Pushed to Africa: emigration and social change in China

Miriam Driessen

Published online: 15 Apr 2016.

Submit your article to this journal ⬀

Article views: 348

View related articles ⬀

View Crossmark data ⬀

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Pushed to Africa: emigration and social change in China

Miriam Driessen

School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the dynamics of recent labour migration from China to Africa through the prism of migrant narratives. Drawing on field research in Ethiopia and China the author links migrants' motives for, and experiences of, migration to social transformation in China: most notably a shift away from the flurry of optimism and idealism to a mood of careful conformism fuelled by a prevailing yearning for a sense of security and a fear of 'missing out' in a competition for resources. Migrants expressed being 'pushed' to Africa. Their attitudes stand in relief to the dreams about 'making it' that have propelled many Chinese to the West. By examining how these migrants imagine time and space, displacement and emplacement, the author sheds light on the distinct characteristics of Chinese migration to Africa, as well as on the relationship between emigration and social change.

> Zheng He did not intend to go to Africa. He just got lost at sea.
>
> (Chinese engineer in Ethiopia, 18 February 2012)

The above statement is not only a subtle critique of Chinese state rhetoric, in which Zheng He (1371–1433 or 1435), the Ming Dynasty court eunuch, diplomat and fleet admiral, has been exalted as a symbol of China–Africa relations; it is also a reflection of the engineer's own disposition. Given his financial situation at home, with a mortgage loan waiting to be repaid, this Chinese engineer contended that he had no other option but to move to Africa. This essay explores the dynamics of the recent wave of Chinese labour migration to Africa, which, heralded by the introduction of the 'going-out policy' in 1999 and the establishment of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, took off in the early 2000s and has grown hitherto. I link this wave of migration to salient societal transformations in China: most notably a shift away from the flurry of optimism and idealism that swept Chinese society in the 1990s and much of the 2000s to a mood of careful conformism fuelled by a yearning for a sense of security. In doing so, I demonstrate that emigration is deeply embedded in social change.

While the desire to undertake migration, which is viewed as an avenue for upward social mobility, remains prevalent among a broad cross-section of Chinese society (cf. Chu 2010; Ong 2006; Pieke 2007), the incentives that fuel this desire have changed in response to the rapid economic growth and socio-political transformation that have generated what Chinese scholars refer to as a sense of *jiaolü*, often translated as 'anxiety' but

---

better captured by the notion of 'angst' – a persistent but unfocused fear (Shen 2013). Representing a lingering fear of lagging behind in a fierce competition for resources (e.g. wealth, jobs and housing), this angst challenges individual agency in a society in which the very principle of freedom is celebrated, at least in the socio-economic sphere. Angst weighs upon the dispossessed – those who fail to attain the status they think they must achieve. In this socio-historical context, 'the desiring self' (Rofel 2007), the embodiment of the desires that drove Chinese individuals 'to make it' in the early post-reform period, has come to yearn not so much for satisfaction in pursuit of self-realisation and material wealth, as for a sense of security and stability.

Recent social transformations in Chinese society are particularly felt by those labour migrants who are involved in infrastructure projects undertaken by Chinese enterprises in Africa. In their words, these migrants are 'pushed' (*tui*) or 'forced' (*bi*) to move overseas. Their attitudes stand in relief to, for instance, the dreams of 'getting ahead' or 'getting rich fast' that propelled many Chinese from coastal provinces to the West (Chu 2010). Labour migration to Africa is viewed as an investment in time, which it is hoped will result in the wealth or start-up capital needed for the migrants to catch up with the rapid development taking place at home. Those who migrate to Africa for work are in search of respect and security, rather than prestige. Moving 'down' to a less developed region, rather than 'up' to the developed world, migration to Africa is decidedly China-oriented and, being largely state-led, predictable and relatively secure.

In examining the dynamics of Chinese labour migration to Africa today, I build on Xiang Biao's notion of the 'displacement of the present' (2014). Haunted by the fear of 'missing out' in the competition for resources in a competitive and uncertain neoliberal environment, Chinese (would-be) migrants, Xiang argues, seek to displace the present by migrating overseas and earning 'quick' money in order to get ahead when they return to China. Transplanting one's life to Africa is a means of jumping towards the future. As such, it does not necessarily have any inherent value. By reflecting on migrant motives and experiences, I explore the nexus of displacement (and emplacement) in time *and* space. The displacement of the present, I show, invariably leads to spatial displacement. Migrants view Africa as a transitional space rather than a destination, and their time spent there as liminal. The valuations of time and of space, as they are experienced in particular socio-historical contexts, are intimately connected.

Personal narratives offer, I believe, the best insight into migrant perspectives and their dreams and delusions, hopes and predicaments. These perspectives, in turn, shed light on the particular dynamics of Chinese labour migration to Africa today. I draw on 16 months of field research in Ethiopia (2011–2012) and China (2013 and 2015) where I lived with, and interviewed, Chinese employees of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private sub-contracting companies from China.[1] These employees occupied various positions, from site managers and contract managers to surveyors, draftsmen, and accountants. Although they represent a broad cross-section of Chinese society, socially and geographically, the majority of my interlocutors were bachelor males in their twenties and thirties, who came from various rural areas across China. Some of them had worked in other African countries prior to moving to Ethiopia. For these men, Africa had become a more attractive 'way out' (*chulu*) of relative rural poverty than China's metropoles and coastal regions, where a part of them had previously worked. This group of migrants has been part of a shifting migration frontier; from internal (rural-to-urban) migration

in China to overseas migration to Africa. Although this study is limited to the experiences of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia, narratives of Chinese living and working in other parts of Africa that have appeared in the popular media reveal surprisingly similar experiences.

Africa-bound

Migrating to Africa was alternatively described by my interlocutors as a mission, a duty, a temporary sacrifice, an investment for the future, an exercise in 'eating bitterness' (*chiku*), or, at best, an alternative career opportunity. The majority of migrants, however, rued the fact that they had to migrate to Africa in the first place. They were almost unanimous in downplaying their agency in migration projects, contending that they were 'pushed' to move to Ethiopia. The driving factor behind migration decisions was, in their words, 'societal pressure' and the persistent lack of a sense of security. Only a few migrants referred to specific personal predicaments. In order to justify their decisions to migrate, to themselves and to family members, migrants often describe themselves as victims of macro-level forces that are beyond their control (cf. Reichman 2011).

The dismissing of agency in migration projects stands in contrast to the current discourse in China regarding *ziyou* (freedom) in respect to occupational choice (X. Zhang 2008), and popular discourses of self-development and self-realisation, which emphasise agency in the shaping of individual lives. By contrast, migrants refer to or imply a lack of freedom in regard to their decision to migrate to Africa. For them, mobility produces a sense of entrapment rather than freedom (cf. Schiller and Salazar 2013), a feeling that is aggravated by the secluded lifestyle they experience in Africa. Most migrant narratives I recorded reflect the ambivalence of Chinese migration projects as never being truly voluntary. Discussing the aspiration/ability nexus of migration, Jørgen Carling (2002) argues that migration involves both choices and constraints. Those who aspire to migrate overseas are not always able to do so. Yet even for those who manage to realise their overseas ambitions, migration is often not completely voluntary – at least it is not perceived as such. Plagued by a constant sense of insecurity in the face of growing inequality at home, Chinese migrants feel they have to keep on climbing in order to avoid falling down again. For them, migration to Africa is a way to relieve, at least temporarily, the socio-economic pressure that is reinforced by their rural background. In Africa they could earn their 'first barrel of gold' (*di yi tong jin*), with which they will be able to buy a house in the city and the freedom to do what they actually want to do upon return.

The persistent feeling of insecurity that drives Chinese to Africa is rooted in three decades of economic reforms, which began in the late-1970s. The shift from a planned to a market economy fundamentally altered mechanisms of stratification. Markets opened up alternative avenues for social mobility through emergent entrepreneurship and labour markets, and changed existing opportunity structures previously dominated and controlled by the redistributive bureaucracy. The enterprise reforms of the 1990s weaned urban Chinese from their dependence on, and the restrictions of, the work unit (*danwei*). Under the government policy 'seize the big [enterprises], and let go of the small' (*zhua da fang xiao*), China's economic reforms resulted in mass lay-offs at small- and medium-sized SOEs, fuelling a growing sense of uncertainty among Chinese employed in the state sector. At the same time, foreign investment spawned industrial growth in the coastal South, and produced a new

entrepreneurial elite. Increased social mobility generated new expectations and aspirations, in the cities and the countryside alike.

The market reforms have led to an unprecedented wealth gap and a rapid increase in social stratification, both in terms of income and security (Xiang 2014). In light of the idea, which has become widespread, that one's position in society is a reflection of one's ability and one's ability alone, rather than unfortunate class origins (*chushen*), as was the case in the Mao era, or disadvantageous government policies, the fierce competition for (newly available) resources has left winners and losers who feel they have only themselves to blame. This assumption explains the hunger for upward mobility that went hand in hand with the economic reforms. Yet, as many ordinary Chinese are now facing the limits of upward social and economic mobility, feelings of frustration and injustice are growing.

The economic reforms also sparked emigration as an avenue for upward social mobility. From the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 until the late-1970s very few Chinese citizens left their country. Viewed as a fault line between the socialist and capitalist worlds, China's national border was highly politicised. Those who applied to leave China individually were thought to be dissatisfied with the socialist system and suspected of conspiring against the Chinese state (G. Liu 2009, 314). The few citizens that did go abroad went as part of political missions or aid programmes – to Africa, among other destinations. Beginning in the late 1950s China started dispatching goodwill missions to Africa made up of agricultural and medical experts, as well as railway and motorway engineers. In fierce competition with Taiwan (the Republic of China), with an eye to securing more votes among the UN General Assembly in the case of a vote on whether Beijing should be given the UN seat held by Taipei, the PRC Government attempted to gain political support from newly liberated member states in Africa (Yu 1968). To help cement new diplomatic relations with African countries, as many as 150,000 Chinese technicians and workers were sent to Africa under the government of Mao Zedong (Park 2009).

In contrast to socialist 'brother' countries such as the Soviet Union, and (to be) turned-socialist countries in Africa, such as Egypt, Guinea, Ghana and Tanzania, the 'Imperialist' West was not yet considered a migration destination at the time. This changed in the decades following the opening-up of the People's Republic and the economic reforms beginning in the late-1970s and -1980s, when Europe and North America became popular destinations of a wave of 'new migrants' (*xin yimin*) (Nyíri 1999, 2001; Thunø 2001), chiefly consisting of entrepreneurs, professionals, students, as well as a wave of political migrants after the Tiananmen Square crack down. Africa declined in importance as a migration destination until the revival of Sino-African relations in the 2000s. An important premise of these new flows of labour and educational migrants was the recognition by the Chinese state – central *and* local – of the social and economic benefits of migration. This appreciation was crucial for the gradual liberalisation and institutionalisation of emigration in China (Xiang 2003). Types, origins and destinations of Chinese migration have since proliferated.

Under Mao Zedong and in the early years of economic reform, engineers were 'chosen' to go to Africa. Seen as serving the nation abroad, such migrants enjoyed a respectable reputation. At the time employment was allocated by the state, and Chinese citizens were accustomed to going wherever they were assigned a job. This system greatly facilitated aid bureaus in recruiting competent professionals for projects overseas (Snow 1988, 147). In the early post-reform era, state command chains of labour recruitment were gradually transmuted

into recruitment agent chains. In 2002, the Chinese Government completely transferred its control over labour export to private agents. With this policy shift, labour migration was redefined as overseas employment of individuals rather than as state projects (Xiang 2003). Although commercial recruitment agents play a crucial role in facilitating emigration from China to overseas destinations, the majority of my interlocutors had entered their companies via more direct channels, such as recruitment at university job fairs in the case of SOEs, and recruitment through native-place kin and acquaintance networks in the case of private subcontracting companies.

Visions

My hopes are not at all unreasonable, I think. I hope my future life will be stable (*wending*). I hope to have a stable family, just live a good life in China. […] I don't necessarily have to earn a lot of money. I don't have to drive a fancy car. Happiness [for me] is a stable family and a stable income. (Accountant, male, 29; 7 June 2012)

In 10 years I won't be abroad anymore. If I still work abroad, it means I have switched to another sector, or I have become depressed. If I'm still here [in Ethiopia] at 40, I'll be too tired. Life here makes you tired. I don't want this to be the case. […] My hair is already getting grey, what if I would continue work here, I will soon be completely grey. (Draftsman, male, 31; 16 May 2012)

Let me use a Chinese expression, *Yourenyouyu* (to do something skilfully and easily). I will be very busy, very tired the coming 10 years. But I hope after 10 years I will have more of my own ideas. I hope I will have improved [myself] and become skilled in what I do. In fact the life I hope to live is very ordinary. […] I just want to become a better person; become a little bit more kind-hearted, have a little bit more money, be a little bit nicer. (Public relations manager, male, 27; 8 June 2012)

In 10 years I will be 50 years old. Fifty years is half a life time. I hope to have a small business, so I can be my own boss. […] For many years, I have had people above me. I have always listened to others and followed other people's orders, or followed the assigned work schedule. […] One day I will become my own boss. (Surveyor, male, 40; 11 June 2012)

Ten years? That's too far away! … Surely, the Ethiopian road network will be saturated by then (Site manager, male, 26; 1 June 2012)

I don't place my greatest hopes in myself, but in my next generation. I hope that they will be able to stand out among their peers. I hope they will be able to develop themselves and become officials, or join the army. (Materials engineer, male, 24; 3 June 2012)

I'm not sure yet. Right now I'm here for my house, which I think is the right thing to do. I'm planning to buy another house. Last year the prices have started to go down. I should grasp my time, and quickly buy [a house], now the prices are lower. (Materials engineer, male, 43; 2 June 2012)

To start with, I will be married and have a little child. I will have bought a house, and earn a stable income. Like a moderately affluent life (*xiaokang shenghuo*). I won't be rich. Just a normal life in the city. (Contract manager, male, 25; 25 May 2012)

I will have a stable income that is enough to provide for my family, to buy food and clothes. That's it. My demands are not high. I will have a house and a car. This car I will be able to

drive myself, of course … I hope my child will do well in school, so that I don't have to worry. Just no worries, then everything is fine. (Surveyor, male, 31; 17 June 2012)

I don't really know my place yet. I'm still young. I still have fantasies. […] If I have the opportunity, I will go abroad; migrate (*yimin*). I would like to go to Japan. Although China–Japan relations aren't very good, I have quite a lot of respect for Japanese culture. […] I believe in them. Chinese are a bit, how to say … they are too wrapped up in social climbing. They are not very attentive in the things they undertake, only when it comes to getting into [particular] circles. [They are] all very superficial. […] If you live in a society like this for too long, you will discover that you will become intensely loathed. (Site manager, male, 27; 26 May 2012)

In contrast to what the reputation of Chinese in Africa as 'gold diggers' (*taojinzhe*) might suggest, my interlocutors were in search of a life without financial concerns or worries of any other kind. The Chinese labour migrants I spoke to in Ethiopia sought to gain stability and security, rather than strike gold. The modesty of their dreams is reflected in the selection given above of responses to the question regarding how they envisaged their lives in 10 years' time. While they were entrepreneurial in pursuing their migration projects, migrants appeared rather conservative in envisioning their lives after their return to China. Looking to gain respect rather than prestige, these migrants hoped to secure a financial base, for themselves and their (future) families.

The first year of a migrant's salary was typically spent on the down-payment for a new flat in China or the repayment of a mortgage loan. A house is not only seen as a profitable way to invest in future returns, but also as providing social and emotional security. Moreover, for single male migrants home ownership is thought to enhance their prospects of finding a marriage partner (Driessen 2015). The majority aspired, in the long run, to become their own boss (*laoban*) – to set up a shop or a trading company and regain the autonomy (and agency) they had lost upon moving to Africa.

In all, Chinese migrants' visions feature a strong domestic focus. The investments made by moving to Africa are recouped at home. Migrants feel a strong sense of duty and responsibility vis-à-vis their families: feelings that ultimately tip the scale and make them decide to go to Africa for work. This family-orientation is certainly not new. From the Guangdong miners and merchants in North America in the late nineteenth century to the Fujianese migrants in Europe at the dawn of the twentieth century, all bore, at least initially, a strong desire to improve the social and economic situation of their families at home (H. Liu 2002; Pieke et al. 2004). Their narratives were equally couched in a language of self-sacrifice for the advancement of the natal and nuclear family (Pieke et al. 2004, 195).

The dream of moving abroad upon return, expressed by the 27-year-old site manager (in the last quote above), was exceptional. Although quite a few interlocutors spoke critically of Chinese society, this engineer was the only one who envisioned, or in his words fantasised about, moving to what he deemed to be a morally better world. Note his use of the word *yimin* (migrate) to indicate permanent settlement. For him, migrating to Japan was a goal instead of a mere means to an end (as his move to Ethiopia had been). In Africa he was merely 'a person who went abroad' (*chuguo de ren*) or a 'Chinese in Africa'. The notion of *yimin* is seldom used in the context of Chinese labour migration to Africa.

Africa does not figure in migrants' visions of the future. Nobody envisioned, or hoped, to be in Africa in ten years' time. It would mean that their lives had been put on hold for

many years; a prospect that was seen as unwelcome. Life in Africa was viewed as making one age faster. Note the comment of the 31-year-old draftsman who says that life in Africa is turning his hair grey. The evil-doer was seen by these migrants as being the African sun, but also, more crucially, the monotony and dullness (*kuzao*) of daily life and work, which was held to turn one into a 'human machine' (*renrou jiqi*) or a 'walking corpse' (*xingshi-zourou*). Focused on life upon return, visions are China-oriented and migration projects China-rooted.

How can we explain the apparent lack of bold dreams in migrant narratives? Much like the decisions to migrate, the dreams that motivate and inspire these decisions are embedded in particular social and historical contexts, and can only be understood this way. First, owing to their socio-economic backgrounds, this group of migrants is reluctant to take risks, lacking the starting capital, the safety net and crucial connections to achieve upward mobility, or even to attain what they consider a certain level of decency. This, second, has to do with the above-mentioned shift away from the unbridled optimism and idealism of the early post-reform period. Rather than 'making it', 'getting ahead' or 'getting rich fast', these migrants sought to measure up to what the 25-year-old contract manager calls a 'moderately affluent life' – an idea based on the ideal of a 'moderately prosperous society' promoted by president Hu Jintao (2002–2012) and more recently by president Xi Jinping, in reference to economic policies that are meant to realise a more equal distribution of wealth in China.[2] The goal was being able to live up to a certain status, instead of surpassing that status. Fresh college graduates, who had moved to Africa right after graduation, in particular bemoaned the social pressure they were subject to upon 'entering society'. They might have secured an urban household registration (*hukou*) through college; however, in order to live up to their urban status they were expected to buy residential property, as well as to maintain a certain level of (conspicuous) consumption.

In their defined and limited capacity, migrant projects were predictable and secure ventures. They were set deals offered by domestic companies: the firm organised the whole journey, from air tickets to Addis Ababa to movement within Ethiopia. Upon arrival Chinese employees were asked to hand in their passports, which were kept with other personal documents in the head office in the capital. Throughout the period of employment the employer was the sole care-taker and provider of housing, transport, food, medicine, daily utensils and entertainment. As such, the employer commanded full authority over the mobility and the lifestyle of its employees, and created a sense (or illusion) of security.

The investment in time was fixed, as was the payoff. Income could be calculated beforehand. The migrants were fairly confident that they would be able to recoup their investment in going to Africa as soon as they arrived back in China. The three- to five-year contracts they signed before embarking on work in Africa offered a certain sense of security. Given the investment made, in terms of flight tickets, work permits and living costs, employers were unlikely to simply replace employees; a threat that is very relevant in the increasingly informal construction sector in China, in which some migrants had worked before. At worst, employees were transferred to another project in Ethiopia or Africa when there were personal or work-related issues. Albeit complaints abound, few of the migrants I spoke to held regrets about having moved to Africa. Migrating to Africa was not so much about winning or losing, or making or breaking, as about following – dutifully and well-behaved – set migratory trajectories. Although circumstances were

generally viewed as rough and tough, employment in Africa is an attractive alternative to the short employment contracts and lack of welfare benefits that come with the increased informalisation of employment in China (Gallagher, Lee, and Kuruvilla 2011).

Sacrifices

If you go to Africa, you have to prepare yourself for the following:

1. Have you ever thought of Malaria? This is the name of the most deadly disease in Africa. Since I am there I have seen many Chinese suffering from Malaria.
2. Africa is a place that even a lot of local Africans seek to escape. Can you imagine the feeling of being far removed from modern technology and civilisation?
3. In general if you go to Africa, in terms of language and customs, Chinese and locals are two different circles. Can you imagine the feeling of loneliness when you are being surrounded by a black ocean?
4. If you live with Chinese in Africa, it is like living in custody. There is much gloominess in this; I have come across this very often. Would you be able to live in prison?
5. The majority of Chinese who left to go to Africa in my year, all returned [to Africa after the holidays]. There are only a few who persist in struggling [to make a living] at home. They endure their yearning for the little pressure of competition there is [in Africa]. The question is however do the time and the investment [of going to Africa] pay off?
6. You should not think that this is a place of blue skies and jade water, where you can set your mind at rest and learn. To be frank, I have lived in Africa for a long time, but I have only seen those who after returning take a long time to catch up with the rhythm of life in China.
7. You should not think that you can earn a lot of money in just a few years. Opportunities like these have become scarce.
8. You should not think that it is easy to put up a business. The local government is eager to crack down on Chinese who try to set up small businesses. Have you ever seen a stray dog? The Chinese who put up small businesses in Africa are even more pitiful than Africans who set up small businesses.

Of course, if you are prepared for the above, you find in Africa:

1. Fresh and clean air, primitive life. And if you don't mind [gossip], you can also get a black sister (local woman or prostitute).
2. If you are naturally open-minded and outgoing, Africa is heaven for you.
3. The market there is a blank space. It is up to you to fill it out.
4. My hand is sour, haha.
(Liu Bo's response to the question of whether it is worth going to Africa and how to prepare for going to Africa, on *Zhihu*, the Chinese question-and-answer website, 9 July 2013)

Liu Bo's portrayal of Africa and his warnings to the questioner, a student who is contemplating moving to Africa with a Chinese SOE after graduation, is reminiscent of what Charles Piot (1999, 2) has termed the 'orientalisation' of Africa, in which the continent is depicted as a place that is steeped in tradition; a place where drought and tropical disease run rampant, and political conflicts and chaos are the norm. The themes addressed by Liu Bo are familiar and recurring tropes in migrant narratives. For the Chinese labour migrants who I spoke to, employed by domestic construction companies, Africa featured as a transitional stage in their migration projects, rather than as a destination or as a promised land with greener pastures, blue(r) skies and jade water. Africa was viewed as a mere

liminal space. In fact, almost everything in Africa – money-making opportunities excluded – was perceived as being of lesser quality and value than in China. Not surprisingly, moving to a place like this was seen as a sacrifice.

Why exactly did the Chinese migrants I spoke to interpret moving to Africa as a (temporary) sacrifice? First, the involuntary nature of their journeys, as discussed above, account for their having a sense of having to make a sacrifice. Migrants gave up their relative autonomy and career prospects for the sake of a better (family) life upon return. If China had more to offer in terms of employment opportunities and employment security, or companies overseas paid salaries equal to those in China, they would not have left for Africa in the first place. Second, the nature of the place where they were 'forced' to spend a good part of their youth contributed to the feeling of having to make a sacrifice. They traded their life in China, close to friends and family members, but also close to 'modern technology and civilisation', for a 'primitive life' in Africa.

In an essay titled *Angolan Belles Lettres*, Sheng Wei (2015) portrays the lives of the Chinese construction workers he encountered on his travels in Angola. Taken by their toughness and intrigued by their persistent-looking sun-burned faces, Sheng Wei asks why this group of Chinese, born in the 1980s as the first generation of Chinese born under the one-child policy, a generation that is known as having 'grown up in the honey pot', are trying to make a living thousands of miles away from home. Sheng Wei observes that they pursue their dreams with great persistency and perseverance, and that they make huge sacrifices. They live the lives of hermits, far removed from rapid progress – the word he uses is *rixinyueyi* (literally 'daily renewal, monthly change') – in China. Cut off from the rest of the world, they do not know about the latest films and the latest developments in science and technology. For example, he finds that they had only just familiarised themselves with the Chinese social medium WeChat. In fact, what Sheng Wei does not mention, or perhaps what he does not realise, is that this group of construction workers does not belong to the pampered class of urban singletons. Rather, they grew up in the countryside, in much less privileged conditions. Nonetheless, the image sketched by the author strikes a familiar chord with migrant narratives that speak of enduring hardships in Africa.

The orientalisation of Africa in migrant narratives does not reflect a simple binary opposition of 'us equals good' and 'them equals bad', but rather it reflects a shrewd mirrored reversal along the lines of 'what is good in us is [still] bad in them, but what got twisted in us [still] remains straight in them' (Baumann 2004, 20). Chinese superiority, in terms of scientific progress, implies a sense of loss: of what is no longer spontaneous, care-free and pure – if only the blue skies and the jade water. The joy Africans are thought to find in life and their 'aboriginal believe [*sic*] of living every day as if it were one's last' (Q. Zhang 2012) is part and parcel of the orientalisation of Africa. The migrants I spoke with held that Ethiopians are easily satisfied, which mitigates the hardships *they* suffer in Africa. One Chinese grader operator pointed out: 'These black boys (*hei xiaozi*) are happy. They believe in Jesus. They are easily satisfied. They are already pleased when their bellies are full'. Religion is perceived to produce contentment, which is, to the exasperation of Chinese managers, believed to be a major impediment to hard work. Since Ethiopians have not (yet) encountered scientific progress and rapid economic development, they accept their present state – naively so. 'Chinese have to work; otherwise

they have nothing to eat', was their much repeated remark. Chinese society makes its citizens work hard – even pushing them to Africa – while taking from them their joy in life.

'There are not so many things [in Ethiopia] that can upset you', a 29-year-old public relations manager said, echoing the 'complex vs. simple' and 'tainted vs. pure' orientalist oppositions.

> The relations between people are not very complex. They are honest and pure. In China you encounter numerous problems. There are many possibilities, but everything is in disorder. Here everything is a bit simpler (*danchun*). There are not so many people. There are not so many things. Every day is like any other day. (Public relations manager, male, 29; 8 June 2012)

Notice that the last comment suggests a lack of progress, reflecting the notion of time in Africa as repetitive, as I will elaborate below. This Chinese manager approaches the shift to profit maximisation in *guanxi* (relations) exchange as an inherent part of the development of society to a greater level of complexity and sophistication. He views this as a bad tendency. In Ethiopia, on the other hand, human relations are less exploitative and more sincere. Again, the simplicity and the purity of Ethiopian life are being romanticised, while the complexity and the 'disorder' of Chinese society are being rejected.

'Of course I have given this thought before I signed my contract', a 26-year-old design engineer told me, recounting his initial reservations about moving to Africa.

> I knew I wouldn't go to Europe or America. Africa, in our minds, is poor (*pinqiong*), backward (*luohou*) and chaotic (*zhanluan*). I was thinking, what if I fall ill? What will I do when I end up in the midst of war and chaos? Or even when I die? (Design engineer, male, 26; 17 May 2012)

The reason this young man ultimately decided to go was the attractive 'treatment' (*daiyu*) (meaning high salary) abroad. 'In fact, a lot of people work abroad because of this reason.' Having lost his father at the age of 17, he, as the only son and eldest sibling, saw it as his duty to take on the role of father in the family. Consequently, he was prepared to sacrifice time and career opportunities to secure a financial base at home.

Young men like this engineer make ideal employees. They stay in Africa for a good number of years, making the company's investment in its new staff a worthwhile one. The ability to endure hardships is one of the main requirements for a job in Africa, where both working and living conditions are considered to be arduous. Only those with a thick skin are expected to endure life in Africa for a substantial duration. 'Ideally you have a younger or an older brother, a father who left home [for work], a mother who is ill, and your brother takes care of you at home', commented one laboratory technician somewhat cynically. The more vexed the situation and the greater the need for a stable income, the more easily parents agree to their son going to Africa. 'Eating bitterness' (*chiku*), construed as to undergo and overcome sorrow by biting the bullet, is part and parcel of sacrifice. By temporarily eating bitterness in Africa, Chinese labour migrants are convinced that they will be able to improve their financial circumstances at home, and to prevent their children from eating bitterness in the future.

Hardships, it appears from the narratives of the migrants I met, are mostly related to the perceived dullness of work and the loneliness of life in Ethiopia. Chinese workers often compared their compounds to prison, and their life in Ethiopia to life in custody (see also the quote that opened this paragraph). It is not only the restriction on physical

movement that heightens the feeling of seclusion and is seen as the bitterness that Chinese workers have to eat, it is also the monotony of daily life. Compounding the prison-like sense of isolation is the fact that the work week is a full seven days. Work days from seven in the morning to seven in the evening (excluding overtime) leave little spare time to do as one wishes. When asked about nice moments in Africa, my interlocutors typically referred, apart from the fresh air and the food security – conditions they did not enjoy in China – to the moments in which they received their salaries in their bank accounts. Gold is thought to yield gold upon return to China (Xiang 2014, 190). Migrants are certain that their sacrifices will pay off and that the money earned abroad is convertible into respect, status and security at home.

What, then, are the sacrifices that Chinese labour migrants in Africa make? In other words, what do migrants give up for the sake of something better or more valued? Most importantly, the migrants I spoke to perceived themselves as trading a family life for a life in isolation. As these migrants' visions were family-related, so were their sacrifices. These migrants in fact chose to give up the joys of family life in order to improve their lives and those of their family members in the future. Nevertheless, 'When you love your family, why do you choose to leave your family?' was a question that came up over and again among married migrants with children back in China. 'My wife and I have asked this question many times. In fact, we are both clear about the answer', said one surveyor who struggled with his wife's disapproval of him living in Africa, while she was at home working and taking care of their child and four parents.

Second, the migrants I spoke to perceived that they sacrificed time. By moving to Africa, they lost time – or, more accurately, progressive time. Sheng Wei, author of *Angolan Belles Lettres* (2015), implies that the construction workers he observed lagged behind their peers back home in China. Having only just acquainted themselves with WeChat, they were cut off from advancement (science and technology). The fear of falling behind seems even more prevalent in Africa, where time is perceived to stand still or, in the words of a manager, to move in circles (*zhou'erfushi*), in contrast to China where time is perceived to proceed. The idea of repetitive or stagnating time is reminiscent of Achille Mbembe's (2001, 16) account of the time in African existence as it appears in Western discourse: 'neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point where a single age exists within society.' African time is, instead, an interlocking of presents, pasts and futures; made up of disturbances rather than ordered series and sequences. This idea, which was advanced either explicitly or implicitly, reflects an acute belief in China's advancement and superiority in terms of development, as well as pride in its newly established place in the world.

With time, the migrants also saw themselves as losing their youthfulness: recall the worries of the draftsman, who feared that he would turn grey if he stayed in Africa for too long. 'I have given my youth to Angola', stated Chen Shenlin to a journalist of *The Workers' Daily* (Yang 2014), suggesting an acute sense of sacrifice. The feeling of having to catch up with China was also evident among the Chinese I interviewed, and echoes the warning of Liu Bo in his response on the question-and-answer website *Zhihu*, that many Chinese returnee migrants struggle to adapt to the rhythm of life in China. Chen Shenlin says he has learned to 'adjust himself' in order to keep up with time. 'If you want to keep hold of your passions, you have to make sure that you are not being submerged by the dullness of life [in Africa]', he warns his colleagues.

This leads to a third sacrifice: self-development. Time spent in Africa was viewed by my interlocutors as wasted, in terms of personal and career development. Africa was, in their eyes, devoid of opportunities to develop the self; an individual project that is seen as a responsibility – a duty almost – in contemporary China. Migrants compared road construction in Ethiopia with road building under Mao Zedong in the 1960s and 1970s. Professionally, these migrants felt there was little to learn. Being cut off from scientific progress and civilisation meant that there was little else to gain in terms of experience and 'culture' (*wenhua*, as in social etiquette). Indeed, these migrants were able to transfer knowledge to African workers, and develop themselves into more philanthropic and better persons. Drawing a clear division between educational migration to the West and labour migration to Africa, the curt response of one 23-year-old mechanical engineer when I suggested he must have gained life experience in the past year in Addis Ababa was: 'I'm not in the US'. Time spent in Africa was considered by these migrants to be of little educational value, or value of any other sort. However, a higher salary, the main reason for coming to Africa, made up for the few gains in other fields, not to speak of the sacrifices made along the way.

Displacement

Expectations of upward mobility have engendered a lingering yet profound angst about remaining behind in a competition for resources. This has led to what Xiang Biao terms the 'displacement of the present' (2014, 186). Embodying an intense forward-looking momentum, migrants and would-be migrants attempt to find ways to cast off their regrettable present state with an 'instrumental jump into the future' (Xiang 2014). The sense of uncertainty in a neoliberal economy and the persistent angst about being left behind is experienced as fear of time, and is translated into a 'last-bus mentality' (*mobanche xintai*), as the Chinese expression has it (Xiang 2014, 191). If one misses the bus now – that is, in the present – one is thought to miss out on everything in the future. It is exactly this fear of 'missing out' that has propelled Chinese from relatively poor rural backgrounds towards overseas destinations such as Africa. Migration implies a temporary displacement from the present, as a method of being catapulted into the future upon return to China.

Owing to recent social changes in Chinese society, it is not surprising that so many young Chinese are willing to take the jump into the future at this moment in time. What China increasingly lacks is not employment opportunities per se, but long-term security. While ample in the 1990s and throughout much of the 2000s, opportunities for socio-economic upward mobility have waned significantly; particularly at the bottom end of Chinese society. At the same time, the aspiration to achieve upward mobility has not disappeared, and, in fact, has arguably increased in the face of the growing risks and insecurities of a highly competitive and informalised neoliberal economy. Added to this, is the fact that three decades of high social mobility have enhanced individual and social expectations. Failing to achieve social upward mobility can mean a loss of face.

Ironically, migration to Africa is, simultaneously, viewed as a leap back in time. Seen as a dark spot on the world map, Africa is an unfashionable migration destination. Migrant journeys are focused on returning to China, where the ultimate vindication for the hardships endured away from home await the migrant. In Africa migrants are merely en-route. Migration to Africa is at once a displacement in time and a displacement (without direct emplacement) in space. Time spent in Africa, albeit experienced as suffocating, is viewed

as a lull in the hectic lives of Chinese and their projects of self-development. It does not really count – as compared to time lived in China, amidst progress, civilisation, growth and development. Time in China is quality time. Time in Africa is not. This is not to say that the years spent in Africa are wasted. On the contrary, they are functional in fast-forwarding life to prepare for a permanent return to China. Yet, as a mere means to a future end, African time has no inherent ethical or moral value.

The attitudes of temporary labour migrants account for the lack of emotional and social investment in Africa, and shed a different light on ongoing debates concerning the nature of Chinese migrants overseas, and the difficulty they appear to have in assimilating in the countries where they settle (Wang 2000). Chinese are frequently seen not only as unable to integrate, or hesitant about doing so. Of course this issue has multiple causes in the context of temporary labour migration to Africa, such as the geographical isolation of building projects and construction camps, and the short-term nature of construction projects. A concept like sojourning (*huaqiao*), as a Chinese experience of migration, suggests temporary residence in a new place of abode, with the always lingering intention of returning (Wang 2000). Indeed, *huaqiao* (sojourners) are viewed as more permanently settled overseas Chinese, which implies a certain rootedness in local society and the acquisition of a new lifestyle, while maintaining connections with mainland China. The migrants I spoke to in Africa did not consider themselves to be *huaqiao*; neither did they refer to themselves as *yimin*, the more neutral term in Chinese for migrant(s). Rather, they simply called themselves 'Chinese in Africa'. This denomination arguably reflects an (unconscious) dismissal of their migrant status, and suggests the relatively irrelevance migrants attach to their experience of living overseas. Their migration enterprise has little to do with settlement, and more with displacement and biding time until replacement. Crucially, time spent in Africa had to be carefully calculated by these migrants. If one were to stay too long in Africa, one would truly risk lagging behind.

In these shifting imaginaries of displacement and emplacement, or the lack thereof, destination has gained a different meaning. Julie Chu's portrayal of the visions of would-be migrants in rural Fujian in the early 2000s as 'It ain't where you're at, it's where you're going' – a play on Paul Gilroy's insight regarding diasporic conditions as 'It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at' (1991) – asks, again, for revision. Much like the aspiring Fujianese migrants, my interlocutors were at once rural and cosmopolitan, peripheral and well-connected. They fostered an equally strong desire to leave China. For migrants from rural regions in China's southern coastal provinces who have left for the United States and Europe through personal networks and often unofficial channels (Chu 2010; Pieke et al. 2004), the destination of migration was a central orientation. For my interlocutors, destination was of little importance – in fact, almost irrelevant. Whereas the migrants of Chu's study are driven by the enchantments of capitalist modernity, the Chinese who go to Africa are pushed abroad by the very expectations and delusions capitalist modernity has produced. The former were at pains to prove their agency; the latter deny it, albeit with regret.

Discussing the power-geometry of mobility, Doreen Massey (1993, 61) argues that

> different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.

Indeed, my interlocutors had initiated their movement to Africa, but only after a push in the back from what they referred to as societal pressure. They were not fully in charge of their mobility. In fact, many migrants did not know in which country they would be put to work before signing their preliminary contracts on university campuses, or even when they were informed about a potential transfer abroad. Reflecting the ultimate aim of securing better lives on their return, safety seemed to be the major concern.

Chinese who have moved to Africa in the past decade have migrated 'down' to a less developed region, rather than 'up' to the developed world. This has major implications for the ways in which they imagine and experience time and space, and the displacement and emplacement thereof. Time and space are neither neutral concepts, nor static entities. Different values are attached to them by the people who experience them. As spaces are 'articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings' (Massey 1993, 66), temporality is construed through constantly changing social imaginaries. Taking this into consideration, Africa was perceived by the migrants I spoke with as a space crossed instead of as a destination. 'It ain't where you're from, but where you're going' therefore has a different connotation. It is about 'where you're going' in time rather than in space. The focal point of the Chinese labour migrants I met in Africa was a better life in China, instead of a better life overseas. This shift in migrants' perceptions and aspirations reflects not only the fact that increased uncertainty and angst is a driving factor in (would-be) migrants' lives, but also the improved condition of China as a whole, and its status vis-à-vis other countries in the world.

Conclusion

Chinese workers involved in large-scale infrastructure projects in Africa constitute a specific social stratum – poor yet upwardly mobile – that is drawn, at home in China, into a fierce status competition based on wealth. Their choice to move to Africa with domestic companies is, however, pragmatic rather than idealistic, based on carefully calculated goals rather than dreams and passions, and fuelled by a sense of *jiaolü* (angst) about lagging behind rather than desires of wealth-creation and getting ahead of others in a race to the top. As such, Chinese labour migrants in Africa embody a fundamental shift in Chinese society, from a mood of unbounded optimism and idealism to more conservative attitudes. 'Societal pressure' is an important trope in narratives that seek to explain and justify motivations for migration to a place that is deemed poor, backward and conflict-ridden. Financial constraints and the very feeling of insecurity lead these Chinese to embark on migrant projects that are predictable and relatively secure; in stark contrast to earlier, often dangerous and gruelling boat smuggling ventures of labour migrants from rural regions in China's coastal provinces, and the sometimes perilous circumstances that awaited them in their destinations. The company arranges for everything, creating the suggestion (or illusion) that it is taking full responsibility for its employees' security.

By disentangling migrants' visions of the future as well as the sacrifices they perceive to make, I have attempted to shed light on the motives for young Chinese men to move to Africa for work, and, more generally, the dynamics and characteristics of today's wave of Chinese labour migrants to Africa. People commonly migrate for work when they feel they lack sufficient or ideal employment opportunities at home, to satisfy particular needs, or, as is the case with Chinese labour migrants in Ethiopia, to attain certain

levels of respect and the standard of a 'moderately affluent life'. While the pursuit of emigration from China is, as it has been many times before, very prevalent, the motives that engender this emigration have changed in response to societal change. Migration is a process that is deeply embedded in broader societal structures and shifts, rather than being the outcome of individual migrants' behaviour or the sum total of individual migrants' choices. As such, Chinese labour migrants to Africa in the past decade are an outgrowth of socio-economic transformation in China. Desires and dreams in present-day China are tempered by a longing for stability and muffled by a rapid decrease in socio-economic mobility. This is mirrored in migration choices, especially in the case of those who venture to Africa.

Notes

1. Ethiopia is one of the major African recipients of Chinese investment in the infrastructure sector (following Angola, Sudan and Nigeria). The majority of Chinese infrastructure projects in Ethiopia and other African countries have been carried out by large SOEs. These companies, and their smaller state-owned and private subcontractors, have been at the forefront of the new wave of Chinese migration to Africa that took off in the early 2000s; accompanied by a flow of individual migrant entrepreneurs. At the time of research, skilled and semiskilled workers from China involved in infrastructure construction made up the largest Chinese immigrant group in Ethiopia. Their number is estimated to lie between 5000 and 10,000 (Gebre in Adem 2012, 147). The flow of Chinese to Ethiopia, and Africa in general, has however diversified in the past few years, in terms of migrants' socio-economic and educational background as well as the occupations and the activities they pursue in Africa. Narratives of Chinese migrants who have received substantial higher education, foster entrepreneurial ambitions, or have moved to Africa out of curiosity or interest are very different from the workers I discuss in this paper. Their move to Africa is an 'active' rather than a 'passive' one.
2. The concept of 'moderately prosperous (or affluent) society' (*xiaokang shehui*) was first mentioned by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s as a target for national economic growth and development.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

References

Adem, Seifudeim. 2012. "China in Ethiopia: Diplomacy and Economics of Sino-optimism." *African Studies Review* 55: 143–160.

Baumann, Gerd. 2004. "Grammars of Identity/Alterity. A Structural Approach." In *Grammars of Identity/Alterity. A Structural Approach*, edited by Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich, 18–50. New York: Berghahn Books.

Carling, Jørgen. 2002. "Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (1): 5–42.

Chu, Julie Y. 2010. *Cosmologies of Credit. Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. London: Duke University Press.

Driessen, Miriam. 2015. "Migrating for the Bank. Housing and Chinese Labour Migration to Ethiopia." *The China Quarterly* 221: 143–160.

Gallagher, Mary E., Ching Kwan Lee, and Sarosh Kuruvilla. 2011. "Introduction and Argument." In *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization. Markets, Workers, and the State in a Changing China*, edited by Sarosh Kuruvilla, Ching Kwan Lee, and Mary Gallagher, 1–14. Ithaca: ILR Press.

Gilroy, Paul. 1991. "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At … ." *Third Text* 5 (13): 3–16.

Liu, Haiming. 2002. "The Social Origins of Early Chinese Immigrants: A Revisionist Perspective." In *The Chinese in America. A History from Gold Mountain to the New Millennium*, edited by Susie Lan Cassel, 21–36. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Liu, Guofu. 2009. "Changing Chinese Migration Law: From Restriction to Relaxation." *Journal of International Migration and Integration/Revue de l'integration et de la migration internationale* 10: 311–333.

Massey, Doreen. 1993. "Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place." In *Mapping the Future. Local Cultures, Global Change*, edited by Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson, and Lisa Tickner, 61–69. London: Routledge.

Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nyíri, Pál. 1999. *New Chinese Migrants in Europe. The Case of the Chinese Community in Hungary*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Nyíri, Pál. 2001. "Expatriating Is Patriotic? The Discourse of 'New Migrants' in the People's Republic of China and Identity Construction among Recent Migrants from the PRC." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27 (4): 635–653.

Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception. Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Park, Yoon Jung. 2009. *Chinese Migration in Africa*. Occasional Paper No 24. China in Africa Project. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.

Pieke, Frank N. 2007. "Editorial Introduction: Community and Identity in the New Chinese Migration Order." *Population, Space and Place* 13: 81–94.

Pieke, Frank N., Pál Nyíri, Mette Thunø, and Antonella Ceccagno. 2004. *Transnational Chinese. Fujianese Migrants in Europe*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Piot, Charles. 1999. *Remotely Global. Village Modernity in West Africa*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Reichman, Daniel. 2011. "Migration and Paraethnography in Honduras." *American Ethnologist* 38 (3): 548–558.

Rofel, Lisa. 2007. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Schiller, Nina Glick, and Noel B. Salazar. 2013. "Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39 (2): 183–200.

Shen, Guanbao. 2013. "Hunyin jiating zhiduxing bianqianxia de jiaolü." *Tansuo yu zhengming* 5: 17–18.

Sheng, Wei. 2015. "Angela Suibi: Balinghou de Mengxiang Jianshou yu Xisheng, Lehuo Angela." WeChat: Angola 00244, April 7.

Snow, Phillip. 1988. *The Star Raft. China's Encounter with Africa*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Thunø, Mette. 2001. "Reaching Out and Incorporating Chinese Overseas: The Trans-territorial Scope of the PRC by the End of the 20th Century." *The China Quarterly* 168: 910–929.

Wang, Gungwu. 2000. *The Chinese Overseas. From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Xiang, Biao. 2003. "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective." *International Migration* 41 (3): 21–48.

Xiang, Biao. 2014. "The Would-be Migrant: Post-socialist Primitive Accumulation, Potential Transnational Mobility, and the Displacement of the Present in Northeast China." *TraNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2 (2): 183–199.

Yang, Shaokui. 2014. "Feizhou Dagongji." *Gongren Ribao*, December 4.

Yu, George T. 1968. "Dragon in the Bush: Peking's Presence in Africa." *Asian Survey* 8 (12): 1018–1026.

Zhang, Xia. 2008. "*Ziyou* (Freedom), Occupational Choice, and Labor. *Bangbang* in Chongqing, People's Republic of China." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 73: 65–84.

Zhang, Qiang. 2012. "Zhongguo Wugongzhe Feizhou Shenghuo Shilu." *Guangzhou Ribao*, February 8.