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“Eating Everything and Leaving Nothing”:  
Chinese Commerce in Postwar Angola

By

Cheryl M. Schmitz

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Xin Liu, Chair  
Professor Mariane Ferme  
Professor Aihwa Ong  
Professor Gillian Hart

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## Abstract

“Eating Everything and Leaving Nothing”: Chinese Commerce in Postwar Angola

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Cheryl M. Schmitz

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Recovering from a decades-long civil war, the Angolan government agreed in the early 2000s to contract the majority of projects under its National Reconstruction Program to Chinese state-owned enterprises, in exchange for multiple billions of dollars in oil-backed loans. This partnership has facilitated migration and commerce between China to Angola on an unprecedented scale. While some have denounced Chinese investments in postwar Angola as a form of neo-imperialism, others have celebrated Chinese financing of Angolan reconstruction as a practical mode of cooperation, or even a non-hegemonic expression of South-South solidarity. Without engaging in a moralistic debate between two “sides,” this dissertation examines the contradictions of Chinese-Angolan relations through an ethnographic study of everyday life and work at a Chinese state-owned construction firm in Luanda. By attending to ordinary interactions among employees of this firm and their co-workers, business partners, competitors, and critics, it explores how ethical relations are forged and broken in a context of political instability and moral controversy.

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## Introduction

“You study Chinese businesses?” I was sipping tea at the home of an Italian development worker with her two French friends when one of them, a manager for a European oil company, asked me about my research.<sup>1</sup> This was my second visit to Angola, but I had been in the country for only a few days, and felt reluctant to say that I was studying anything when I had been spending most of my time looking for food and an Internet connection. “Yes,” I replied. He seemed skeptical: “And the Chinese, they talk to you?”

The question caught me off guard. How could I claim to be conducting anthropological research if the people whose experiences I was most interested in refused to speak with me? And yet I continued to encounter this question throughout my fieldwork, generally from curious non-Chinese expats, though often too from Angolan interlocutors who had little direct contact with the hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens working in their country.<sup>2</sup> Though sometimes the question voiced a simple query about my ability to speak Mandarin, most often it expressed more than merely a language-based curiosity. It appeared to observers who held such views that I was attempting to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in a closed community known for its insularity and opacity, and with a mysterious and unapproachable people. Comments about ‘the Chinese’ in Angola often implied that the Chinese signing financing agreements with the Angolan president were related, directly or indirectly, to the Chinese building new residential housing complexes in the suburbs of Luanda, the Chinese selling footwear in São Paulo Market, or the Chinese working on oil rigs in Cabinda.<sup>3</sup> More than hinting at the political, economic, or personal connections possibly linking these different groups together, stories involving ‘the Chinese’ often implied

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<sup>1</sup> I have changed some of these nationalities to avoid the speakers’ identification. Apart from those of cited authors and well-known public figures, personal names used in the text are pseudonyms, and unless otherwise indicated, corporate names have also been changed.

<sup>2</sup> The latest official number for the Chinese population in Angola was 259,000, released in 2012 (see “Angola: Operação policial termina na repatriação de 37 chineses por crimes violentos,” *SAPO Notícias Angola*, August 25, 2012, accessed January 23, 2015,

<http://noticias.sapo.tl/portugues/lusa/artigo/14880137.html>). However, most Chinese expatriates who I spoke with in Luanda in 2012 and 2013-14 gave rough estimates of 300,000 or 400,000. This is a significant number given a widely cited, though unverified, estimate of 1 million for the total number of Chinese migrants on the continent. Preliminary results of the Angolan census of 2013, the first since 1970, placed the country’s population, excluding foreigners, at 24.3 million, with 26.7 percent concentrated in the capital, Luanda. (See “Angola está a fazer o primeiro censo desde que é independente,” *Público*, May 16, 2014, accessed January 23, 2015,

<http://www.publico.pt/mundo/noticia/angola-esta-a-fazer-o-primeiro-censo-desde-que-e-independente-1636300>; Kumuêno da Rosal, “Somos 24 milhões,” *Jornal de Angola*, October 16, 2014, accessed January 23, 2016, [http://jornaldeangola.sapo.ao/politica/somos\\_24\\_milhoes\\_1.](http://jornaldeangola.sapo.ao/politica/somos_24_milhoes_1.))

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Chinese’ was a term used in this discourse to refer both to a nation-state and a group of people classed together due to their physical appearance. Other East or Southeast Asian people working in Angola were sometimes included in this category, as when an Angolan student told me I could go to any ‘Chinese store’ to make photocopies. I never did find a Chinese-owned print shop, although many were run by Vietnamese entrepreneurs.

that all of these different people were likely involved in sinister dealings, perhaps even coordinated. Part of this had to do with the significance of Chinese financing in Angolan post-war reconstruction, and the intimate relationships some Chinese entrepreneurs had forged with high-ranking Angolan government officials. Suspicions of illicit behavior abounded, and the depiction by some voices in Angolan civil society of China as itself an autocratic state with no regard for human rights made it seem an even likelier ally of the allegedly corrupt and oppressive Angolan government.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond concerns particular to the configuration of state and society in Angola, however, the perceived growing influence of China in the country seemed to indicate a broader change that could have repercussions even as far as Europe. “I think China is scary,” the French oil man said frankly, “In our industry, they can bid on everything, from downstream to upstream, and they don’t collaborate with anyone. They have a completely parallel system. I mean, when they’re finished they can sell their product to us, but while they are working on it we have no idea what they are doing.” He was curious about logistical issues—how Chinese companies obtained licenses, whether they had local partners to help them, how they treated their workers. But after voicing these queries, he shifted to a more general reflection: “So should we be afraid of China? Or should we all move there? Is that where the future is? I mean, China has reached the place where it is now because of production, right? When I was young, we thought of China as a place where people lived in poverty and rode around on bicycles. Now, I have a friend who opened a factory there. He’s been there for only three years and already has 400 employees or something. It’s incredible! But don’t you think there’s a chance that production could return to Europe in the future? Like, now that we’re developing so many new technologies, maybe we wouldn’t need all that cheap Chinese labor anymore?” The man took another sip of his tea. With what appeared to be a self-conscious smile, he admitted, “It used to be ‘the West and the rest.’ I kind of miss that. Now we have to share with the rest of the world.”

These words echoed an attitude of trepidation that has become commonplace in both popular and academic treatments of ‘the rise of China.’<sup>5</sup> It is tempting to interpret such alarmist narratives as a kind of imperialist nostalgia. One might argue that China’s involvement in African affairs is disturbing to Western states and citizens, and thereby

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Rafael Marques de Morais, a prominent journalist and human rights activist, wrote in 2011, “Drawing on their own experience at home, China’s political theorists are expected by Angolan leaders to show how development can be given to the people as a substitute for civil liberties and human rights. The prize for Dos Santos and his clique is an economic boom that will give them the legitimacy to continue to rule after thirty-five years in power. The prize for the Chinese is access to Angola’s plentiful resources, especially oil” (“The New Imperialism: China in Angola,” *World Affairs* March/April 2011, accessed February 6, 2015, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/new-imperialism-china-angola>).

<sup>5</sup> Here I refer to the idea of a ‘China threat’ to US/Western hegemony, or more generally to the liberal world order. See Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); also Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China’s Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

criticized in the media, because it is seen as symptomatic of the decline of Western power in a new world order. This would spark particularly acute anxieties in the context of post-colonial Africa, where European economic and political influence has remained strong even after decolonization. However, the worry voiced by this oil company man may not belong to the West alone. The distinction he drew between “before” and “now” indicated a shifting of grounds not only for Europeans or Westerners, but also, as I will show below, for ‘the Chinese’ themselves. This dissertation is an attempt to trace what this shift means, not in abstract economic or sociological terms, but through the everyday interactions of Chinese, Angolan, and other actors engaged in a new phase of Chinese global expansion.

## **An Anthropology of Global China**

Over the past decade, “China in Africa” has emerged as an object of anxious discussions, both in academic literature and popular media, about the future of our globalized world. Official reports from 2014 proclaimed that Chinese state funding to Africa constituted 51.8% of its overseas aid spending, and trade between China and its African partners surpassed \$200 billion USD, allowing China to retain its 5-year-old ranking as Africa’s largest trading partner.<sup>6</sup> In this context, what exactly Chinese diplomats, corporate investors, migrant workers, and entrepreneurs are doing in Africa has come to be treated as not only an empirical mystery but also a source of moral uncertainty. While critics have denounced Chinese activities as neo-colonial or neo-imperial projects to extract resources at the expense of labor and environmental protections, the Chinese state has presented its interventions in Africa as a ‘non-hegemonic’ expression of South-South solidarity based on principles of equality and mutual benefit.<sup>7</sup> Welcomed by some African heads-of-state as an alternative to the harsh conditions imposed by Western financing institutions, Chinese financing has at the same time been condemned by civil society leaders for supporting the corruption and opacity of autocratic governments.<sup>8</sup> These debates tend to center around what China does for Africa—whether it helps or harms Africans, but they also raise another question about what “China in Africa” means. Whether celebrated or feared, global China troubles moral and political sensibilities because of its ostensibly non-ideological stance, in which diplomacy is limited to pure economic interest.

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<sup>6</sup> Yun Sun, “Africa in China’s New Foreign Aid White Paper,” *The Brookings Institution*, July 16, 2014, accessed April 28, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2014/07/16/africa-in-chinas-new-foreign-aid-white-paper/>; Maimbolwa Mulikelela, “Africa: ‘China-Africa Trade to Reach U.S. \$280 Billion,’” *Times of Zambia*, April 23, 2014; accessed April 28, 2017, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201404240212.html>.

<sup>7</sup> For early examples, see Howard French, “The Next Empire,” *The Atlantic*, May 2010, accessed April 28, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/05/the-next-empire/308018/>, contrasted against He Wenping, “China’s Perspective on Contemporary China-Africa Relations,” in *China Returns to Africa*, edited by Chris Alden, Daniel Large, and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, 143-165 (London: Hurst, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> A range of views was collected in Firoze Manji and Stephen Marks, eds., *African Perspectives on China in Africa* (Fahamu/Pambazuka, 2007).

Angola, where I conducted the majority of my fieldwork, is a particularly important case for examining these problems. There, the Chinese government under Mao became involved in anti-colonial struggles on the continent and in recent years it has been cited as China's largest trading partner in Africa.<sup>9</sup> Recovering from nearly three decades of a devastating civil war that ended in 2002, the Angolan government agreed in 2003 to entrust the large majority of contracts under its National Reconstruction Program to Chinese state-owned enterprises, in exchange for multiple billion dollars in oil-backed loans. This 'resources-for-infrastructure' framework has come to be seen as a model for Chinese investment across the continent, an in other 'developing' countries. It has allowed for the migration of vast numbers of Chinese workers to Angola, and the importation of large quantities of construction materials and consumer goods for trade on the market. Alongside state-level engagements, private Chinese businesses have boomed in all provinces of Angola, known at the time of my fieldwork to be one of the fastest growing economies in southern Africa. In 2013, The Angolan Embassy in Beijing was said to grant around 200 visas per week to Chinese citizens, and the official Chinese population of Angola has risen by more than 200,000 in the past three years, now constituting the largest non-African group in the country.<sup>10</sup> As in other African contexts but perhaps heightened due to its scale and nature, the Chinese presence in Angola is often associated negatively, in the press and on the street, with local poverty, unemployment, and the entrenched corruption of the Dos Santos regime. In response to rising incidents of violence and extortion against Chinese businesses, many Chinese migrants I met had come to hold an expressly negative view of Angola, yet they claimed that the appeal of easy profits keeps them from leaving. Angola therefore seemed to be an ideal site for asking whether Chinese overseas workers are as 'one-dimensional' as they appear in popular imaginations, and for thinking about what meanings are produced through Chinese moneymaking in Africa.

The experiences and reflections of Chinese men and women working on the African continent have been largely neglected within the flourishing study of China-Africa connections. Early research on China-Africa relations was dominated by analyses of state-level diplomacy or the effects of official policies.<sup>11</sup> Such treatments often took a polemical

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<sup>9</sup> Indira Campos and Alex Vines, "Angola and China: A Pragmatic Partnership," Center for Strategic and International Studies (London: Chatham House, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> "Número de chineses cresce em Angola," *Angonotícias*, January 14, 2013, accessed 2 October 2, 2013, <http://www.angonoticias.com/Artigos/item/37199/numero-de-chineses-cresce-em-angola>; "Quarenta mil chineses em Angola," *Angonotícias*, April 16, 2009, accessed October 2, 2013, <http://www.angonoticias.com/Artigos/item/21956>; "Angola: Cerca de 259,000 chineses vivem atualmente no país," *Visão* April 25, 2012, accessed 2 October 2, 2013, <http://visao.sapo.pt/angola-cerca-de-259000-chineses-vivem-atualmente-no-pais=f660830>.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Bräutigam, *Chinese Aid and African Development* (Macmillan, 1998); Ian Taylor, *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise* (Routledge, 2007); Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong, "Friends and Interests: China's Distinctive Links with Africa," *African Studies Review* 50.3 (2007): 75-114; Chris Alden, Daniel Large, and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, eds., *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (London: Hurst, 2008); Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift: the Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Lowell Dittmer and George T. Yu, *China, the Developing World, and the New Global Dynamic* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010).

tone, positioning China as either helpful or harmful to Western or African interests. Historical studies of Chinese globalism have served to contextualize contemporary Chinese diplomacy in Africa within a longer-term ideological and political landscape.<sup>12</sup> Other analyses have emphasized the agency of various African entities in their relations with China, while ethnographic studies of Chinese small-scale businesses have demonstrated a need to distinguish among various Chinese presences in Africa, some only tenuously connected to the PRC state.<sup>13</sup> However, despite recent emphasis in academic writings on the ‘human factor’ in China-Africa relations, comprehensive treatments of Chinese migration to Africa tend to avoid cultural questions by presenting sociological analyses of the connections between political economic forces and socio-demographic change.<sup>14</sup> The few explicit theorizations of morality and culture in the context of China-Africa connections unfortunately tend to present an overly homogenous and de-historicized vision of Chinese culture and philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Ching Kwan Lee’s recent publications on Chinese mining and construction firms in Zambia offer a comparative approach based on long-term fieldwork; however, her aim is to determine the characteristics of Chinese capital, rather than the significance of Chinese experiences abroad or the particularities of Chinese-African social relations.<sup>16</sup>

As an anthropological study of global encounters, this dissertation considers how meanings are produced through everyday interactions among members of groups whose collective differences are articulated and produced as they relate to each other. Such relationships are often characterized by unequal and shifting power dynamics, and they involve active processes of boundary making that transform both sides in the context of broader global forces. It is no longer assumed that anthropologists should focus on describing the features of a single community. Indeed, earlier anthropological studies of colonialism demonstrated how imperial projects generated unforeseen resistances, or how colonial relations worked to shape social norms and subjectivities not only in the colonies but also in the metropole itself.<sup>17</sup> More recently, ethnographic treatments of global capitalism in the late-

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China’s Encounter with Africa* (Cornell University Press, 1988); Jamie Monson, *Africa’s Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania* (Indiana University Press, 2009); Li Anshan, *A History of Overseas Chinese in Africa to 1911* (Diasporic Africa Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency: Angola’s Management of China’s Credit Lines* (Ashgate 2013); Gregor Dobler, “Chinese Shops and the Formation of a Chinese Expatriate Community in Namibia,” *The China Quarterly* 199 (2009): 707-727; Karsten Giese, “Same-Same but Different: Chinese Traders’ Perspectives on African Labor,” *The China Journal* 69 (2013): 134-153.

<sup>14</sup> Giles Mohan, Ben Lampert, May Tan-Mullins, and Daphne Chang, *Chinese Migrants and Africa’s Development: New Imperialists or Agents of Change?* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Chan, Stephen, ed. *The Morality of China in Africa: the Middle Kingdom and the Dark Continent* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Ching Kwan Lee, “Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa’s Chinese Enclaves,” *The China Quarterly* 199 (2009): 647-666; also Lee, “The Spectre of Global China,” *New Left Review* 89 (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol. 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1991); Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol. 2: the Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (University of

20<sup>th</sup> century have traced how capital expands not in a systematic unity but through tense negotiations and divergent understandings between managers, workers, producers, consumers, and a range of intermediaries.<sup>18</sup> My account of Chinese investment in Angola builds upon this literature by analyzing the production of difference between Chinese expatriate workers and their Angolan employees and partners. Rather than limiting my study to an analysis of the structural forces surrounding Chinese migration, or searching for an underlying Chinese ethos that would determine cultural behavior, my dissertation confronts the questions generated by Chinese investments in Angola by focusing on the experiences and reflections of individuals directly involved in this historic encounter. Moving beyond a relativistic explanation of how some people find morally acceptable what others do not, I present an account of how Chinese businessmen, Angolan workers, and Western observers, including myself, collectively face the uncertainties of a shifting world order.

## The Fieldwork

I arrived in Luanda for the first time in June 2012, for a six-week period of preliminary fieldwork in which my stated goal was to explore perceptions of ‘China’ and ‘Angola’ among inhabitants of the city who might variously identify themselves as Chinese, Angolan, or otherwise. A period of collaborative field research in Sierra Leone had immediately preceded my trip to Angola. There, I had worked mainly in the capital, Freetown, to meet and interview some of the Chinese entrepreneurs and employees of large companies who had within the past several years come to work in the country. This experience gave me an introductory model for how to conduct anthropological fieldwork, and a point of comparison with the Angolan case. Still, having never set foot on Angolan soil prior to beginning pre-dissertation research there, my first field trip was marked by a Malinowskian mood, in which confusion, loneliness, and excitement were bundled together in the seemingly arbitrary series of meetings and excursions that filled my weeks in Luanda.<sup>19</sup> Trying to learn as much as I could, in an exploratory way, about both Angola generally and the specific effects of Chinese investment after the end of the civil war, I met with NGO

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Chicago Press, 1997); Laura Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Two different approaches to this problem are offered by Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (University of California Press, 2002) and Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier, eds. *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> I refer here to Malinowski's description of the frustration and sometimes boredom he felt when he began his first attempt at ethnographic fieldwork, although the conditions of my own fieldwork were clearly different in many aspects: "I well remember the long visits I paid to the villages during the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into real touch with the natives, or supply me with any material. I had periods of despondency, when I buried myself in the reading of novels, as a man might take to drink in a fit of tropical depression and boredom" (Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1984 [1922]), 4).

workers, university researchers, Angolan and Chinese executives, diplomats, and entrepreneurs. With an Angolan research assistant, I visited Chinese construction sites, interviewing workers and their supervisors. These last meetings were highly formalized, having often been arranged in advance through contacts with managers offsite, and I frequently left them with the sense that the people I had spoken with could not, or did not want to, share their honest opinions with me. By contrast, I was inspired and stimulated by the more relaxed and spontaneous conversations I had with several traders from southern China, many of whom worked in a large market in central Luanda. The men, and especially the women, who I met there seemed eager to share their experiences of hardship. Theirs was an untold story of Chinese involvement in Angolan postwar reconstruction, I thought, completely different from the large Chinese state-owned construction companies who tended to bring a nearly exclusively male workforce to Angola for work on government contracts, and housed their operations on closed compounds in the outskirts of the city.

In October 2013, I returned to Angola for long-term fieldwork with these southern Chinese traders in mind. However, I also pursued contacts among larger companies in the construction industry, where Chinese investments in postwar Angola had been most tangible. Meanwhile, non-Chinese acquaintances repeatedly encouraged me to visit a “Chinese mall” that had recently opened in suburban Luanda. The question, “Have you been to *the Chinese shopping center?*” would often come with a knowing look, as if to imply not only that it was it scandalous for a *Chinese* mall to have been built in Angola, but also that some illicit activity must have been taking place within or around the shopping center itself. Having opened only the year before the start of my fieldwork, the shopping center had already been subject of much controversy in local media, in part because of its reputation as a heavily ‘Chinese’ space. The mall was reported to be huge, housing exclusively Chinese-owned or –managed shops, and recently it had been closed temporarily, when Angolan regulators discovered that many of the products sold were labeled only in Chinese. It stood as a symbol for the potential dangers of increasing Chinese presences in Angola, both economic and social.

My first visit to Shopping ChinAngola constituted a second Malinowskian moment in my fieldwork. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski describes a paradigmatic “first entry into the village,” in which the ethnographer might be chaperoned by a white resident of his island—perhaps a colonial administrator, or a missionary. He writes: “Your white companion has his routine way of treating the natives, and he neither understands, nor is very much concerned with the manner in which you, as an ethnographer, will have to approach them.”<sup>20</sup> My own chaperone to the “village” of ChinAngola was a white American twenty-something, Rob, who had studied for a year in China and, through personal connections, found himself selling insurance to Chinese companies in Luanda. He was generous with his time and eager to share the knowledge of Chinese business networks and practices that he had accumulated over the course of his solitary work visiting Chinese companies to sell insurance. As he led me around the shopping center, Rob dropped bits of juicy-sounding information, such as which shops were actually owned by larger companies, or how various Angolan and Chinese entities were involved in the administration of the mall, and what their plans were for

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

expansion. This commentary was interspersed with observations about the cultural habits of both Angolans and Chinese. Although grateful for Rob's guidance, I also wondered how my experience would change once I had a chance to explore and reflect on my own.<sup>21</sup>

Rob introduced me to Li Jun, a young manager at a Chinese provincial-level state-owned construction company that housed its Trade Department and retail operations in a store at Shopping ChinAngola. The Company, which in this dissertation I call Northwest Construction, interested me for many reasons. The majority of Chinese construction firms I encountered in Angola originated in southern China, specifically Jiangsu and Sichuan provinces. Based in Gansu, a province with a reputation for poverty and lack of development, and certainly not a traditional 'sending' region for outmigration from China, Northwest Construction represented a case of a Chinese state-owned enterprise that relied heavily on Chinese state diplomacy to globalize its operations. At the same time, despite being state-owned, the Company operated a small retail store and collaborated closely with many private entrepreneurs. Indeed, Northwest Construction was the only store at Shopping ChinAngola that was owned by a state-owned enterprise. In terms of its mode of operations, it straddled an ambiguous distinction between "private" and "state-owned" companies, working both on government construction contracts and attempting to expand commercial business through sales of imported products from China. Moreover, through its attempts to expand into sectors beyond construction, the Company exemplified a tendency common among Chinese businesses in Angola in 2013. Ten years into the National Reconstruction Program, which had initially brought most Chinese construction firms to the country, many managers and entrepreneurs complained that the construction sector had become "saturated," that competition was too fierce among the many Chinese contractors who had come to Angola to cash in on the postwar construction boom. They sought new and creative ways in which to maintain a foothold in the Angolan economy, and Northwest Construction was no exception.

In the official capacity of an intern translator and interpreter for the Company's Trade Department, I developed important relationships with this company and its partners—Chinese, Angolan, and international—over the course of my fieldwork. In January 2014, I moved into one of the company's compounds. Like several other female translators of Chinese construction firms who I met in Angola, I was usually the only woman living on company grounds. I worked with Chinese and Angolan employees of the Trade Department on a daily basis, both participating in the work they did for the company and engaging in extended conversations about their experiences working for a Chinese company in Angola. I also made connections to business associates of the company, and I traveled with Company representatives to sites outside of Luanda where they planned to expand business. Discounting the month when I returned to the United States in June-July 2014, my fieldwork in Angola lasted a total of 10 months. Following my departure from Angola in September 2014, I spent a total of 9 months in China, where I conducted follow-up research and began to draft my dissertation. This dissertation draws primarily from material collected in Angola, as that is where my richest ethnographic material was collected, which informs the core of my

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<sup>21</sup> My sentiments thus somewhat echoed Malinowski's words: "The first visit leaves you with a hopeful feeling that when you return alone, things will be easier" (Ibid.)

thinking on the question of how to characterize Chinese-Angolan relations. My fieldwork in China was crucial for the contextual knowledge it provided me about the experiences of this Company and its employees in Angola; however, a detailed analysis of my time in China will have to wait for a future iteration of this ethnography.

I have chosen to privilege my conversations with interlocutors in Angola and China as sites where various understandings of Chinese-African encounters were produced, and I have been explicit about my own participation in these interactions. I almost never recorded the conversations I had in the field, in part due to various individuals' explicitly telling me that they did not want to be 'interviewed.' As will be made clear in the chapters to follow, my identity as a national of the United States, researching a topic of noted political sensitivity, required me to be especially careful about my interlocutors' preferences. This was also a consideration in my choice to establish a relatively fixed institutional position with one company, rather than moving between various organizations, which in some cases were in economic competition with one another. In light of the conditions of my fieldwork, I chose to conduct research by participating in everyday work activities and engaging in conversations, on which I took notes and later reconstructed from memory. I take full responsibility for any omissions or errors that may have resulted from this process.

## Summary of Chapters

This dissertation consists of an Introduction, five substantive chapters, and a Conclusion. In my first chapter, "The Vampires," I present a historical overview of China-Angola relations to ask how, despite the explicit positioning of the Chinese state as an alternative to the West, Chinese in postwar Angola have been repeatedly accused of greed and immorality, sometimes to the extent that doubts are raised about their basic humanity. Reading state-level relations between China and Angola through classic anthropological discussions of exchange and reciprocity, I show how an attempted alliance is fraught with suspicion and resentment, specifically targeted at Chinese migrants. Moving from this scene of collective encounter to examine the rhythms of everyday life, Chapter 2, "Another Day of Work," outlines the organization of space and time at the Chinese construction and trade firm that I call Northwest Construction. As I show through depictions of daily life and work at the company, Chinese employees justified the regulation and isolation to which they were subject in Angola by invoking the goal of individual monetary gain. However, their everyday practices and the discourses around them betrayed collectivist sentiments that would distinguish their attitudes from those typical of modern consumerism.

Crucial to the economic survival of the Company was its localization and collaboration with Angolan employees, business partners, and legal authorities. Chapters 3 and 4 thus analyze the social dynamics of Chinese-Angolan relations as they relate to inter-lingual communication and political regulation. In my third chapter, "Learning How to Speak," I examine how monolingual speakers of Chinese and Portuguese communicated by means of either professional translators or a contact language. I explore how these forms of communication reflected a combination of enmity and amity in Chinese-Angolan social relations. My fourth chapter, "When the Law is Unreasonable," shifts to analyze not the

conditions but rather the limits of friendly relations. Through the Angolan state's attempts to impose legal sanctions on Chinese merchants while maintaining their economic viability, alliances were forged and broken, and actors on both sides negotiated the question of who gets to govern Chinese business in Angola.

Concomitant to this political question is a question about understandings of human difference and value. Thus, my final chapter, "A Chinese Idea of Africa," directly addresses how Chinese migrants in Angola conceived of collectivities like China and Angola through various conceptual hierarchies of human difference. In my Conclusion, I review the structure of the dissertation as a whole, and I reflect on the possibilities that a tradition of ethnographic writing could offer for answering the polemical questions generated by a new era of non-Western global expansionism.

## Chapter 1

### The Vampires: A History of Chinese-Angolan Encounters

I had been working and living on the compound of Northwest Construction<sup>22</sup> for several months when Pimentel, an Angolan schoolteacher I met in 2012, asked me to accompany him on what for me was a rare outing off company grounds. Sonangol, the state-owned oil company, was hosting an exhibition on the Marginal, a promenade running along the Bay of Luanda, at the edge of the downtown area. An expensive renovation of the Marginal had been completed just before the presidential elections of 2012, in which José Eduardo dos Santos, in office since 1979, was elected for another five-year term. With 147,000 square meters of pedestrian space, three playgrounds, several basketball courts, a skating ramp, and multiple exhibition areas for cultural events, the site was a testament to the vitality of the city of Luanda and the accomplishments of President Dos Santos, “Architect of Peace,” ten years after the end of the Angolan Civil War.<sup>23</sup> On the other side of the eight-lane Avenida 4 de Fevereiro, named for the beginning of armed struggle against Portuguese rule, shabby colonial buildings slumped in the shadows of shining skyscrapers and hulking yellow cranes bearing the insignia of foreign construction companies. Imported palm trees had been installed along the median of the avenue, along with an impressive number of streetlamps. When foreign dignitaries came to visit, I was told, a generator was placed in front of each lamppost to ensure the visibility of the dazzling night scene. This was necessary in a city that experienced frequent outages of electricity and water. As I watched gardeners spray their hoses over vast green lawns, it was hard not to think of the time I had spent living in a much poorer area only a few kilometers away. There, the faucets often ran dry for days on end; the streets were perpetually sandy and in some places paved in garbage; and when it rained, the neighbors poured bucket after bucket of water from their flooded tin-roofed shacks.

While he worked as a high school physics teacher, Pimentel had also been studying electrical engineering at Agostinho Neto University, and as his graduation date approached he was looking for job opportunities in the corporate sector. At the exhibition, we wandered through endless booths featuring the activities of Sonangol’s many subsidiaries, ranging from offshore oil exploration to real estate development to steel manufacturing.<sup>24</sup> Pimentel chatted with a few recruiters as I pretended to read informational pamphlets, but we quickly grew

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<sup>22</sup> The compound where I lived was located in the outskirts of Luanda, about 20 kilometers from the city center.

<sup>23</sup> “Angola/Eleições: Nova baía de Luanda foi hoje inaugurada pelo Presidente José Eduardo dos Santos” (Angola/Elections: New bay of Luanda inaugurated today by President José Eduardo dos Santos), *Lusa*, August 28, 2012, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://visao.sapo.pt/lusa/angolaeleicoes-nova-baia-de-luanda-foi-hoje-inaugurada-pelo-presidente-jose-eduardo-dos-santos=f683233>.

<sup>24</sup> Sonangol was established in 1976, just after Angola declared independence from Portugal, to serve as official regulator of the Angolan oil industry. See Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, “In the Shadow of War: Oil and the Making of the Parallel System,” in *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

weary of the event and stepped outside for a stroll along the meticulously manicured promenade. On the sidewalk, joggers in sweaty spandex dodged swirling adolescent boys on rollerblades.<sup>25</sup> As we wandered across a small concrete bridge that ineffectually traversed a piece of lawn, Pimentel grinned and let out a chuckle. “Djamila!” he said, greeting a fashionably dressed young woman who had been walking arm-in-arm with her female friend. “*Boa tarde, professor!*” she said playfully.

Djamila was Pimentel’s former student, and she proceeded to update him about her ongoing studies. She was attending the Catholic University,<sup>26</sup> and planned to finish in the next two years with a degree in engineering. “You’re doing very well, very well indeed!” said Pimentel proudly. As she and her friend politely excused themselves and walked away, giggling, Pimentel shook his head and said in a tone of what may have been nostalgia, “Djamila, Djamila...” She had been one of his best students, he said. The school where he taught was in a very poor and, as he described, dangerous neighborhood, and although Djamila had been one of those students who had to walk a long way to get to school every day, she had still attended regularly. Moreover, unlike the other girls, she never tried to flirt with the teachers. I was surprised at this last comment, but he insisted that, although he personally disapproved, it was “normal” for female students to romantically engage their instructors, just as it was common for students to pay *gasosas* (cash bribes) to faculty or administrators at the school when they needed to pass a class. He claimed to be among the few who would never accept such bribes. “A lot of my colleagues ended up dating their students, or are currently married to their former students,” he explained, laughing slightly, “But in Angola we have a saying: *o cabrito come onde está amarrado*,” the goat eats where it is tethered.

The phrase “goats eat where they are tethered” would be familiar to a student of the political in Africa as what Jean-François Bayart has called the “politics of the belly.”<sup>27</sup> Refuting characterizations of African states as pathological or degenerate, Bayart proposed that a specific mode of accumulation and redistribution had arisen within the particular context of material scarcity that has characterized the African continent since before the colonial era.<sup>28</sup> As the saying “goats eat where they are tethered” indicates, it involves access to

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<sup>25</sup> In September 2013, Angola hosted the Roller Hockey World Championship, which may have inspired many young men to take up the sport of inline skating.

<sup>26</sup> Universidade Católica was the premier private university in Angola at the time of my fieldwork.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009 [1993]).

<sup>28</sup> Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Bayart sought to correct a problem stated most forcefully in the nineteenth. An ahistorical view of Africa, articulated in different versions from Aristotle to Hegel and, most recently, through late-twentieth century dependency theory, saw the African continent as a space of passivity and darkness, an empty place first discovered by Europeans and then violently thrust into a marginalized position in the world economy. Under this paradigm, the postcolonial African state would be merely a hollow imitation of European institutions through which chief-like despots use violent and coercive means to maintain their fragile grasp on power. Bayart’s intervention was designed to grant agency to both African political actors and African states within a global system. Indeed, a key point for him was that these two domains—political relations within African societies and those at the interface between African states and the world—are not separate, but rather share the ethos characterized by the politics of the belly.

resources through relations of dependence—the “tether” is both what constrains the goats and what allows them to eat. While Bayart posits patron-client relations and other related social phenomena, which would easily appear as “corruption” or “political decay” when held up against a model of liberal democracy, as central to the constitution of the African state, he does not deny that the relations formed through the politics of the belly are unequal or even violent. Indeed, the personal relations through which it operates are “by definition inegalitarian and hierarchical.”<sup>29</sup> However, Bayart cautions that the production of inequality need not be thought of as necessarily immoral. Since what “big men” accumulate is not power alone, but also the capacity to redistribute, material prosperity could be interpreted as a political virtue. An example given in Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer*, which Bayart drew upon to make his argument, corroborates this point: “Kinsmen must assist one another, and if one has a surplus of a good thing he must share it with his neighbors. Consequently no Nuer ever has a surplus.”<sup>30</sup> If those who accumulate are obligated to distribute, it becomes more difficult to determine who is exploiting whom. Like other systems of accumulation, the politics of the belly is morally ambiguous.

This moral ambiguity makes the politics of the belly an appropriate starting point from which to contemplate the context in which China came to have significance for Angola at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is all the more apt because Bayart relates the domestic workings of the African state to the way in which the African continent has historically engaged with the world—what he terms extraversion, or dependence as a strategic “mode of action.” Again, challenging the notion of a “radical antagonism between colonizer and colonized,” African states’ dependence on various global actors could be understood as strategies to mobilize resources and thereby gain control over dependents domestically. Such an interpretation of African history might help us understand how ‘the Chinese’ in postwar Angola became the target of an accusation originally aimed at Portuguese fascists: “They eat everything, and leave nothing.” This phrase, penned by Portuguese folk musician Zeca Afonso in the 1960s, when revolutionaries struggled against the Estado Novo dictatorship, was repeated by an Angolan market vendor in the early 2000s as an “Angolan saying” that captured the nature of Chinese activities in the country.<sup>31</sup> It recalls a famous description by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*: “Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”<sup>32</sup> Had China behaved so badly in Angola that it deserved a comparison with the undead? Below, I will trace some of the historical conditions that would make such an accusation possible, but first an ethnographic example should specify the stakes of the accusation itself.

By the middle of January 2014, I had been working with Northwest Construction for nearly two months. Although their household appliance store at Shopping ChinAngola was

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<sup>29</sup> Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 233.

<sup>30</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: a Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), 183.

<sup>31</sup> The market vendor was interviewed in a news report I watched before my first visit to Angola in 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 342.

not the most exciting place to be spending my days, I appreciated having shelter from the burning heat and sticky dust outside.<sup>33</sup> Every day after lunch, Li Jun and Ma Hui, vice manager and accountant, respectively, of Northwest Construction's Trade Department, locked themselves in their offices and put their heads on their desks for an hour. As this ritual took place at a time when many potential Angolan customers would be eating lunch, the store was usually quiet, and the air felt thick and slow. Xiao Zhang,<sup>34</sup> store manager, Afonso, senior sales clerk, and I paced the showroom floor with glazed eyes when suddenly a young Angolan man in a flashy red jacket and long dreadlocks, unusual in Luanda, came strutting through the store, loudly looking for floor tiles to decorate his house. When he left, Xiao Zhang smirked and said in Chinese, "His hair was really cool!" Although Afonso did not speak Mandarin, he seemed to have understood the reference. "I used to have hair just like that," he said proudly.

"When was that?" I asked. "When I was in Namibia, when I was 19," Afonso reminded me that he had spent some time outside of the country during the war. "I used to be really big, and I danced funk. When I was in Namibia a lot of people actually thought I was North American because of my style. Life was good there, but I am Angolan after all, so I had to come back." I asked when he had returned. "In 2002, when there was peace. The war was bad, Cheryl. There was so much fighting. We lost *a lot*. Many, many brothers died during the war. I prefer an Angola that has nothing, but that doesn't have war [*prefiro Angola sem nada, mas sem guerra*]." He repeated this last sentence, then added, "But Savimbi was right [*tinha razão*]<sup>35</sup>—he was a true Angolan, and he wanted an Angola for Angolans."

Born in 1978, Afonso would not have seen an Angola without war for most of his life. He had been conscripted to fight on the side of the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), now the party of current president Dos Santos, and had fled to Namibia to avoid military service. I did not expect him to be an ardent supporter of the MPLA, but I was still curious about his invocation of Jonas Savimbi, the leader of UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), the MPLA's main opponent during a 27-year-long armed conflict that officially ended only with Savimbi's death in 2002. I asked what he meant, was Dos Santos not also a true Angolan? "No, he's *not* Angolan!" Afonso responded literally, "He is from São Tomé! In 1975, he came in through the Congo, and after Agostinho Neto died, he came into power." This story of Dos Santos as a kind of post-

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<sup>33</sup> During my fieldwork with Northwest Construction, I spent many days working out of a shop they rented at a shopping center for construction materials, furniture, and household appliances called Shopping ChinAngola. As will be explained in further detail in Chapter 4, the shopping center operated under a partnership between a private Chinese construction company Sichuan (S&C) Construction and the Staff Pension Fund of the National Police. All of the retail and wholesale spaces inside the shopping center were rented to Chinese businesses at the time of my fieldwork. At ChinAngola, Northwest Construction kept a showroom and office space for its Trade Department in order to hold meetings with clients or partners away from construction sites.

<sup>34</sup> Younger or junior employees of the Company were sometimes addressed with the prefix *xiao* (little) plus their surname. I have kept the term of address in Chinese to avoid the pejorative connotation of "little" in English.

colonial “stranger king”<sup>35</sup> was new to me, as the more common biography I had heard traced his roots to Sambizanga, a neighborhood near the Port of Luanda. Afonso found a way to reconcile this narrative with his own: “Yes, he *is* from Sambizanga! That is where the São-tomenses go when they come to Luanda. They tend to settle there, or on the Ilha. He is not Angolan, and that’s why he lets the Chinese enter our country and stay here as long as they like. But I think many Angolans are already quite dissatisfied with José Eduardo. Four years from now we will have elections again, and I think he will leave power, and someone else will come who will not allow so many foreigners to come here and stay indefinitely.”

Although Xiao Zhang had left our immediate presence at the beginning of the conversation, I still felt uncomfortable discussing “the Chinese” in the middle of Northwest Construction’s showroom. I knew that many Chinese expatriates in Angola faced great difficulties—material, social, and psychological—before coming to Angola and during their time working there. Perhaps the least of these was the difficulty of obtaining a visa, which I had personally experienced as a very convoluted and prolonged process. “But the foreigners who come here can’t really stay indefinitely,” I said in defense, “They all have to get work visas.” Afonso reminded me that this was not his point: “But the Chinese have been here now for a *long time*. They came here to reconstruct our country, and they were permitted to stay for 50 years.” I had never heard of this time limit. “You didn’t know that?” said Afonso incredulously, “Any other president would have limited the entry of the Chinese. Do you know why José Eduardo decided to work with them for reconstruction? Why was it the Chinese and not the Americans, or the French? Because the *governantes* can make more money with them! If it had been the Americans, they would have demanded a higher price and would have done their work with more time and better quality, but the *governantes* would have made a lot less money for themselves!”

I hazarded an unhistorical and exaggerated conjecture: “So do you think Savimbi would have been better, since he would have worked with the Americans?”<sup>36</sup> Afonso’s answer

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<sup>35</sup> The “stranger king” theory has been explored in depth by Marshall Sahlins, who provides numerous historical examples of communities that have accepted rule by a foreign figure as a means of establishing order, particularly for societies without a formal state. West and Central African societies have been cited as exemplary of this phenomenon: “Everything happens as if the very structure of a lineage-based society is not capable of engendering dialectical development on the political plane without the intervention of a new political structure. The sovereignty, the magical source of power, always comes from elsewhere, from a claimed original place, exterior to society” (Luc de Heusch, *The Drunken King, or the Origin of the State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 26-7; cited in Sahlins, “The Stranger King or, Elementary Forms of the Politics of Life,” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 36.105 (2008): 178). I draw attention to this discussion in professional anthropology only to point out that if something like a stranger king existed in the historical memory of Angola and related societies, this narrative would have been more readily available for someone like Afonso.

<sup>36</sup> The Reagan Administration famously supported UNITA in the 1980s as part of its covert strategy to combat the Soviet Union by financing insurgencies throughout the Third World. However, I would be incorrect to imply that the MPLA did not work with “the Americans.” Throughout the war, the avowedly Marxist-Leninist MPLA collaborated with American companies and consultants to obtain the oil revenues that continue to sustain it today. See Tony Hodges, *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State* (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 10; also Soares de Oliveira, “In the Shadow of War.”

surprised me once again: “Yes, it is possible that Angola would have become a colony of the United States, but this would still have been better because the Americans would have passed more knowledge on to the Angolans. The Americans take, but they also give. They take, and they give [*tomam, e dão*]. That way, the country would have been more developed. They aren’t like the Portuguese. The Portuguese only take. They take and take, but they don’t give back. All they want to do is drink their wine. Yes, the Portuguese drink a lot!”<sup>37</sup> We both laughed at this last comment, and he continued with a characterization of Angola I had heard many times before: “Angola is a very poor country, but it is very wealthy in resources. Did you know that there are 23 mineral resources in the entire world, and 22 of them can be found in Angola? But the people do not see any of the profit that comes out of these resources. For example, my grandfather, back in my homeland [*lá na minha terra*], in Kwanza-Sul,<sup>38</sup> he had a huge farm where he grew everything. Now that piece of land has been received—yes, by the government. They say there’s uranium in the ground.” As I pondered the innocuous phrasing (*aquele terreno já foi recebido*) Afonso had used to describe expropriation of his grandfather’s land, and wondered whether it was really possible that the government could have been mining uranium in Kwanza Sul, a customer entered the store, and Afonso excused himself to go back to work.

Afonso’s narrative, and other very similar ones I heard over my time in Angola, located “the Chinese” as contemporary descendants of a long line of exploitative foreign powers in Angola. According to this story, the Chinese, like the Portuguese, enjoyed the benefits of extracting from Angola’s natural wealth while the majority of the autochthonous population suffered. Moreover, they did so as co-conspirators of the allegedly corrupt and illegitimate government of President Dos Santos—in Afonso’s version a foreigner himself. His comparison of the recent Chinese intervention in Angola with Portuguese and American colonization, actual or potential, is crucial in that it highlighted that the foreignness of these “collaborators” was not what mattered. A foreign party could be benevolent, like the Americans in his discourse, if they did not only *take* but also *gave*. In other words, an ethical relation required an element of reciprocity. This idea was classically elaborated by Marcel Mauss in his *Essay on the Gift*. There, Mauss made the important point that relations of exchange, which Levi-Strauss would later argue form the basis of all social relations, entail a reciprocal dynamic that presupposes both an obligation to give and an obligation to receive: “To refuse to give, . . . just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality.”<sup>39</sup>

In the “archaic” societies from which Mauss drew his examples, mutual moral obligation would be established between groups that engaged in regular exchanges of gifts.

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<sup>37</sup> Angolans with whom I spoke frequently referred to inferior cultural habits or lack of education among the former Portuguese colonizers. It is important to recall that, up to the beginning of the twentieth century, the majority of Portuguese settlers to Angola were exiled convicts, called *degradados* in Portuguese. See Gerald J. Bender, *Angola Under the Portuguese: the Myth and the Reality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 60.

<sup>38</sup> Kwanza-Sul is a province of Angola on the Atlantic coast south of Luanda.

<sup>39</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1990 [1925]), 13.

Such exchanges were often highly ritualized and took place outside of market or capitalist relations. Potlatches, for example, are highly stylized displays of generosity, often involving extreme distribution or destruction, which would be reciprocated in equally extreme acts.<sup>40</sup> However, such systems of gift exchange contained elements that moderns would also recognize: a combination of disinterestedness (the gift should be given willingly) and obligation (one must repay) that, according to Mauss, serves as a symbol of social life itself, “to reflect somewhat directly the manner in which [these groups], constantly enmeshed with one another, feel that they are everything to one another.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Mauss concluded that this combination of freedom and constraint that characterizes the act of gift giving is also the moral foundation of every form of society.<sup>42</sup> It would follow that a conception of ‘the Chinese’ as those who take without giving would exclude the possibility of a shared sociality between China and Angola, or Chinese and Angolans. A major question of this dissertation is how such sociality might be possible—whether and how people associated with the two collectivities ‘China’ and ‘Angola’ could be morally obligated to one another.

### Angola in the World

If, as in Afonso’s rendering, the Chinese could be figured as the latest in a series of outsiders working in collusion with local elites to extract Angolan resource wealth, at least two examples from the history of Angolan foreign relations would serve as precursors. First, the trade in human slaves from Angola to the Americas, which reached its height in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, involved an unprecedented form of exploitation: whereas the chiefs of Bayart’s pre-colonial societies would have had to repay the loyalty of their dependents with material sustenance, the slave trade turned people into commodities to be exchanged for imported goods. According to historian Joseph Miller, 15<sup>th</sup>-century Angolan leaders originally became involved in trade with the Portuguese in order to acquire prestigious items like textiles, alcohol, and weapons, which would attract further dependents. Ironically, they ultimately succumbed to Portuguese demands for slave labor in order to pay off debts they owed for foreign imports.<sup>43</sup> As the meaning of “wealth in people” was transformed from dependents into commodities, over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a lucrative market grew for the export of human beings, and it persisted despite the fact that most slaves died before they reached their destination, or within only a few years of working on the plantations of Brazil.<sup>44</sup> The memory of this morbid trade continues to hold political significance in Angola, although the active role of African political leaders is deemphasized by their contemporary successors. For example, in a speech to commemorate 40 years of Angolan independence on November 11, 2015, President Dos Santos reminded the Angolan public that nearly half of the slaves taken

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>42</sup> “This morality is eternal; it is common to the most advanced societies, to those of the immediate future, and to the lowest forms of society. We touch upon fundamentals” (Mauss, *The Gift*, 70).

<sup>43</sup> Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 105.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

from Africa to Brazil came from Angola, and, had it not been for the treacherous business of the Portuguese, Angola's population would be much more numerous today.<sup>45</sup>

The armed conflict that began with the anti-colonial struggle in 1961 and transformed after independence into a civil war that lasted until 2002 serves as a second example of foreign intervention in Angola.<sup>46</sup> War in Angola was a classic form of extraversion in that it afforded opportunities for political leaders to strategically cultivate relations of dependence both internally and with foreign entities. The three major parties initially involved in the conflict all benefited from foreign backing in different ways. The National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), based in the northwest of the country, was founded by Holden Roberto, who had lived most of his life outside of Angola. The party drew support from Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko during its relatively short involvement in the war. UNITA, the main opponent of the Angolan government during the civil war and the main opposition party today, was based in southern and central Angola. It was supported by apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, and after 1985 received aid from a United States eager to counterbalance Soviet assistance to the MPLA. The MPLA, for its part, was based in the capital and claimed to represent the government of Angola since 1975. Declaring itself a Marxist-Leninist party in 1976, the party received military training and munitions from the Soviet Union, as well as tens of thousands of ground troops from Cuba.<sup>47</sup> Natural resources played a major role in the finances of both parties during the war. The MPLA steadily developed oil production throughout the 1980s, allowing it to spend an unusually high proportion of its GDP on defense and security. Oil revenues numbering in the billions of dollars were managed directly by the Futungo de Belas presidential palace, bypassing the National Bank of Angola.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, UNITA gained control of profitable diamond mines in the northeast of the country that allowed it continue financing its war efforts through the 1990s.<sup>49</sup> Rumors continue to circulate today that Jonas Savimbi, leader of UNITA, was found and assassinated in Moxico province with the aid of Israeli actors heavily involved in the diamond industry.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Angola 40 Anos: Íntegra da Mensagem do Presidente da República," *Agência Angola Press*, November 10, 2015, accessed March 8, 2016, [http://www.portalangop.co.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/politica/2015/10/46/Angola-Anos-Integra-Mensagem-Presidente-Republica,31645f08-9bbc-4a5b-b949-5c0666a12b73.html](http://www.portalangop.co.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/politica/2015/10/46/Angola-Anos-Integra-Mensagem-Presidente-Republica,31645f08-9bbc-4a5b-b949-5c0666a12b73.html).

<sup>46</sup> It is only possible to offer a crude sketch of this history here, though it could include other examples or a different periodization. Coffee, for instance, was the leading export from Angola until surpassed by oil in 1973.

<sup>47</sup> Hodges, *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State*, 9-10.

<sup>48</sup> Assis Malaquias, "China as Angola's new best friend—for now," in *China and Angola: A Marriage of Convenience?*, ed. Marcus Power and Ana Cristina Alves (Fahamu/Pambazuka, 2012), 35-6. According to the NGO Human Rights Watch, from 1997 to 2002 an estimated \$4.2 billion in oil revenues "disappeared from government coffers, roughly equal to all foreign and domestic social and humanitarian spending in Angola over that same period" (Human Rights Watch, *Transparency and Accountability in Angola*, 13 April 2010; cited in Malaquias, 36).

<sup>49</sup> Hodges, *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State*, 160, 176.

<sup>50</sup> For a contemporary account of government influence in the diamond industry, including detailed descriptions of violence committed against residents in diamond-mining areas by the Angolan Armed Forces, see Rafael Marques de Morais, *Diamantes de Sangue: Corrupção e Tortura em Angola* (Lisboa:

The most recent iteration of the conjuncture between domestic clientelism, foreign patronage, and the leveraging of resource wealth, brings us to the contemporary task of postwar reconstruction. This was taken up by the Dos Santos government after the civil war ended with Savimbi's death in 2002. The Angolan government is initially supposed to have sought financing from 'traditional' Western donors like the International Monetary Fund and the United States, but the conditionalities that would have accompanied such funding, such as demands for budgetary transparency, proved impossible for Angola to meet.<sup>51</sup> As an official in the Angolan Ministry of Foreign Relations said in hindsight, "Chinese financing appeared at the right moment."<sup>52</sup> In 2003, an announcement was made of a "framework agreement" between the Angolan Ministry of Finance and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, under which several multibillion-dollar lines of credit would be released from Chinese policy banks for funding a National Reconstruction Program. These loans were to be guaranteed by regular sales of oil from Sonangol, the Angolan state-run oil company, to the Chinese government, and the terms of the largest creditor, China Export-Import Bank, stipulated that the majority of construction contracts be awarded to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs).<sup>53</sup> Only two years after this initial agreement was signed, the Angolan government received an additional source of financing from China International Fund (CIF), a private company based in Hong Kong that is thought to have close connections to both the Chinese and Angolan

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Tinta da China, 2011). Following this book's publication, Marques was tried for criminal libel of Angolan military generals and given a suspended sentence in May 2015 (David Smith, "Angolan journalist given suspended jail term over blood diamonds book," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2015, accessed March 8, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/28/angolan-suspended-jail-blood-diamonds-rafael-marques-de-morais>).

<sup>51</sup> According to Malaquias, the MPLA-led government pushed for a donors' conference for postwar reconstruction, but Western donors, particularly the United States, declined: "By withholding support of the donors' conference, the United States signaled displeasure with the Angolan government's lack of transparency in the management of public finances, especially of funds accrued from the sale of oil and diamonds" ("China as Angola's new best friend—for now," 35). See Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift*, 274-5, for slight variations on this story.

<sup>52</sup> "Angola 'apostou na China no momento certo,' diz diplomata angolano," *Agência Angola Press*, November 19, 2012, accessed March 8, 2016,

[http://www.portalangop.co.ao/motix/pt\\_pt/noticias/politica/2012/10/47/Angola-apostou-Chinamomento-certo-diz-diplomata-angolano,eaf657d2-797b-4a5c-a39d-0fbf870588f2.html#](http://www.portalangop.co.ao/motix/pt_pt/noticias/politica/2012/10/47/Angola-apostou-Chinamomento-certo-diz-diplomata-angolano,eaf657d2-797b-4a5c-a39d-0fbf870588f2.html#). There are historical precedents for this kind of move by China in relation to Western involvement in large-scale investment or aid projects on the African continent. When the idea for a railway connecting land-locked Zambia to the Indian Ocean through Tanzania was first devised in 1961, presidents Kaunda and Nyerere first appealed to Western governments, but while they hesitated, the Chinese government presented a practical, efficient, and generous alternative. See Snow, *The Star Raft*, 151-3; also Monson, *Africa's Freedom Railway*.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed explanation of the credit line framework, see Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency*. The interest rate that Exim Bank offers is much lower than that of a standard commercial loan (%10), but the loans are considered to be "less concessional" than financing considered as Official Development Assistance (ODA) by the World Bank; what marks them apart from financing from other sources may be the extended length of the repayment term, up to 17 years with a grace period of 5 years at the time of Corkin's writing (Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency*, Chapter 5).

governments. CIF provided several billion dollars in oil-backed loans for infrastructure construction and established a joint venture with Sonangol to conduct exploration and trade in the petroleum sector.<sup>54</sup> A number of Western and Angolan commentators on these events have criticized both the opacity of the agreements with China and the central role of oil supplies in them, alleging that they contribute to continued corruption and inequality in Angola.<sup>55</sup>

In each of these three historical examples, a foreign group had benefited from the capture of resources—in people, diamonds, oil, or market share—seen to originate from and therefore rightly belong to Angola and the Angolan people. A theft had taken place, and this theft was all the more egregious because it had been facilitated by Angolan “elites,” to use a term frequently invoked in Angolan discourses of social criticism today.<sup>56</sup> Angola was posited as originally possessing an abundance of natural wealth, which made it both attractive to foreigners and vulnerable to predation. Although Portuguese traders, American CIA agents, and Israeli merchants had each, at different times, claimed to be “friends” to Angola, cementing social bonds through relations of exchange, these various foreign groups had

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<sup>54</sup> China International Fund has built a glittering gold skyscraper, called CIF Luanda One, on a major thoroughfare of downtown Luanda. CIF is commonly perceived as a mysterious entity that claims to be private and is officially based in Hong Kong but clearly has close ties to both Chinese and Angolan governments. The man usually identified as chairman of the company, known in English-language reports as “Sam Pa” and among my Chinese interlocutors in Luanda as “Mister Xu”, reportedly met José Eduardo dos Santos in the 1960s at a military training camp in the Soviet Union and later facilitated arms deals to the MPLA for the Chinese government. He is said to travel on an Angolan diplomatic passport, and has invested in a number of what the United States would call ‘rogue states,’ such as Zimbabwe or North Korea. Several investigative reports have been published about Sam Pa and his companies, known by the address at which they are registered in Hong Kong. See Lee Levkowitz, Marta McLellan Ross, and J.R. Warner, “The 88 Queensway Group: A Case Study in Chinese Investors’ Operations in Angola and Beyond” (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2009); also J.R. Mailey, “Anatomy of the Resource Curse: Predatory Investments in Africa’s Extractive Industries” (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, French, “The Next Empire,” Marques de Morais, “The New Imperialism: China in Angola.”

<sup>56</sup> Justin Pearce has written about attempts, beginning from the last years of the war, by civil society organizations and political activists to reconstruct the notion of “the Angolan people” in opposition to elites associated with the two major political parties, the MPLA and UNITA. See Pearce, “Changing Nationalisms: From War to Peace in Angola,” in *Sure Road? Nationalisms in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique*, ed. Eric Morier-Genoud (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 215. For a typical example of how the term “elite” is used in the press, see Joe Brock, “Amid yachts of rich elite, Angola’s poor crushed by oil price drop,” *Reuters* May 20, 2015, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-angola-politics-idUKKBN0O51IH20150520>. Angolan author Pepetela offers a literary treatment of this issue in his novel *Predadores* (Dom Quixote, 2013). The term “theft” (*roubo*) is also frequently used in popular criticisms of corruption in Angolan government. For example, see “Exonerações e nomeações servem apenas para continuar a facilitar o roubo” (Dismissals and appointments serve only to keep facilitating theft), *Rede Angola*, October 5, 2016, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.redeangola.info/as-nomecoes-do-presidente-e- apenas-para-continuar-facilitar-o-roubo-diz-francisco-viena/>.

ultimately harmed Angolan people, by turning them into commodities, providing weapons that would contribute to their destruction, and harvesting precious mineral resources for profit that they would never see. These and other examples of Angolan dealings with foreigners could be summarized in Afonso's description of "taking without giving," and for many Angolan interlocutors who I met during fieldwork, memories of economic, moral, and political betrayal were condensed into a strong sentiment of distrust toward Chinese investors, entrepreneurs, and migrant workers arrived in the early 2000s to rebuild Angola.

Distrust toward China, sometimes verging on fear or hatred, was something I encountered in everyday conversations with Angolan acquaintances.<sup>57</sup> A cousin of Pimentel, who worked on the accounts of some Chinese businessmen at the bank where he was employed, exclaimed of "the Chinese," "They're a bunch of scoundrels!" He told me how China had struck a deal with Angola to acquire business opportunities and natural resources; like others who presented this narrative to me, he expected the facts themselves to be evidence of outrageous wrongdoing. Pimentel later explained to me that his cousin was a continual witness to the practice of deliberate overbilling for Chinese contractors working on projects for the Angolan government. Speaking of one of his cousin's Chinese clients, he postulated, "Suppose there is a need to build a school. If construction of the school should cost 500,000 dollars (USD), do you know what he [the man in government] will do? He'll say, 'Put down a million [in the budget].' All the money, which comes from the government of China by the way, will get deposited into the bank account of Wang's company. Later they will share it; 500,000 will go to Wang's company, and the other half a million will get divided between Wang and his friend in government." In a variation on Afonso's theory, Pimentel insisted that the *governantes* preferred to work with foreign contractors precisely because they could more easily get away with such fraudulent practices by doing so. "If he were to work with an Angolan the Angolan might complain to someone, but Wang, he won't say anything. He's a foreigner; all he wants is money." The assumption was that foreigners had no interest in Angola except as a means to extract wealth for themselves. As pawns in an already predatory system that privileged government-connected elites, their presence could only exacerbate corruption.

A suspicion toward the figure of "the Chinese" was articulated even in casual exchanges, and concerns might extend beyond the technicalities of unfair or fraudulent business deals. A sales clerk at a mobile phone store in Luanda freely shared his opinions about "the Chinese" after I told him I was doing research on Chinese investment in Angola. "The Chinese are invading all over the world," he told me. "Here, we already have millions of Chinese immigrants, and they are engaged in illicit businesses, including trafficking in drugs, human beings and animals. It's because of the agreements between Angola and China."<sup>58</sup> He

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<sup>57</sup> In his study of anti-Chinese sentiment in Mongolia, Franck Billé defines Sinophobia as "the intersection of fear *and* hatred of China." Billé, *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity* (University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Besides those listed here, another common complaint I heard during my fieldwork was that Chinese had begun to compete with Angolan street vendors (*zungeiras*), usually women and some of the

continued by trying to appeal to xenophobic sentiments he assumed I, as an American, would share. “But I prefer the Chinese to the Arabs. It’s not only the United States that is preoccupied with the spread of Islam all over the world. We already have more than 300,000 Muslims here in Angola.” In this man’s alarmist discourse, the Chinese “invasion,” already in progress and not limited to Angola, was linked to a kind of criminality comparable to the terroristic activities that had become associated with terms like “Arab” or “Islam” in certain post-911 American discourses.

Fear of criminal activity was not the only reason to be wary of Chinese migrants. On a visit to Lobito, a town in Benguela Province, south of Luanda, I met a man who, like the cell phone clerk, was unrestrained in his opinions about the presence of Chinese people in Angola. “Chinese immigration is a huge problem! Imagine, you have ten Chinese workers, and their boss takes all of their passports. With those eleven passports, he invites ten more Chinese to come to Angola using the passports of the others! This happened many times, until the government noticed and began to control the entry of Chinese in Angola. But there are still many coming into the country, which presents a threat to the local population.” The man’s story involved an assumption that Chinese workers look similar enough to be able to freely use each other’s passports.<sup>59</sup> I chose not to argue with him on this point, and instead asked what he meant by Chinese migration presenting a threat. Was this because Chinese workers were displacing locals on the job market? “No,” he said frankly, “The threat is really about miscegenation itself. Once all these foreigners enter Angola and mix with the population, Angola won’t be Angola anymore.” I tried to absorb the shock of a statement that for me invoked nineteenth-century ideas about the proper separation of races, ideas against which early social scientists like Franz Boas and W.E.B. DuBois had refuted on both scientific and moral grounds.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, my conversation partner went on to explain that the Angolan government had also recently begun to regulate the flow of foreign currency out of the country, another loss for which the Chinese could be blamed. “Now, all salaries issued in Angola must be paid in kwanzas. Imagine, in the past, every day there would be ten

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poorest members of society, by selling medicines or small electronics on roadsides and in informal markets.

<sup>59</sup> Mockery toward “the Chinese,” as comical or strange has pervaded global discourses on China since the nineteenth century: “The Chinese were either characterized as uncivilized, inferior and decadent, or else they were represented as comic figures, who could be used in all kinds of ways as an object of mockery and amusement. Everything Chinese was distorted into something absurd and bizarre. This tendency has been maintained right up to the present day, and many journalists and reporters still consider that their readers are better entertained if they describe Chinese affairs with an undertone of the exotic and absurd, instead of trying to give a serious description of reality. And everyone has seen those yellow figures with wide conical hats, long black moustaches and a long pigtail hanging down their backs, which even today, as a relic of the *chinoiserie* of the past, sometimes adorn advertisements for tea and other products, or the dust-covers of books” (Wolfgang Franke, *China and the West* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1967), 143).

<sup>60</sup> See Franz Boas, *Race, Language, and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940). George Stocking discusses Boas’ refutation of the polygenist evolutionary theories predominant in his time in *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 173; also W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Dover Publications, 1994 [1903]), 137.

Chinese lining up at every bank, each one trying to transfer five thousand dollars (USD) out of the country.<sup>61</sup> That adds up to a lot!” He shifted to ask me about my work, “And the research with the Chinese, is it difficult?” By that time I had been visiting Northwest Construction nearly every day for several weeks, and I felt I had established good rapport with the employees of the Trade Department. I told him there had not been many difficulties. It probably helped that I could speak Chinese; I had previously spent three years living in China. He smiled, then added, “And you have slanted eyes too!”<sup>62</sup>

The contrast between narratives that praised Chinese involvement in Angolan national reconstruction and those that were wary of it should not be understood as a neat division between “official” and “popular” discourses. Indeed, I also met Angolan individuals who welcomed Chinese investment. For example, I was asked to translate one day when a regular customer of Northwest Construction came to Shopping ChinAngola to purchase construction materials. The man, who introduced himself as Henrique, was dressed in an expensive-looking brown and burgundy suit, and his wrist bore a large gold-trimmed watch. He had just returned from a vacation to Australia, which his doctor in France had prescribed as a cure for stress-induced ailments. As we waited for one of the shop’s warehouse staff to check for Henrique’s materials, he asked me if I knew of a place in Luanda where one could study Chinese. “I want to learn,” he said, “because in fifty years, people who speak Mandarin will be the richest in the world! Right now, many of my clients are already Chinese. And if you can speak Mandarin, you can do business with Chinese people very easily.” I asked Ma Hui, who had been sitting near us, whether he knew of any Chinese language classes in Luanda. He said no. Henrique went on: “You know, China is number one in the world now. It is even higher than the United States. And it has gotten there because Chinese people work very hard. In 1970, China was nothing. Now it is number one in the world!” I translated for Ma Hui, who responded doubtfully, “Has he been to China? Does he know what China is really like?” Henrique continued with his theory of Chinese supremacy: “It’s all because of one man. You know? What’s his name? Mu? The leader of China.” At that time, the Chinese head of state was Xi Jinping, but the name that Henrique had uttered did not sound anything like “Xi,” nor did it bear any resemblance to the man often credited with jumpstarting China’s economic development after 1970: Deng Xiaoping. I wondered if he could have been referring to the leader of an earlier transformation. “Do you mean Mao? Mao Zedong?” I

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<sup>61</sup> This was the limit on foreign transfers for private individuals at the time.

<sup>62</sup> His precise phrasing in Portuguese was, “*E tens os olhos rasgados!*” [lit: And you have ripped/torn eyes!]. Indeed, I am a product of “miscegenation” myself, born to a German–American father and a Hong Kong Chinese mother, but my ancestry was usually not guessed by Angolan interlocutors in the same way it might be by Californians. Instead, comments about my racial appearance were usually made in a tone of confusion or surprise. For example, an Angolan exchange student to Ukraine remarked, when we met on a flight to Luanda, that he had never met a person with “closed eyes” who could speak Portuguese. On another occasion, the owner of a neighborhood bar near where I lived in Luanda in 2012 told me that I had begun to look like the Chinese because I had been spending so much time with them (“*por causa da convivência*”). I often found amusement in such comments, but they also made me aware that I was not racially legible in a stable way. I could not assume that people who looked at me would recognize that I was, or was not, somehow racially Chinese.

asked. “Yes!” Henrique confirmed, “Mao. That’s it. China is where it is today because of him.” A bemused smile passed across Ma Hui’s face as he muttered, “That’s not quite right.” Henrique continued, “And it’s also because Chinese people work very hard. I also work a lot; I’m working all the time. But most of the African people,” he pointed to the skin on the back of his hand, “are lazy. They are very embarrassing.” I told Ma Hui what Henrique had said about Chinese industriousness, to which he replied, “You should tell him it makes me very happy to hear him say this.” But after Henrique had left, Ma showed me the stack of 300,000 kwanzas he had left as payment. “You see this? If it were Chinese *renminbi*, it would only be \$2,500. But if it were American dollars, it would be \$3000.” Despite Henrique’s flattering theories, he seemed to be telling me, China was still *not* number one.

### China “Going Out”<sup>63</sup>

If Angolan apprehensions toward Chinese loans, business, and migration should be understood as part of a long history of Angolan foreign relations, Chinese ambitions in Angola must also be placed in relation to the historical development of China in the world. In May 2014, as part of his 8-day tour of four African countries, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang gave a speech in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.<sup>64</sup> The African Union headquarters where he spoke had been financed and built by China, and Premier Li cited it as “a symbol of China-Africa friendship.” He recalled growing up in the 1960s and ‘70s hearing of African independence movements and the building of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, through which “sixty-five sons and daughters of China gave their lives... and were laid to rest on the African continent.” He praised Africa for its political influence as holder of one quarter of United Nations seats, for its development potential due to natural resource wealth and recent economic growth, and for its rich history and culture. Drawing a line of continuity from the historic visit to Africa undertaken by Zhou Enlai in 1963, Li offered four principles to strengthen China-Africa cooperation: first, to “treat each other with full sincerity and as complete equals,” on the basis of similar “cultural features,” a shared history of imperial oppression that has inspired deep values of “independence and equality,” and an unwillingness to meddle in each other’s domestic affairs; second, to “enhance solidarity and mutual trust” through continued respect and support of each country’s interests in the international arena; third, to “jointly pursue inclusive development” by complementing the technical and financial capacity of China, “the world’s largest and most populous developing country,” with the economic potential of Africa, “the continent with the highest concentration of developing countries;” and lastly, to “innovate on practical cooperation,” expanding joint development projects from “energy,

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<sup>63</sup> A formal directive for Chinese companies to globalize, or “go out” (*zou chuqu*) was issued at the announcement of China’s tenth five-year plan in 2001.

<sup>64</sup> This was not the first time the current Chinese government had drawn attention to its policies and practices in Africa through a high-profile tour. Within one week of Xi Jinping’s inauguration as President in March 2013, he embarked on visit to Africa (Tanzania, South Africa, and Republic of Congo-Brazzaville), unprecedented as the first overseas trip for a Chinese head of state. See “Xi Jinping wraps up Africa trip in Congo,” *BBC News*, March 30, 2012, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21979122>.

resource and infrastructure” to “industrialization, urbanization, agricultural modernization and many other areas...” The premier ended his speech by describing a legend shared between China and Africa, of a mythical phoenix that dies and is reborn in a cycle of regeneration: “These two legends seem to be telling us that the great renewal of the Chinese nation and the African continent represents an unstoppable historical trend.”<sup>65</sup>

Compared to Afonso’s tragic story of injustice, or the discourses of distrust towards China and Chinese people I encountered in other conversations, the words of this government official come across as fantasy or delusion. However, the significance of Li Keqiang’s speech lies not in any correspondence it may or may not have with factual reality, but in its attempt to draw legitimacy from an earlier period of Chinese engagement with Africa, established under very different political-economic circumstances. Many celebratory histories of China-Africa relations cite Ming admiral Zheng He’s multiple voyages to the eastern coast of Africa in the early fifteenth century as the beginning of a relationship of trade and diplomacy quite unlike the fraught encounters between Africa and Europe.<sup>66</sup> Instead of retracing those developments, I propose to focus on a contrast between two moments in the second half of the twentieth century: a period of revolution, followed by one of reform. A shift from the revolutionary aid programs of the Maoist period to an emphasis on economic development and business opportunity from Deng onwards must be borne in mind in order to understand the significance of Chinese expansion today. On the other hand, continuities between these two periods may account for what appear as contradictions in the discourse and practice of Chinese actors in postwar Angola.

In 1946, while Mao Zedong was living out of a cave at the Communist base at Yan’an,<sup>67</sup> American journalist Anna Louise Strong met him to ask about the possibility of war between the United States and the Soviet Union. In his response, Mao made an early statement of what would become his theory of “Three Worlds”: “The United States and the Soviet Union are separated by a vast zone which includes many capitalist, colonial and semi-colonial countries in Europe, Asia and Africa.”<sup>68</sup> This “vast zone” was granted a new kind of

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<sup>65</sup> “Full Text of Li Keqiang’s Speech at the African Union,” *China Daily*, May 6, 2014, accessed March 8, 2016, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014livisitafrica/2014-05/06/content\\_17531846.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014livisitafrica/2014-05/06/content_17531846.htm).

<sup>66</sup> Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift*, 23. See also Snow, 21-36, for a longer discussion of “the Chinese Columbus” (*The Star Raft*, 21-36). Li Anshan traces Chinese contacts with Africa from “indirect knowledge” in pre-Han times to “direct knowledge” and personal experience through the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (*A History of Overseas Chinese in Africa to 1911*, 17-54).

<sup>67</sup> Yan’an was the endpoint of the Long March undertaken by the Red Army in retreat from the Kuomintang in 1934-5. It became Chinese Communist headquarters from 1935 to 1948. For a description of life at Yan’an, see Edward E. Rice, *Mao’s Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) Chapter 7.

<sup>68</sup> “Talk with Mao,” August 1946, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Vol. IV* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1969), accessed March 8, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/strong-anna-louise/1946/talkwithmao.htm>. Strong was to hold three longer conversations with Mao in 1959, 1964, 1965. After the first of these, which was held alongside W.E.B. DuBois and his wife Shirley Graham DuBois, she wrote: “...Mao, beginning as a peasant of China and becoming a poet, a philosopher, a Marxist, a leader of armies and of government, still specializes, by constant contacts and conscious effort, as the soul and analyzing brain of the Chinese people (Tracy B. Strong and Helene Keyssar,

subjectivity nearly a decade later with the meeting of twenty-nine newly independent African and Asian countries in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. There, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai declared, first, the shared experiences of Asian and African peoples oppressed and impoverished by colonialism, and, second, the shared destiny of an Asia and Africa undergoing a radical process of liberation.<sup>69</sup> Eight years later, when Zhou made his historic tour of Africa, European colonial powers remained active on the continent, and the message he brought was a similar one of shared suffering and revolutionary hope. In a speech in Accra, Ghana, on January 16, 1964, he announced eight principles that were to govern Chinese aid to foreign countries.<sup>70</sup> These were based on the five principles of “peaceful coexistence” adopted by participants of the Bandung Conference, and they emphasized equality, mutual respect for sovereignty, and the cultivation of self-reliance.<sup>71</sup> The contrast against colonial relations was clear, as it was precisely such relations of inequality, or dependence, that Maoist China officially struggled against.<sup>72</sup> Still, it was assumed that China would have to teach its African brothers how to achieve the freedom it had already gained. To use Philip Snow’s words, “Chinese Communists were missionaries... bringing their gospel of independence to African soil.”<sup>73</sup>

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“Anna Louise Strong: Three Interviews with Chairman Mao Zedong,” *The China Quarterly* 103 (1985): 498).

<sup>69</sup> See “Main Speech by Premier Zhou Enlai, Head of the Delegation of the People’s Republic of China, Distributed at the Plenary Session of the Asian-African Conference,” April 19, 1955, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Translation from China and the Asian-African Conference (Documents) (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1955), 9-20, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121623.pdf?v=e1cd06384e2e67bdff11f809ead78849>. See also Christopher Lee, ed. *Making a World After Empire: the Bandung Moment and its Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010) and Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 45-46.

<sup>70</sup> See Monson, *Africa’s Freedom Railway*, Appendix 1.

<sup>71</sup> Viewing these developments through the lens of Cold War political strategy, Rice argues that Mao’s appeals to the “third world” were primarily motivated by his “quarrel with the Soviet Union” during the first half of the 1960s. Mao’s emphasis on self-reliance, Rice claims, was merely part of a set of tactics to build up Chinese power against that of the Soviet Union and the United States. The same went for China’s relations with other countries: “...The primary touchstone of the value to China of other states had become their willingness to align themselves with China against the Soviet Union or to oppose the United States, and of nonruling Communist parties, it was their readiness to follow the Maoist path of armed insurrection” (*Mao’s Way*, 351). Rice goes as far to state that Mao’s attitude toward the rest of world reflected a, possibly unconscious, return to “the traditional Chinese view that Peking was the rightful center of the world” (*Ibid.*, 352).

<sup>72</sup> Upon visiting China in 1973, Italian writer Maria Antonietta Macciocchi described a “class choice” that Third World countries had to make between self-reliance, the choice of revolutionary China, and reliance on aid from developed countries, exemplified by democratic India. This choice, she writes, is one “between the path chosen by equals, codified in the ‘five points’ and consistently adhered to by China, and the path of *effective dependence* on the developed world...” (*Daily Life in Revolutionary China* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973) 408).

<sup>73</sup> Snow, *The Star Raft*, 71-74. Brautigam also uses the term “missionary,” but to point out that Western aid to developing countries traces its origins to Christian missions and colonialism, while

During the 1960s and '70s, Chinese activities on the African continent were designed to reflect the grand ideals proclaimed by political leaders.<sup>74</sup> In one of the first demonstrations of how “the poor help the poor,” the Chinese government presented a gift of nearly 30,000 tons of rice to the government of newly independent Guinea. This donation of food took place from 1959 to 1961, in the middle of the Great Leap Forward, just as China was experiencing a famine involving tens of millions of deaths.<sup>75</sup> Such gestures were intended as concrete expressions of Chinese selflessness and solidarity with fellow revolutionaries. In his 1965 pamphlet on “People’s War,” Lin Biao likened the countries and peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America, “subjected to aggression and enslavement on a serious scale by the imperialists headed by the United States and their lackeys,” to the situation of the Chinese rural peasantry before the revolution, and through the 1960s, China provided training or supplies to many African independence movements.<sup>76</sup> In Angola, the MPLA received food, medicine, vehicles, and uniforms, while the leadership of UNITA was brought to Beijing for military and political education.<sup>77</sup> During the same period, teams of Chinese technicians were sent to nearly every country on the continent to provide medical services, run agricultural projects, and construct buildings, but by far the most significant project of this era was a railway connecting landlocked Zambia to the Indian Ocean through its neighbor Tanzania. From 1970-1975, at the height of the Cultural Revolution in China, the “Tan-Zam” railway, or TAZARA, was built with a \$400 million (USD) interest-free loan and the assistance of 25,000 Chinese technicians.<sup>78</sup> The men who came to work on the project were instructed to put Zhou Enlai’s principles into practice: by living, eating, and working under the same conditions as their African counterparts, they were seen to embody China’s anti-hegemonism.<sup>79</sup> Upon its completion, the railway was the longest in Africa, and the longest

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Chinese aid has very different roots (*The Dragon’s Gift*, 22-23). I lean more towards Brautigam’s position, although I think it is important to note Snow’s point, sometimes overstated in *The Star Raft*, about the paternalistic attitude sometimes adopted by China in relation to African countries.

<sup>74</sup> Political scientists tend to interpret Chinese efforts during this time in terms of diplomatic strategy. For example, “Between 1964 and 1971, when votes in the United Nations (organized skillfully by the permanent representative of Tanzania) finally gave Beijing back the seat occupied by Taiwan, China started aid programs in thirteen additional African countries” (Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift*, 34).

<sup>75</sup> Snow, *The Star Raft*, 145.

<sup>76</sup> Lin Biao was a Marshal in the People’s Liberation Army who after liberation served as Vice Premier, Vice Chairman, and Minister of National Defense until his mysterious death by plane crash in 1971. See “Long Live the Victory of People’s War! In Commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japan,” (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), accessed March 6, 2017, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lin-biao/1965/09/peoples\\_war/](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lin-biao/1965/09/peoples_war/).

<sup>77</sup> Snow, *The Star Raft*, 77, 125. At the time both groups were fighting for independence from Portugal.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 154; Monson, *Africa’s Freedom Railway*, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Monson writes about the TAZARA railway as an example of both anti-hegemonism and economic practicality, for both China and Africa: “Local people did not have much direct contact with the Chinese technicians. Yet they remember the simplicity of their dress and comportment; the way they

railway completed anywhere in the world since World War II.<sup>80</sup> It was evidence that China, and Africa, could do what the rest of the world thought was impossible, and thereby achieve collective liberation on their own.<sup>81</sup>

This vision of Chinese and African liberation underwent a dramatic shift with the end of the Maoist era. Mao's death in 1976 and his replacement in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping marked the beginning of a new way of thinking both within China and in its relations with Africa. Domestically, Deng and his government instituted a series of privatizing reforms designed to stimulate economic growth.<sup>82</sup> As China began to open itself to foreign investment and encourage domestic enterprise, the previous emphasis on poor countries "looking after" one another was replaced with trade geared towards the accumulation of foreign currency. Deng's government encouraged state enterprises to produce goods for export, and African markets were more accessible than those of Western countries with well-developed domestic industries and protectionist policies. Chinese aid teams on the ground in Africa began to make profits themselves by fulfilling small construction contracts for either governments or

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lived in local accommodations and grew their own food; and most especially their dedication to hard work" (*Africa's Freedom Railway*, 34).

<sup>80</sup> Snow, *The Star Raft*, 154.

<sup>81</sup> In the background of development projects like TAZARA was a competition against the United States and the Soviet Union. The North American development industry therefore serves as an important point of contrast for Chinese engagements with Africa. There too, a shift occurred, from the Marshall Plan and President Truman's launching of the "development age" in the late 1940s and '50s, to the neoliberal policies of the 1970s and '80s. See Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (New York: Zed Books, 2014). For anthropological treatments of development practice and governmentality, see James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Leticia Cesarino presents an overview of the anthropology of development with special consideration for "South-South cooperation," ("Anthropology of Development and the Challenge of South-South Cooperation," *Vibrant* 9.1 (2012): 507-537) and Zhongguang Niu gives a comparison between Western development theory and that of China ("China's Development and its Aid Presence in Africa," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 51.2 (2016): 199-221).

<sup>82</sup> In the late 1970s, land from the People's Communes was allocated to individual farmers for subsistence activities through the "household responsibility system." Although William Hinton laments these policies and their effects as a "great reversal" of the revolutionary land reform undertaken three decades earlier, Gillian Hart has argued that the reallocation of land to peasants alongside the development, through the 1980s, of township and village enterprises (TVEs), demonstrates how accumulation is possible *without* dispossession. Giovanni Arrighi further argues that, because they did not displace people from the land, reinvested surpluses in rural areas, and remained embedded in local networks and forms of governance, TVEs drew strengths from both the 18<sup>th</sup> century East Asian "industrious revolution" and the Chinese communist revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to facilitate China's rise as a global economic power. See Hinton, *The Great Reversal: the Privatization of China, 1978-1989* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990); Hart, *Disabling Globalization*; Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso 2007) 365; also Arrighi and Lu Zhang, "Beyond the Washington Consensus: A New Bandung?" In *Globalization and Beyond*, eds. Jon Shefner and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2011): 25-57.

private entities.<sup>83</sup> In 1982, when Premier Zhao Ziyang visited the continent, he emphasized that assistance from China to Africa should take diverse forms and “bring practical advantages to donor and recipient alike.”<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the term he used was not “aid,” but “cooperation,” which would become a keyword in the new era of China-Africa relations.<sup>85</sup> Zhao’s message was cemented through reforms to the Chinese aid program in the mid-1990s, when an explicit link was drawn between the kinds of activities previously referred to as “aid” and the new emphasis on trade and investment.<sup>86</sup> Trading companies and “economic cooperation” corporations previously owned by Chinese ministries were encouraged to “operate as independent companies, responsible for their own profits and losses.”<sup>87</sup> At the same time, three “policy banks” were established—China Development Bank, China Export Import (Exim) Bank, and China Agricultural Development Bank—through which Chinese overseas financing would operate.<sup>88</sup> A system of concessional loans was introduced, and support for Angolan postwar reconstruction would serve as a prime example of their implementation.<sup>89</sup>

In contrast to the cases of Tanzania, Guinea, or other African countries that might boast a long history of stable Chinese “friendship,”<sup>90</sup> Chinese engagement with Angola began more recently and proceeded inconsistently. As mentioned above, China at different times gave support to each of the Angolan independence movements active in the armed struggle against the Portuguese after 1961. Although China initially provided funds and necessary materials for the MPLA during the early years of the anti-colonial war, Mao’s split from Khrushchev’s USSR in the early 1960s also meant withdrawal of Chinese support for Soviet-backed independence movements in Africa, which by that time included the MPLA.<sup>91</sup> China

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<sup>83</sup> Snow, *The Star Raft*, 177-179.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>85</sup> Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift*, 53.

<sup>86</sup> Zhang Chixin, deputy director, Department of Foreign Aid, MOFTEC, “The Foreign Aid Work Develops in the Course of the Reform,” *Almanac* (1996-7) 69, cited in Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift*, 329.

<sup>87</sup> Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift*, 78.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-80.

<sup>89</sup> In the year 2000, representatives from China and the fifty African states with which it has established diplomatic relations met in Beijing for the first Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Subsequent meetings of this organization have taken place every three years, alternating between Beijing and the capital of an African country. See Ian Taylor, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Similar language was invoked in Freetown during celebrations of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China-Sierra Leone “friendship.” See Mariane Ferme and Cheryl Schmitz, “Writings on the Wall: Chinese Material Traces in an African Landscape,” *Journal of Material Culture* 19.4 (2014): 375-399.

<sup>91</sup> Snow, *The Star Raft*, 77, 83, 118. Corkin explains that the representatives of the Chinese Communist Party first met their counterparts in the MPLA at the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization conference held in Guinea Conakry in April 1960. Three leading figures in the Party, Mário Pinto de Andrade, Viriato da Cruz, and Lúcio Lara, were subsequently invited to Beijing, where they requested military support. Later, when the decision was made to ally with the USSR, perhaps to access more technologically advanced weapons, Viriato da Cruz was ousted from the MPLA and exiled to Beijing, where he died in 1973 (*Uncovering African Agency*, Introduction). See

began to support UNITA in the mid-1960s, including by bringing several soldiers to train in guerrilla warfare at the Nanking Academy, but in the 1970s also provided aid to the FNLA.<sup>92</sup> In August 1974, China sent 450 tons of arms and 120 military instructors to FNLA headquarters in Kinkuzu, Zaire, which was then also an important Chinese ally. By that time, however, the Estado Novo dictatorship of Portugal had been overthrown in a military coup, and the new leadership had decided to grant independence to Portuguese-controlled territories in Africa and East Timor. Chinese arms and military training for the FNLA were therefore deployed not against Portuguese military forces but against a heavily fortified Soviet-backed MPLA. In late 1975, as the United States and apartheid South Africa began to get involved in the war, Chinese military instructors withdrew from the conflict.<sup>93</sup>

Although in 1983 China established official diplomatic relations with the MPLA, by then representing the government of Angola, it remained a relatively absent figure of foreign support until after the civil war ended in 2002. By the time the first credit line of \$2 billion USD was released from China Exim Bank in 2004,<sup>94</sup> Chinese media had been reporting for several years already on Angola as an important oil producer and a market full of “golden opportunities” for Chinese businesses.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Exim Bank included in its funding conditions that the majority of construction and civil engineering projects under Angola’s National Reconstruction Program would be awarded to Chinese firms on a list of approved state-owned enterprises, and at least 50% of equipment and supplies for would be sourced from China.<sup>96</sup> What President Dos Santos called a “pragmatic partnership” with China therefore provided a framework through which hundreds of Chinese companies, private and public, began to do business with Angola.<sup>97</sup> The idea that projects like the reconstruction of

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Michel Laban, ed. *Viriato da Cruz: Cartas de Pequim* (Luanda: Caxinde, 2003). For more on the Sino-Soviet split, see Rice, *Mao’s Way*, Chapter 14.

<sup>92</sup> Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency*, Loc 188-206.

<sup>93</sup> Snow, *The Star Raft*, 125-126.

<sup>94</sup> This financing package was not the first loan ever given to the Angolan government by a Chinese funding institution. China Construction Bank (CCB) and China Exim Bank provided an initial line of funding for infrastructure development in 2002, bypassing the Angolan Ministry of Finance to disburse funds directly to Chinese companies. However, the 2004 Exim Bank credit line is notable both for its size (an initial tranche of \$2 billion USD, followed by another \$2.5 billion USD two years later) and because it was the first to be granted under the ‘framework agreement’ signed by the Angolan Ministry of Finance and the Chinese Ministry of Trade in late 2003. See Campos and Vines, “Angola and China: A Pragmatic Partnership,” 5.

<sup>95</sup> Liu Haifang, “The Untold Story of Chinese Perceptions of Angola,” *China and Angola: A Marriage of Convenience?* Marcus Power and Ana Cristina Alves, eds. (Fahamu/Pambazuka, 2012): 162-178.

<sup>96</sup> Lucy Corkin, “Uneasy Allies: China’s Evolving Relations with Angola” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29.2 (2011): 169-180; also Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency*, Chapter 6.

<sup>97</sup> Drawing a contrast against relations with Western countries, in 2006 President Dos Santos described bilateral relations with China as “pragmatic” and devoid of “political conditions” (Campos and Vines, “Angola and China,” 1). In 2010, then Chinese ambassador to Angola Zhang Bolun reported that there were over 50 state-owned and 400 private Chinese companies “involved in Angola’s national reconstruction” (“Over 50 Chinese State Companies and 400 Private Firms Operate in Angola,” *Macauhub*, 19 November 2010, accessed March 8, 2016,

roads, water supply, and other basic infrastructure needed to be completed as quickly as possible meant that regulations guaranteeing employment of local workers were treated flexibly, and thousands of Chinese “technicians” came to do the work.<sup>98</sup> Between 2006 and 2012, the number of Chinese citizens reported to be working in Angola grew from less than 5,000 to more than 250,000, making the Chinese the largest non-African group in the country.<sup>99</sup> I was told that in the early years of the National Reconstruction Program, truckloads of Chinese workers were observed passing through the streets of Luanda. Chinese men were also frequently seen driving around in black SUVs marked GRN, *Gabinete de Reconstrução Nacional* (National Reconstruction Office), the office that managed funding from China International Fund. A joke circulating at the time stated that these cars usually passed freely, without obstruction from police, but whenever police did stop them, the Chinese drivers would utter the only Portuguese word they knew: “Kopelipa!” This was the nickname of General Manuel Hélder Vieira Dias, one of the highest-ranking men in the MPLA, head of the National Reconstruction Office and the *Casa Militar*, the military wing of the executive branch of government.<sup>100</sup>

## A Nail in the Bridge

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<http://www.macauhub.com.mo/en/2010/11/19/over-50-chinese-state-companies-and-400-private-firms-operate-in-angola/>).

<sup>98</sup> Tang Xiaoyang, “Bulldozer or Locomotive? The Impact of Chinese Enterprises on the Local Employment in Angola and the DRC,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45.3 (2010): 350-368.

<sup>99</sup> It is very difficult to determine precisely how many Chinese citizens are physically present in Angola at any given time, at least in part due to frequent movement in and out of the country and the somewhat common practice of overstaying beyond the terms of the visa. Liu cites a Chinese businessman who stated there were only 22 Chinese nationals, including diplomats, in Angola when he visited in 1999 (“The Untold Story,” 169). Corkin cites an Angolan government employee estimating 4,000 for the Chinese population in 2006 (*Uncovering African Agency*, Chapter 6). During a visit from the Angolan Ministry of Interior to China in 2012, the official figure was placed at 259,000 (“Angola: Operação policial”). Most Chinese expatriates who I spoke with in Luanda in 2012 and 2013-14 gave rough estimates of 300,000 or 400,000. If we accept Howard French’s estimate of 1 million Chinese migrants in Africa (see *China’s Second Continent*), this would mean at least one quarter of Chinese people on the continent reside in Angola. During my fieldwork, it was often said that Chinese were the largest foreign group in Angola. Preliminary results of the Angolan census of 2013, the first since 1970, placed the country’s population, excluding foreigners, at 24.3 million, with 26.7 percent concentrated in the capital, Luanda. See Kumuêno da Rosal, “Somos 24 milhões.”

<sup>100</sup> A major component of the National Reconstruction Program concerned the provision of housing. With forced removals and neighborhood demolitions accompanied by the construction of expensive villas and apartment buildings in remote suburbs, housing in Luanda has become the object of much political contestation and academic research. See Ricardo Cardoso, “The Crude Urban Revolution: Land Markets, Planning Forms and the Making of New Luanda” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015; Sylvia Croese, “One Million Houses? Chinese Engagement in Angola’s National Reconstruction,” in *China and Angola: A Marriage of Convenience?* eds. Marcus Power and Ana Cristina Alves (Fahamu/Pambazuka, 2012): 124-138; Claudia Gastrow, “Cement Citizens: Housing, Demolition, and Political Belonging in Luanda, Angola,” *Citizenship Studies* (2017): 1-16.

Northwest Construction, the company with which I conducted ethnographic research from 2013 to 2014, had entered the Angolan market as a direct result of Chinese financing for Angolan reconstruction. The first company representatives to visit Angola had arrived in Luanda in early 2005. Their employer, a provincial-level state-owned enterprise (SOE) based in Lanzhou, China, was subcontracted by a larger Chinese SOE to rebuild a mass media production center for the Angolan Ministry of Communications, financed through loans from China Exim Bank. Shortly thereafter, a subsidiary was officially established, referred to by many employees as simply “The Angola Company.” According to Li Jun, deputy director of the Trade Department, The Angola Company quickly became one of the most valuable units in the entire Northwest Construction conglomerate, which had operations in 40 different countries across the globe. This was both because profit in Angola was extremely high and because, as Director Fu told me, “in Angola, there are many openings to exploit.” He explained that a turning point for the company had come in 2007, when they had been awarded contracts to build sports stadiums in five provinces for an international tournament. “We received the contract in January, and the deadline was set for July. Portuguese contractors had been afraid to take the project. No one wanted to do it, because of the tight deadline! We had seven months in total, but we managed to finish in FIVE. If it had been Europeans working on the contract, they would just said they couldn’t finish so quickly, and would have delayed the project. But we *had* to get it done, because it was a political question. If we didn’t get the project done on time, it would have reflected poorly on Chinese people, and on China.” Perhaps more importantly, the restricted timetable of the stadium project allowed Director Fu to negotiate for duty-free importation of construction materials from China. They began to sell surplus materials to other Chinese companies for profit, and in 2012 they rented a retail space in Shopping ChinAngola through which to expand their commercial activities.

By 2013, when I began an internship with Northwest Construction the company held several major construction contracts, either through central-level Chinese SOEs funded by China Exim Bank, or through China International Fund. All Chinese employees of Northwest Construction had Angolan work visas in the name of either China Electrical or CIF, even though many of them did not work directly on projects carried out by these two major contractors. At the time of my fieldwork, the company employed around 500 Chinese managers, permanent staff, and contract workers in Angola. Although foremen on construction sites would each oversee 5–6 Angolan day laborers, by far the majority of staff on company grounds were Chinese. This surprised me, given the strict legal regulation of foreign employment in the Angolan oil sector,<sup>101</sup> but Chinese employees of Northwest Construction thought nothing of it. Ma Hui, an accountant with the company’s Trade Department, even

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<sup>101</sup> Regulations to ensure local employment in the Angolan oil industry have been in place since 1957 (Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency*, Chapter 6), and Angola’s Basic Private Investment Law stipulates that at least 70 percent of employees should be Angolan. A clause in the framework agreement with Exim Bank also requires that 70 percent of labor employed on government projects should be Angolan. However, according to Tang (“Bulldozer or Locomotive,” 353), “labor” could be interpreted to mean only non-skilled workers. Moreover, as already mentioned above, the urgency with which certain projects needed to be completed served as justification for making exceptions to these rules.

speculated that there might be a clause in the agreement between the Angolan government and China Exim Bank allowing Chinese companies to bring their own workers. “I think China was very clever on this point,” he said to me one afternoon as we chatted at the store. “They told the Angolan government: We’ll give you money to rebuild, but you have to contract Chinese companies, and you also have to employ Chinese workers, and, finally, you have to give us oil!”

Ma’s summary of an unfair deal between China and Angola echoed those I had heard from Afonso, from Pimentel’s cousin, and from chance encounters on the street. The difference in his rendering was the hint of pride that accompanied his description of China as “very clever.” He apparently enjoyed benefitting from the unequal arrangement established by the Chinese government. This was a stark contrast from the revolutionary sentiments of Maoist China, which had brought Chinese technicians to work “shoulder to shoulder” with their African brothers, together enacting possibilities for self-reliance.<sup>102</sup> Instead, it now seemed that not only Angolan high school teachers but also Chinese employees of an SOE were willing to “eat where they were tethered.” Like Pimentel in his description of student-teacher relations, Ma Hui perhaps thought that China’s advantages over Angola were normal, or unremarkable, but he nonetheless recognized that they were unfair. China had apparently come to Angola to eat, without leaving anything behind for their hosts.<sup>103</sup>

On many other occasions when I spoke with Ma Hui, he described the situation of Chinese labor and investment in Angola in a deadpan tone frequently verging on sarcasm. “We are not ‘migrants,’” he told me emphatically one day when I used the term to describe Chinese working in Angola. “We are company employees performing overseas labor,” he paused, then said with the hint of a smile, “And we are also prospecting for gold.” There was apparently little interest among Chinese working in Angola to settle in this new country; even those who sought residency permits did so primarily to eliminate work-related inconveniences. The men who came to work abroad temporarily left their families behind, while they sought avenues to wealth unavailable back home. I asked Ma, who had been working in Angola since 2008, what he had experienced when he returned to China for visits. “The first time, some of my friends asked me why the hell I’d chosen to go work in Africa,” he chuckled, “And I decided to play around with them a bit.” He stood up and deepened his voice in feigned magnanimity: “I told them, ‘I went to help our African brothers rebuild the beautiful country of Angola. I am a nail in the bridge of friendship between our two countries!’” He laughed at his own exaggerated performance, and I asked how his friends had reacted. He smiled, recalling the scene: “They cursed the shit out of me!” Both he and his friends knew that what he had said could no longer be true. Unlike their Maoist ancestors, these men had come to Angola not to sacrifice themselves in Third World solidarity, but, as they often told me, simply to make money.

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<sup>102</sup> Monson, *Africa’s Freedom Railway*, 49.

<sup>103</sup> Even the physical infrastructure built by Chinese companies proved to be transitory. During the period of my fieldwork, several major roads built by Chinese companies and used daily by Luanda commuters, collapsed almost completely during the rainy season. Chinese employees of Northwest Construction attributed this in part to lack of maintenance.

As this chapter has shown, the difficulty of establishing ethical relationships between two collectivities broadly conceived as “China” and “Angola” was recognized not only by Angolan critics of Chinese exploitation, but also by Chinese commentators who cynically admitted their self-interested motives. Although the politics of the belly makes clear that social relations founded in reciprocity need not entail perfect equality, they would still require a shared sense of morality, or a feeling of mutual obligation. The moral controversies surrounding Chinese investment in postwar Angola raise a question about the nature of social relations among Chinese expatriates, Angolan employees and partners, and other collaborators or competitors working to rebuild Angola after the war. What kind of sociality was constituted in this scene of contestation, and what were the limits to affinity or alliance that these various social actors encountered? The following chapters will explore in greater detail how such relations may have been forged and broken. The approach I take involves a return to some classic anthropological studies of China and Africa, to examine what insights they continue to offer us today, even as our concerns have departed from those of their original authors.

## Chapter 2

### Another Day of Work: Compound Life and Livelihood

At my first meeting with Li Jun, Assistant Director of Northwest Construction's Trade Department, we had lunch at the back of Shopping ChinAngola. The store that he managed was only a 20-minute walk from the location of the restaurant, but he insisted on driving us in his company's spotless Volkswagen SUV. Speeding down a narrow road on the northern edge of the shopping center, we passed row after row of shops on one side, and, on the other, dormitories and manufacturing facilities belonging to S&C Construction, the Chinese co-owner of Shopping ChinAngola. The exterior walls of the dormitories had been decorated with large signs displaying slogans like "In Africa, for Africa," or "Here, we walk forward, hand in hand." At the end of the road, we turned left, driving past a cluster of three flag posts—one for China, one for Angola, and one for the logo of Shopping ChinAngola—into a small parking lot. An entryway where two red lanterns hung from a yellow-tiled roof with upturned corners<sup>104</sup> signaled the entrance to a Chinese restaurant, although a piece of paper that had been pasted sloppily onto the wall read: *Comedor dos Funcionários da S&C* (Canteen for Employees of S&C). The restaurant was built in a courtyard style, with some water features in the center, and private dining rooms lining the edges. Paper printed with an image of grey bricks covered the walls in lieu of actual stones. A Chinese waitress led us to a small pagoda overlooking an artificial pond, and Li Jun ordered a few dishes from a menu printed exclusively in Chinese.

Li Jun was from a small village near Baoding, in Hebei Province. He had spent part of his childhood in a southwestern suburb of Beijing and after high school moved to Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu province, to attend an institute for business studies. He told me that during his time in college he began tutoring high school students in physics, and later set up his own center for after-school courses. He loved teaching and being with his students; he would sometimes treat them to watch films and then spend hours afterwards in lively discussion. Over the course of only a few years, he made enough money from his teaching business to purchase his own 60-square-meter apartment, but his parents discouraged him from pursuing further entrepreneurial activities. "They think I'm not suited to be an entrepreneur. They want me to work a steady, dependable job," he explained. For his parents' generation, the most reliable kind of work one could find was at a state-owned enterprise

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<sup>104</sup> In his ethnographic treatment of daily life in Hangzhou at the end of the Song Dynasty, Jacques Gernet writes that roofs with upturned edges were intended to harmonize with the curves of trees or hills in the natural landscape. He notes that this type of construction was expensive and rarely seen prior to the thirteenth century: "...curved roofs were reserved, by imperial decree, for the houses of people of high rank and for government buildings. As for constructing roofs for shops and ordinary houses, no one would have thought of spending money on such a costly method" (Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250-1276*, Stanford University Press, 1962 [1959], 115). By contrast, in twenty-first century Luanda, the style suited a variety of buildings and was freely available to the merchant class.

(SOE). Out of deference to his parents, then, Li Jun temporarily set aside his entrepreneurial dreams and took an internship at Northwest Construction, where he was provided with meals and dormitory lodging but earned only 1,400 RMB per month, a little more than \$200 USD. However, after less than a year, his superiors recognized his business talent, and he was offered the chance to work in Angola, under the supervision of Director Fu, Party Secretary of Northwest Construction in Angola and head of the Trade Department. When we met in November 2013, Li Jun had been in Angola for seventeen months and was earning a base salary eight times what he had been making in China.<sup>105</sup>

As we sat sipping tea to the sound of mahjong tiles clicking in rooms nearby, I explained that I wanted to understand the experience of working for a Chinese company in Angola. I thought that by learning about the daily life of Chinese employees living in Angola I might also understand something about the meaning of the economic and political relationships developing between China and Africa. Therefore, I was hoping to find an internship with a Chinese company. Li Jun responded thoughtfully, “I see. That’s why you’re interested in Shopping ChinAngola. I think ChinAngola would be a good place to do research then. You want to know not only how Chinese companies work here, but also how Chinese people live here, and there are a lot of Chinese people living at Shopping ChinAngola.” I was delighted to hear him say this, as I had been nervous he would reject my idea, perhaps out of suspicion of my motivations or for reasons of impracticality and ‘inconvenience.’ After weeks of doubting the viability of my project, I felt lucky to have met someone who understood my immediate research aims. But Li Jun interrupted my excited thoughts with a caveat: “You should know one thing though,” he said soberly, “Chinese people do not *live* in Angola. We only *work*.”

This comment startled me. What did he mean? Certainly work was what had brought many Chinese men and women to this country in the first place, but once in Angola, were there not many facets to their experience beyond what could be classified as ‘work’? Even if most companies did maintain a 7-day workweek, and housed their staff on closed compounds, did the employees not form relationships, feel emotions, develop reflections, or indulge in moments of pleasure? Were work and life not always intertwined? Why did Li Jun insist on a strict separation of the two, with the one all-encompassing, and the other entirely absent? Later, among non-Chinese friends he would often repeat a joke: “Chinese people here are like robots. We get up at the same time every day, go to work at the same time, get off work, go home, and recharge our batteries at night!” And after I began to work with Northwest Construction on a daily basis, I heard other employees describe their Angolan existence in similarly cynical terms. “We are like machines, or zombies,” Zhao Wei, a young technician in the Engineering Department, told me, “In Angola, we have no goal beyond fulfilling our daily tasks. We work only for the sake of working.” Later, he described his first experience returning to his hometown in Northwest China after a year and a half in Angola: “I remember looking down from the airplane, at that barren wasteland, those brown piles of dirt

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<sup>105</sup> At his internship in China, Li Jun only worked from Mon-Fri, 8:30-12:30 and 2:30-6, and he rarely worked overtime or on weekends.

we have for mountains where I'm from, at our city covered in yellow dust, and I came *alive!* I thought, this place may be ugly, but it's my *home*."

Such statements would seem to perfectly exemplify the concept of alienation developed by Karl Marx in his studies of capitalist society. In his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Marx discussed at length the "estrangement" that labor undergoes in the process of capitalist production. The first and most concrete example of this lies in the "actual economic fact" that the products of a worker's labor, the commodities he produces, appear to him as a world of alien objects independent of his lived reality. Although the production of a commodity is also a realization of the worker's labor; his labor, thus congealed in a material object, confronts him as something strange, no longer a part of his lived reality. Thus "realization of labor appears as a *loss of reality* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object* and *object-bondage*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*."<sup>106</sup> This is only one aspect of the worker's alienation, however. If the worker experiences estrangement in relation to the products of his labor, he also undergoes alienation in the act of production itself. When working, Marx contends, the worker is not himself:

"[Labor] is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; ...in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone's else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another."<sup>107</sup>

This aspect of alienation, in which the worker feels as if he does not belong to himself, will emerge clearly below in my discussion of the way permanent employees at Northwest Construction related to their company. Marx's analysis does not stop there, however. He argues further that labor alienates man not only from the fruits of his labor and from himself, but also from his "species being," that aspect of human life that transcends the individual. Unlike animals, whose life activities constitute only what they need to survive, humans possess a consciousness that allows them to direct their life activities according to their will. Man creates his world and contemplates himself in that world. However, alienated labor reverses this relationship of man to his world, making him the victim of forces external to himself and

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<sup>106</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 72.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

beyond his control. In turn, “Life itself appears only as *a means to life*.”<sup>108</sup> Moreover, an important consequence of man’s estrangement from his collective existence is the “estrangement of man from man.”<sup>109</sup> As the product of the worker’s labor is externalized and objectified, “an *alien*, hostile, powerful object independent of him,” it appears as an object mastered by someone who is “alien, hostile, powerful, and independent of him.”<sup>110</sup> As the worker’s productive activity is not free, it becomes activity performed for someone else, another man, who dominates and coerces him.<sup>111</sup>

Marx’s treatment of alienation thus outlines four aspects of estranged labor. First, there is the “estrangement of the thing,” the alienation of the worker from the objectified product of his labor. Second, there is the “self-estrangement” of the worker from himself in the process of labor. Third, man is estranged from his life as a member of a species, and his life activity becomes merely a means to sustain his physical existence. And lastly, the alienation of labor results in the estrangement of men from each other.

These ideas about alienation echoed through my conversations about life and work with Chinese employees of Northwest Construction. However, as I will show below through an interpretation of their working conditions, reflections on moneymaking, and mode of relating to the company, Chinese expatriates in Angola were not necessarily model capitalists. Although they sometimes drew upon the language of political economy to analyze their situation, I suggest that they also understood work and life in a way particular to post-reform China, newly globalizing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In order to account for these particularities, which I think are crucial for correctly understanding Chinese activity on the African continent, I begin with an overview of how space and time were experienced at the company with which I conducted fieldwork.

## In China in Angola

In 2013–2014, the compound was a basic institution of Chinese business in Angola. Like the *danwei*, or “work unit” of the Maoist period, this was a self-contained, multi-functional space, used by Chinese construction companies to store materials and equipment, house employees, conduct business, and sometimes entertain guests.<sup>112</sup> A decade since the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>111</sup> Marx thus comes to the conclusion that private property actually results from the alienation of labor, because whatever does not belong to the worker is seen to belong to the non-worker, “the capitalist, or whatever one chooses to call the master of labor”: “Only at the very culmination of the development of private property does this, its secret, reemerge, namely, that on the one hand it is the *product* of alienated labor, and that secondly it is the *means* by which labor alienates itself, the realization of this *alienation*” (“Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 79).

<sup>112</sup> I use the term “compound” in English for places usually referred to as *jidi* (基地, translatable as “base”) in Chinese and *estaleiro* (also the term used for a construction site) in Portuguese. For more on the work unit system, see Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth Perry, eds. *Danwei: the Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (East Gate, 1997).

start of the National Reconstruction Program, Chinese enterprises in Angola were still primarily involved in construction, and Chinese businesses active in other sectors, such as furniture or electronics importation, retained a link to the construction industry. Many Chinese compounds were therefore built on the sites of construction projects, while others housed dormitories and office space in an enclosed area separate from the job site. In Luanda, most Chinese companies were based in the outskirts of the city, in so-called “peripheral zones” that had been occupied by mango plantations until their recent transformation, over the past several years, into sites for the development of gated residential communities.<sup>113</sup> Some were accessible through narrow streets branching off from the Highway (*Auto-Estrada*), a semi-ring road completed in 2009 that ran 50 kilometers around the periphery of Luanda. Encircled by high aluminum fences or concrete walls, they were often secured by armed guards, sometimes dressed in Angolan military uniform, who kept watch over the surrounding area from towers two or three stories high. The closed compound gates kept thieves and other unwanted elements out as much as they kept employees safe inside. Often unmarked, or identified only by signs written in Chinese characters, these walled complexes appeared to outsiders as another symbol of the secretive, secluded nature of Chinese business in Angola.

I initially borrowed a friend’s car to drive over an hour each way from the city center to Northwest Construction’s store at Shopping ChinAngola, but after a few weeks, Li Jun and Director Fu offered me a room on company grounds. Most employees of the Trade Department lived on the premises of what they called The Media Center, a facility built for an Angolan government ministry on 10 hectares of land, about 20 kilometers from downtown Luanda, and just down the road from their ChinAngola store. Although The Media Center had been one of the Company’s earliest projects in Angola, begun in 2006, it remained unfinished in 2013, and the Company continued to house employees on a corner of the property. Living with them over several months, I was able to gain some insight into the experience of space and time among members of a Chinese company in Angola.

One entered the compound first through the main gate of The Media Center, watched over by two or three Angolan security guards, middle-aged men who lived in a shipping container behind the guardhouse where they sat during the day. Straight in front, in the distance, one could see the blue aluminum fencing that enclosed Northwest Construction living quarters. In between the fence that ran along the main road, and the one that encircled the Northwest Construction compound, lay about 500 meters of dirt and weeds, yet-to-be-landscaped grounds of The Media Center waiting for that last bit of funding to come through. On the left was The Media Center itself—massive candy-colored concrete buildings that together formed a circular shape, with a fountain in the middle that remained unused. After driving partway along the curve of the road past these newly built, yet partially abandoned structures, one would veer off through a cutout in the curb of the parking lot, onto a dirt path, to arrive at the compound gates.

Space inside the compound was organized according to both functional operations and institutional hierarchy. A large structure facing west toward the entrance contained the

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<sup>113</sup> *Condomínios*, in Portuguese.

kitchen and dining hall, where all residents took their meals. On either side of this central building were two lines of single-story dormitory rooms, 22 in total, about six square meters in area, each of which housed 1-2 people. An open space in front of the canteen was sometimes used to park vehicles but most often left empty, thus resembling a large courtyard. A generator and several dogs were kept in the area behind the canteen, along the back fence that separated the eastern boundary of The Media Center from undeveloped land. On the south side of the compound, behind one row of dormitories, the cook kept a small vegetable garden and raised pigs that could be slaughtered on special occasions. Two shipping containers had been dropped by the southern edge of the compound—one had been converted into a bathroom, while the other sat empty, though I was told it had once housed a ping pong table for entertainment. At the opposite end of the compound, farthest from the gate, two additional rows of dormitory rooms had been built, slightly larger than those adjacent to the canteen. These housed the highest-level managers of the two companies, as well as Ma Hui, Li Jun, and eventually myself. All of these structures, with the exception of the shipping containers, consisted of Styrofoam-insulated aluminum panels set atop a concrete foundation—cheap, temporary arrangements that could be easily assembled or disassembled (as they were once by accident in a wind storm that took place in the middle of my stay there). The only concrete buildings on the premises housed rooms directly related to the affairs of The Media Center: two rooms next to the canteen where construction foremen for The Media Center lived, and a row of offices on the northern edge of the compound, reserved for Angolan supervisors on the project but almost never occupied except by an elderly manager who lived in one of the empty rooms.

Although this Company base was physically located in a suburb of Luanda, a clear division of social space between ‘China’ and ‘Angola’ was clearly established within the compound, and through the Company’s broader activities. Many practices that took place inside the compound were different from those that took place outside, and many Chinese employees rarely left this circumscribed space, in part because they perceived the Angolan world outside as one of uncertainty and danger. This mirrored some of the mystified Angolan perceptions of ‘the Chinese’ that I introduced in the previous chapter. Indeed, the system of enclosed compounds that many Chinese companies adopted, and their practice of working six or seven days per week, which I will discuss further below, became examples of the secretive and sinister nature of Chinese investment in some critical Angolan discourses. Some observers of Chinese business went as far as to speculate that many of the workers who had been brought from China were actually convicted prisoners, serving out their sentences through forced labor abroad.<sup>114</sup> Such a rumor would imply that the conditions in which Chinese workers lived and labored would have been intolerable for any free person.

The distinction between Chinese and Angolan spaces was reflected both in physical separation and a difference of social norms. Angolan employees of the company, mainly young men in their twenties from the south of the country, lived at The Media Center in an area reserved for them just outside the compound gates, which were kept locked at night.

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<sup>114</sup> This rumor has been found to circulate in other African contexts as well. See Yan Hairong and Barry Sautman, “Chasing Ghosts: Rumors and Representations of the Export of Chinese Convict labor to Developing Countries,” *The China Quarterly* 210 (June 2012): 398-418.

According to official rules, Chinese employees were not permitted to leave the compound except on Company business, and no one was allowed through the gates after 10pm, although the leaders would occasionally return from business dinners around 10:30 or 11. Managers at the Company argued that it was necessary to keep the compound locked and guarded, and to never go out at night, to ensure the physical safety of company personnel and property. However, Company employees made clear to me that their perception of Angola as dangerous or violent was not an unfounded, racist idea about black people, but rather the historical result of a dynamic relationship between Chinese business and the local population. In employees' narratives, Angolans had been "friendly," and their Angolan environment had felt safe, when the first members of Northwest Construction arrived in the mid-2000s, but with the expansion of Chinese businesses in the country, Chinese individuals and companies developed a reputation among locals that made them targets of violent crime. Northwest Construction itself had suffered break-ins at several of its bases, one of which involved the death of an Angolan guard from a gunshot to the head. It was only after a dramatic increase in such incidents, around 2009-2010, that greater restrictions on freedom of movement were put in place for Chinese employees at Northwest Construction.

Angolan workers, on the other hand, could come and go as they pleased, and sometimes they would leave for several days or weeks on end. Hired as casual laborers, they had no contracts with the company and were paid according to the number of days they worked every month. Some of these workers lived in housing in the city they had procured on their own, while about twenty of them slept most nights at The Media Center. The Company had dropped a few shipping containers just outside the compound fence; nearby they had set up a water faucet and strung a power line. Chinese employees each had their own air-conditioned room, sometimes shared with one other person and equipped with a bed and desk, and they enjoyed three meals per day served at the canteen. Angolan workers, by contrast, slept four or five to a room, some on bunk beds provided by the Company, some simply on the floor. They bathed in an open-air shower made of waist-level plywood arranged around the water faucet, and they cooked meals themselves over an open flame. Only the two young men who served as assistants to Master Lin in the canteen were entitled to leftovers. Since the Company made no effort to integrate its Angolan workers, social or institutionally, they did not receive the same benefits as Chinese employees, but were not subject to the same restrictions either. During the time that I lived at The Media Center, my room abutted the fence that divided the Chinese dormitories from the Angolan workers' living area, and every night I could hear them listening to music, shouting and laughing. They were only a few meters away, and yet they seemed to be living in an entirely different world.

In *The Nuer*, Evans-Pritchard showed how purportedly universal and absolute categories like time and space were experienced among the group he studied as *relative*; they were perceived in relation to social activities of significance to collective life.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, for Chinese employees at Northwest Construction, spatial points of reference were discursively conceived in relation to China. For example, Company employees referred to the many large construction projects around Luanda not by their Angolan names, but by the names of the

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<sup>115</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, Chapter 3.

Chinese companies that built them. Thus, the City of Kilamba, a massive complex of apartment buildings only a few kilometers away from The Media Center, was known to Northwest Construction employees only as *Zhongxin*, the Chinese abbreviation for China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC). The name “Kilamba” was unrecognizable to members of the Trade Department when I first mentioned it to them, despite their having frequently visited the project.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, *Zhongji*, a shortened version of the Chinese name for China International Fund (CIF) was used to refer to another large housing project nearby, known to many Portuguese-speakers as the New Centrality of Zango. The Portuguese names of other frequented locations were similarly unused among Chinese employees of Northwest Construction, who referred to a restaurant with a gorilla statue at its entrance only as “Gorilla Restaurant” (*daxingxing canting*) or called the supermarket Jumbo, whose logo was an elephant, “Elephant Supermarket” (*daxiang chaoshi*). These kinds of Chinese terms had been invented for common reference points whose Portuguese names were unknown or difficult to remember.<sup>117</sup> In other cases, Angolan place names were replaced by Chinese names that referenced locations of similar significance in China. For example, a major thoroughfare in Luanda upon which were located the Congressional Palace, Supreme Court, and several government ministries, was referred to in Chinese as *Chang’An Jie*, the name of the avenue in Beijing that runs past Tiananmen Square, the Great Hall of the People, Zhongnanhai, and other major government buildings. Similarly, some Chinese employees called the Cemetery Alto das Cruzes, where many Angolan historical figures had been buried, by the Chinese name *Babaoshan*, in reference to a burial place for revolutionary heroes in Beijing.

Thus, it was possible to conceive of a “China in Angola,” not because an overseas version of Chinese society was being physically set up in the country, but because distance between Chinese expatriates and their Angolan surroundings was established and maintained, as evidenced in part through language. The “distance” I refer to here is not a measurable space between two points on a map, but a level of social connectedness or detachment. Evans-Pritchard used the term “structural distance” to describe a similar concept among the Nuer, which he explained in terms of value:

“Structural distance is of a very different order, though it is always influenced and, in its political dimension, to a large extent determined by ecological conditions. By structural distance is meant ...the distance between groups of persons in a social system, expressed in terms of values. The nature of the country determines the distribution of villages and, therefore, the distance between them, but values limit and define the distribution in structural terms and give a different set of distances. A Nuer village may be equidistant from two other villages, but if one of these belongs to a different tribe and the other

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<sup>116</sup> This has become one of the most well known projects funded and built by China abroad, and it was cause for some controversy in its early stages. See Louise Redvers, “Angola’s Chinese-Built Ghost Town,” *BBC News*, July 3, 2012, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-18646243>.

<sup>117</sup> Some Chinese employees at Northwest Construction complained that they were illiterate in Angola because they did not know how to read and pronounce Angolan and Portuguese words.

to the same tribe it may be said to be structurally more distant from the first than from the second. A Nuer tribe which is separated by forty miles from another Nuer tribe is structurally nearer to it than to a Dinka tribe from which it is separated by only twenty miles.”<sup>118</sup>

Although Chinese managers justified their isolation by appealing to security-related fears, in practice the social distance between “China” and “Angola” had more to do with how social relations were primarily forged and sustained between Chinese individuals and companies. By the time I began fieldwork in 2013, a supply system had emerged such that many of the daily operations of a Chinese company in Luanda could be carried out by working solely through other Chinese companies. At the Media Center compound, for example, water was supplied by another large Chinese SOE, vegetables were purchased from a farm run by a private Chinese construction firm, and vehicles or machinery in need of maintenance were taken to Chinese technicians at Chinese repair shops. Although most Chinese workers and technicians at Northwest Construction rarely socialized with anyone off company grounds, managers frequently attended social events hosted by other Chinese managers at the compounds of other Chinese companies. As Evans-Pritchard wrote of the Nuer, “Villages are always joined to their neighbors by paths created and maintained by their social interrelations.” Chinese compounds were like villages, scattered across a landscape otherwise occupied by the city of Luanda. They were connected to each other through a common association to China, but only in a very limited way to their immediate physical surroundings. To Chinese employees of Northwest Construction, the Angolan men with whom they worked every day, and who lived just on the other side of the fence, were much more distant, socially, than the loved ones in China with whom most Company men exchanged phone calls or electronic messages every day.

I once accompanied sixteen Company employees on an unusual dinner out at a historic Portuguese restaurant in the center of Luanda.<sup>119</sup> The Chinese men referred to the place only as “the stone-grilled steak restaurant,” and once we had been seated by flustered waiters in bow-ties who put several tables together for the large group, they asked me to order for them sixteen plates of the only dish they knew: steak grilled on a hot slab of marble. The scene that ensued was one of comical extravagance, as each man struggled to devour a large steak sizzling in front of him. To many observers, it may have looked as if the Chinese men were enjoying a kind of luxury that they could afford due to their wealth and privilege as moneyed investors in Luanda’s postwar construction boom. What such spectators would not have known is that, for many of the men, this dinner at a restaurant was the first and only time they had been outside of the compound since arriving in Angola months or years before. Some of the men asked me to teach them to eat with a knife and fork—steak, or any kind of

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<sup>118</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 110.

<sup>119</sup> The person who organized this outing, a young manager named Wu Tao, explained to me that it was only possible because at that moment all three of the senior managers at The Media Center and the base where he lived, The Intelligence Center, were on home-leave in China. He asked me several days in advance if I could accompany the group to help order food, as it really was a rare chance for them to go out unsupervised by the leaders. For several of them, the chance to go out at all was a special occasion.

“Western food,” was not a common indulgence for them. For the Media Center cook, Master Lin, who was also present, that steak dinner may have been the first and only time he took an evening off in all his years in Angola. The next morning, he would wake up at 5am again to prepare breakfast for thirty men.

### Counting the Days

The conditions of compound life also gave a particular texture to Company employees’ sense of time. In its everydayness, time at Northwest Construction in Angola was experienced as monotonous repetition, the kind of robotic existence that Li Jun alluded to with his statement that Chinese people “recharge their batteries at night.” The working schedule for Chinese employees, whether on the construction site or at Shopping ChinAngola, was 7 days per week.<sup>120</sup> Whereas Angolan employees sometimes missed work or requested days off, for which they would not be paid, most Chinese employees at the Company repeated roughly the same daily routine for up to two years. At The Media Center, I woke up nearly every morning at around 6:30am to the sound of pebbles crunching under tennis shoes as Director Fu and another senior manager returned from their daily badminton practice. A breakfast of plain steamed bread, pickled vegetables, and unsalted rice or corn porridge was served every morning until 7am, when construction foremen gathered groups of Angolan workers and went off to their designated project sites. At 8am, some Trade Department employees moved into position at desks in their bedrooms, while others were driven down the road to the store at Shopping ChinAngola. At noon, almost everyone took a bowl and a pair of chopsticks from their room to the canteen, rinsed them in a sink in the corner, and sat down to a meal of rice, three dishes, and a soup. Ten minutes later, most of the men would already have washed their utensils and returned to their rooms for a 1-2 hour nap. After that, work resumed until 5pm, and at 6pm bowls and chopsticks were retrieved once more for a meal of noodles. By 6:15 the latest, several people would have assembled by the compound gates for an after-dinner walk of 1-5 circles around The Media Center. For the rest of the evening, some of the men would engage in social activities like drinking or playing cards, while others watched movies or played computer games alone in their rooms. Nearly everyone was asleep by 11pm.

This routine was not unusual among Chinese companies in Angola, and similar rhythms have been described for Chinese working environments elsewhere in Africa.<sup>121</sup> Although some companies gave their employees Sundays off to sleep in, do laundry, or cook for themselves, the practice of working 7 days a week was common enough that “the Chinese” had developed a local reputation as “the only people in Angola who work every day.”<sup>122</sup> Company employees most often traced the origins of this nonstop work schedule to the construction industry in China. In northern China, where many had worked before coming to

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<sup>120</sup> The administration of the shopping center, which consisted of a partnership between a private Chinese firm and an Angolan government agency, allowed their own employees half-days off on Saturdays and a full day off every Sunday, but they either allowed or required merchants to keep their shops open every day, including on many Angolan national holidays.

<sup>121</sup> For an example from Zambia, see Ching Kwan Lee, “The Spectre of Global China,” 55-56.

<sup>122</sup> This comment was made to me by an Angolan entrepreneur, in a spirit of awe and admiration.

Angola, construction work had to stop in winter months due to weather conditions. To make up for the long pause, during the rest of the year work went on 24 hours per day, 7 days a week. Company management justified the transportation of this practice to Angola in terms of logistical, economic, and security reasons. Logistically, it had initially been necessary for work to continue uninterrupted in order to meet deadlines for government construction projects. Economically, the Company should have been able to extract more surplus value from its laborers and thereby maximize profits by having them work as much as possible. Workers who were paid by the day may also have been willing to forego days of rest in order to maximize their earnings abroad. From a management perspective, working every day was also a way to ensure security, for both workers and the Company. Keeping employees busy at work reduced the possibility that they would run into trouble while off company grounds, or that they would cause social problems by drinking, gossiping or fighting in their idle time. If anything happened to one of the workers, I was told, the Company would have to face their families in China. Therefore, busy workers were safe workers who did not bring unnecessary inconveniences to the Company.

Although a goal of the instituted 7-day workweek may have been to keep employees “busy,” the intensity of daily work at Northwest Construction varied widely, and members of the Trade Department, with whom I became most familiar, often spent much of the day performing tasks that could be considered economically ‘unproductive.’ Employees who worked at Shopping ChinAngola kept the Northwest Construction store open every day from 8am to 5pm, but when customer traffic was slow, Ma Hui the accountant and Xiao Zhang the showroom manager spent hours playing games on their mobile phones. Li Jun, Vice Manager of the Trade Department, did his best to keep himself busy devising strategies for business development, setting up meetings with potential clients or visiting suppliers at their offices, but most afternoons he could be found in his office watching movies on his laptop or videoconferencing with his girlfriend in China. Senior managers enjoyed greater freedom of movement than their junior-level colleagues, but they may have been equally bored. Old Duan, a middle-aged man who held the title of Section Head (*buzhang*), diligently drove his coworkers to and from the shopping center every day, but he spent most mornings and afternoons reading news on his tablet computer and chain-smoking cigarettes. Fourth Brother, a gregarious man in his fifties ranked as Vice Manager, had earned a reputation for being “hardworking” (*qinlao*) because he got up early every morning to wash Director Fu’s car. Apart from accompanying Fu to drinking dates with business partners, telling many entertaining stories, and occasionally enforcing rules, Fourth Brother spent most of his time drinking tea and smoking in the doorway of his bedroom-office, once in a while tending to the many potted plants he had assembled outside. Director Yang, the highest-level manager at Northwest Construction, who oversaw all of the Company’s operations in Angola, may have had the worst reputation for idleness. Employees smirked as they described how he rarely left his bedroom and office at The Intelligence Center, another compound of the Company. A young Chinese worker had been specifically designated to clean his room, deliver meals to him, and perform other services as required. Although he frequently returned to China, it was said he spent his time in Angola mainly reading electronic books, savoring

fine teas, and enjoying a collection of Cuban cigars. When he got bored, he called his subordinates to come report on their work.<sup>123</sup>

The sense of monotony with which Company employees experienced days passed in Angola was made humorously apparent to me in a failed experiment to study Portuguese with one of the men. Ma Hui had already spent five years in Angola when I met him at the end of 2013, and when I began to visit Shopping ChinAngola regularly, he asked if I could help him improve his Portuguese language skills. This request, however, was not motivated from a desire to further communicate with Portuguese-speakers. “It’s just that life is really *so* boring here,” Ma explained, “I just want to feel like I’ve *done something* over the next year, before I go back.” For a few weeks, we met every day after lunch to read dialogues out of a Portuguese textbook, and I struggled to explain what verb conjugations and gendered nouns were. Ma Hui’s coworkers sometimes made fun of him, but they also seemed genuinely impressed that he took time every evening to review his textbook and memorize vocabulary. Less than a month later, however, Ma told me he wanted to take a break from studying. “I think I want to wait until after Christmas to continue,” he said. Then Christmas passed, and he said he wanted to wait until after the Lunar New Year. After that, he revealed to me that he had begun to obsessively play a video game on his tablet computer. Wu Tao, a colleague from the Logistics Department, had introduced it to him. Played online between multiple participants all over the world, the game involved building up a fortified compound and amassing gold by attacking and plundering other players’ settlements.

“Are those all your soldiers?” I asked, staring at some squirming purple figures on the screen.

“Yeah,” he said. “And this is all my money. Look how big Wu’s fortress is! Mine’s still pretty small, but I can build it up over time. I just want to feel like I’ve *done something* over the next few months, before I go back.”

Ma Hui’s choice to play a computer game over studying Portuguese, and the way he had justified both activities, exemplifies the arbitrary quality of daily activities in Angola for Company employees. To use E. P. Thompson’s distinction, time at Northwest Construction

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<sup>123</sup> Contrast daily life on the Chinese compound with this description of Westerners in Tianjin in 1886: “...Apart from this business activity, which only requires our attention now and again, we spend our time in the way of life which is usual here, which must be described as on the whole exceedingly monotonous.... The comparatively few Europeans who live here have no one else to turn to but themselves in their social intercourse... and thus as a rule each day goes by like all the others. In the early morning an hour or two is spent at work, and in the afternoon, when the heat permits, one can play lawn tennis with the few ladies in the colony, and it is possible to take a ride later on into the monotonous area of the town nearby or perhaps beyond the mud wall of the city to the settlement racecourse, which lies in the open country and is completely without shade. Towards mid-day one meets the other men in the club for whisky and soda, and to hear the gossip of the town, and in the evening there will be a game of billiards or skittles in the same place.... Since the ‘real’ work is usually restricted for Europeans, as in most places overseas, to a few days in the week, that is, to the days round about the arrival and departure of the mail steamer, they have an extraordinary amount of free time left at their disposal, which in the absence of any opportunity for intellectual amusement, tends largely to be spent in entertaining and being entertained at extraordinarily opulent dinners and suppers” (A. H. Exner, *China*, (Leipzig, 1889), 27; cited in Franke, *China and the West*, 87-88).

was neither “task-orientation”—time conceived in relation to social activities—nor was it the calculated time of work disciplined to keep pace with the industrial clock.<sup>124</sup> Instead, it was a kind of empty time, a period endured until meaningful time could resume, and it seemed this would only happen once one physically returned to China. Perhaps it was significant that many Chinese office workers in Angola never bothered to change the time set on their computer screens, preferring a constant reminder of Beijing Time. Because they repeated the same routines every day, and had few social connections to anyone with a schedule different from their own, most Company employees never knew what day of the week it was, but they could state with impressive exactness the number of days that they had spent in Angola, and the number of days left before their anticipated departure. My experience living at The Media Center was certainly different from that of my Chinese coworkers in this regard: intensely focused on the ethnographic present, I relished the small pleasures of taking walks with a few members of the Trade Department every evening. Sometimes afterwards we would even sit by the stagnant water of the unused fountain, which we jokingly called “the beach,” to talk and catch the cool breeze. I was therefore initially confused when, as we made our way back to our rooms one night, Zhao Wei shouted cheerfully, “Today is the 27<sup>th</sup>, and tomorrow is the 28<sup>th</sup>, that means the month of February is over! Very good, very good!” I asked why he was celebrating, unsure whether something special was meant to happen during the month of March. “It’s really great, don’t you think?” he replied with a smile, “Another day gone, another day counted!”

The emptiness of employees’ time in Angola contrasted starkly against the value with which they imbued their future in China. The men of the Trade Department spent many evenings animatedly discussing major plans they would undertake once they returned. Some of them planned to get married, while others were already married and wished to have a child, and the older men planned for their sons’ or daughters’ weddings. Some of them intended to buy property or renovate the houses they already owned, and a favorite pastime was research into the cost of imported vehicles—American brands were preferred. The men also fantasized about vacations they would take, with their wives or girlfriends, to exotic destinations like Mauritius or Jeju Island.<sup>125</sup> Then there were the more mundane aspirations, like to eat a bowl of authentic Lanzhou noodles, the description of which made everyone’s mouth water. Overall, however, employees’ dreams of an end to the deprivation they had suffered over 18 months or two years in Angola involved lavish expenditures. The salaries they earned in Angola were paid into their bank accounts in China, so a return to China also meant long-awaited access to a hoard of earnings. The starting salary of \$1200 USD per month was a large sum of money for contract workers, who may have been earning around 3000 RMB per month (less than \$500 dollars) in the Chinese construction industry. The base salary for formal employees started at \$1500, and with raises and unpredictable year-end bonuses it could increase significantly. Surprisingly for me, many of the formal employees would not have earned much more than construction workers at office jobs for Northwest Construction in China, although they would certainly enjoy other benefits. Most of the men I spoke to on

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<sup>124</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56-97.

<sup>125</sup> Neither of these required visas for Chinese passport-holders.

the issue claimed that they appreciated not having access to their earnings while in Angola, because it meant there was little opportunity to spend, and they could save as much as possible.<sup>126</sup> When it came time for employees to return to China, the Company purposefully arranged flights for them that stopped in Dubai. There, they could take hours to explore a maze of Duty Free shops, using their credit cards to buy gifts of cigarettes, alcohol, and cosmetics that they would present to friends and family at home. Some of them rewarded themselves, if not for their hard work then for the difficult conditions they had endured, with a wallet or wristwatch from a luxury brand.

Employees of Northwest Construction experienced such extreme self-estrangement during their time in Angola that they considered themselves, and their time there, “dead.” On the other hand, their intense orientation to a future life in China appeared to be animated almost exclusively by a desire to consume. Were they leaving conditions of alienated labor in Angola only to return to a life of alienated consumption in China? In what follows, I explore this question further.

### One-Dimensional Men?

The first time I entered Northwest Construction’s Media Center compound, I was led into a dormitory room, told to sit down, and offered a Coca-Cola, as various employees of the Trade Department came in and passed around cigarettes. Smoke began to fill the room, whose walls, originally white, were stained a deep yellow. Arranged on top of the bare concrete floors were two beds dressed in military-style blankets, a desk with a Lenovo laptop, and a table upon which had been placed a hot plate and some simple cooking items. On the wall to my left hung a poster-sized image of a naked woman reclining on a bed, with the words “China Electrical Corporation,” the name of a general contractor for Northwest Construction, printed at the bottom. At the time, Ma Hui lived in that particular room, and an anthropologist friend who had accompanied me asked if he would be taking many of the items in it back to China. “No,” Ma Hui scoffed at the idea, “I’m only going to bring,” he paused dramatically, “*money*.”

The single-minded desire to make and have money was emphasized to me repeatedly by employees at Northwest Construction, even though such statements carried cynical undertones. Love of money, and the ability to make lots of it, was sometimes even posited as a national characteristic of Chinese people, such as when Old Duan said to me, “Chinese people would give up their lives to make money!” Such invocations of “Chinese people” were most often made in reference to the many apparently hardworking and frugal small-scale entrepreneurs from southern China, who were willing to do business in Luanda neighborhoods that Northwest Construction employees thought were too dangerous, and lived in much poorer physical conditions than those of The Media Center. Ironically, Company men enjoyed the feeling of accumulating high salaries abroad while it was rumored

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<sup>126</sup> Officially, the Company deducted a \$120 boarding fee from salaries every month, and employees who wanted pocket money to spend locally could apply for a loan of up to 500 RMB per month. In practice, at The Media Center at least, Director Fu often looked the other way when Trade Department funds were used to refill employees’ supplies of cigarettes or beer.

that their employer continually failed to make enough revenue to meet output goals. Some employees attributed this problem to bureaucratic complications on the part of the Angolan government, while others complained that it had something to do with the nature of state-owned enterprises. Most, however, simply did not concern themselves with the financial status of the Company. When I tried to ask Ma Hui, Trade Department accountant, about it one evening, his attitude exemplified such a position: “I’m telling you, if the Company continues to operate the way it has been, it won’t last longer than five more years in Angola. It’s simply not competitive anymore. The Trade Department has done pretty well, but the Engineering Department doesn’t always earn profits. The Media Center, for example, is actually suffering losses. I have to keep track of all the receipts, so I know what gets purchased and sent to different construction sites. Recently, ceramic tiles were ordered for The Media Center. Why would they need those? It can only be because the tiles they put in before were poorly done and now they need to be replaced. That’s why we still haven’t handed the project over, because we’re constantly being asked to fix things that weren’t done properly the first time. But the Trade Department’s doing ok, and anyway whatever the Company does is really up to the leaders, so there’s no point for the rest of us to worry about it too much.” He stopped clearing his desk for a moment and looked directly at me, as if to make sure I understood what he was about to say, “All of us have come here with *a single goal in mind*—to make money!” We both smiled at this oft-repeated statement. “Really!” He insisted it was not merely a joke, “I am a worshipper of money!”<sup>127</sup>

Statements like these, which implied that nothing could be more important in life than money itself, reminded me of Herbert Marcuse’s critique of modern industrial society, *One-Dimensional Man*.<sup>128</sup> In his study of society under late capitalism, Marcuse argues that a change has occurred in the relationship between individual and society. A private, political space of reflection and negation that used to be possible within men’s minds has somehow disappeared; instead, individuals identify completely with their society, accepting the modes of thinking and behaving purveyed in mass media, while ignoring what would be vital to human liberation. Under such conditions of life, man becomes purely functional, utterly concerned with the satisfaction of his “needs,” regardless of how false they may be. Marcuse makes the crucial point that this situation is not limited to liberal democracies. Both authoritarian and non-authoritarian societies have become fully engaged in the business of producing and satisfying needs: “Under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole.”<sup>129</sup> The only difference was that in capitalist democracies there were more false freedoms and false choices—among which product to buy, for instance, or which repressive political leader to elect. In both the Soviet Union and the United States, Marcuse argued, the demand for liberation, “liberation also from that which is tolerable and rewarding and

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<sup>127</sup> “我是拜金主义者!” (*Wo shi baijin zhuyizhe!*)

<sup>128</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

comfortable,” had been suffocated, as more waste was produced and consumed, and as people occupied themselves either with unnecessary and “stupefying” work, or with “modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefication.”<sup>130</sup>

Was Ma’s shameless admission that he worshipped money a sign that Marcuse’s “ideology of advanced industrial society” had reached contemporary China as well? Ma Hui had been born in 1978, the year that Deng Xiaoping became paramount leader of China and began to institute liberalizing economic reforms. He was the son of a cook and a factory worker, and he had not attended college, but had studied glass manufacturing at a technical school. When the state-owned glass factory he worked for was shut down in the early 2000s, he earned a living from various kinds of petty trade until in 2008 an uncle who held a high position at Northwest Construction called him to say there was an opening to go abroad. “I heard him mention a three-character word,” he said, referring to the Chinese name for Angola (*An-ge-la*), “and I heard him say I could make 100,000 RMB in a year. So of course I said yes,” Ma had laughed at his former ignorance as he relayed the story of how he had gotten his job in Angola. On his first trip back to China, he had begun to look for a wife, and on his second trip back, he had married a woman over ten years younger than him. He said that when he went back for a third time in a few months, he planned to pay off a second house he had purchased, buy a new car, and have a child. I watched him polish a wristwatch he had bought in Dubai for \$6000 dollars. He kept it in a locked drawer and almost never put it on, not only because he was afraid of being robbed, but also because it did not match the plain t-shirts and jeans he wore every day.

When Marcuse lamented the state of advanced industrial society, he presented a situation in which the concept of alienation was inapplicable because individuals could no longer experience separation from the world of objects around them. Late capitalism, for him, is characterized not only by increased productivity and efficiency, an expanded provision of comforts, and the confusion between waste and need, but also by a transformation of commodities into “an extension of man’s mind and body...” Thus, “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split level home, kitchen equipment.”<sup>131</sup> Similarly, Ma Hui and other employees of Northwest Construction seemed to genuinely love the things they bought with their salaries. “I just like it,” Ma said when I asked how he justified spending three times his monthly salary on a watch. At the same time, there was something about the situation of these Company men that Marcuse’s analysis cannot account for. Although they certainly felt the need to consume, for all of them, the need to make money was also intimately connected to their relations with family. Another example should help to clarify this point.

On one of my earliest visits to the Northwest Construction store at Shopping ChinAngola, I found Li Jun terribly hung-over. His boss, Director Fu, had returned from China the night before, and a welcome banquet had been arranged with the leaders of other companies. “There were six people at the dinner,” Li said, frowning deeply and pinching the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 9.

skin between his closed eyes, “Three men and three women. Together we drank eight bottles of wine, and six large beers.” I was later to learn that social drinking was a regular part of both his and Director Fu’s job responsibilities, and one that made their ‘work’ in Angola that much more exhausting.

That day, I had intended to meet with Li Jun about the possibility of doing an internship with his company, and I had brought a copy of my resume, which I handed to him. We had previously talked about my helping with translation, as at the time there were few employees at the Company with language skills adequate to communicate with business partners or clients. Li Jun stared at the piece of paper I had given him, then he looked up at me with a serious expression on his face. “I think there’s a big difference between you Americans and us Chinese,” he said. “You do things because you are interested in them, not because you have to. You go to different countries and study different topics because you want to, not because you have to make money. If a Chinese person had to choose between studying Economics or studying Anthropology, he would definitely choose Economics, even if he were more interested in Anthropology, because he would know that with an Economics degree he could make more money later.”

I felt awkward at this invocation of nationality, and I commented that perhaps the difference had to do with two educational systems, rather than two peoples. Could it be that in the American education system, students are encouraged to pursue their own interests?

“Students are also encouraged to pursue their own interests in China!” Li Jun retorted, “We just don’t, because of economic considerations. Chinese people are extremely practical; they never try to do anything different. That’s why every year all the new inventions are made in America. But Chinese people do have one good quality, and that is that they are very hardworking. They will sacrifice their health and happiness to work hard and make money. We even have a saying: In the first half of life, you work to death for money; in the second half, you spend all your money to stay alive.”<sup>132</sup>

Wu Tao, the junior manager from the Logistics Department, had been in the room as Li Jun and I spoke, and he asked to take a look at the resume. When he finished reading it, he asked, in a tone I could not quite decipher: “Why have you come to Angola?”

Rather than trying to summarize all of the complicated factors that had led me to choose Angola as a field site for my dissertation research, I said simply that I thought it was a very interesting place.

Wu Tao smiled and looked at Li Jun, who parroted the question back to him: “Why have *you* come to Angola?”

Without hesitating, Wu said emphatically, “To *live!*” (*Weile shenghuo!*)

Surely Wu Tao could have also found a means to survive in China. What he meant by “living” was not merely sustaining his physical existence. As he went on to explain, he felt the comforts he could achieve with extra income were necessary for the sake of his family. His son had been only one month old when he had left to come to Angola. “When I go back in a year

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<sup>132</sup> “前半辈子拼命挣钱，后半辈子花钱保命” (*Qian ban beizi pinming zhengqian, hou ban beizi huaqian baoming*).

and a half,” he said sorrowfully, “my child will not even recognize me. It’s very hard, but I must make this sacrifice to ensure a better life for the next generation.” Other employees at Northwest Construction faced similar kinds of family pressures. When they talked about “life,” they were not only referring to a social existence that required certain levels of wealth and consumption. Thus, although alienation in Marx’s terms meant that life was reduced to a means rather than an end, and in Marcuse’s advanced industrial civilization it meant the satisfaction of false needs manufactured by “the system,” for Wu Tao, Ma Hui, and others, making money was a means to sustain the life of a collective unit, the family. As I will try to show below, their reasoning was not simply the cynical mobilization of an ethical principle from Chinese tradition. Rather, it reflected the inseparability, for them, of family and individual life.

### Company and Kin

On a sweltering night in February, I sat in Ma Hui’s room, insistent on finding out more about the Company’s commercial strategy. I wanted to know why Northwest Construction, a large state-owned construction firm with subsidiaries all over the world, had decided to expand its operations in Angola by renting a retail space in a shopping center to sell ceramic tiles, air conditioners, and motorcycles. Ma Hui asserted that Angola was a growing market; houses were being built all over the city of Luanda, and whoever lived in those houses needed decorations and appliances for them. The country was developing, which meant the population of consumers would increase, and the market for the company’s products would continue to expand. Zhao Wei, who was also present, explained consumption patterns as a matter of human nature. “Everyone is attracted to new things,” he said, “so as long as we’ve introduced something new to the market, customers will come.” We argued about market logics for a while, then suddenly a man known by his coworkers as Little Beijing, who had been sitting quietly and sipping beer, asked permission to contribute his opinion.<sup>133</sup>

“Mei-ting,” he said, “Isn’t this what you’re asking: Why do Chinese people come to Angola? Why is Angola a good place to make money? Are these your questions?”

I had actually been pursuing a slightly different line of questioning, about the reasons behind some of the Trade Department’s business decisions, but I wanted to hear what he had to say.

“China has always had a huge population,” Little Beijing began his formal speech, “And now the Chinese economy has turned into a bubble. How has China sustained itself up to now? People have to find a way to eat, and there are a lot of people who ‘eat’ their parents. We call them ‘elderly eaters’ [*ken laozu*]. Ma Hui is one of them. Zhao Wei is one of them. Even I, at 40-years-old now, am also one of them. We’re all eating our parents—don’t deny it!”

Ma Hui had already begun to interject: “I haven’t...”

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<sup>133</sup> He was one of two employees at the Company who claimed the Chinese capital as their hometown. The other man was slightly older, and everyone called him Old Beijing.

Little Beijing cut him off: “Don’t brag! Your family, your parents, they’re all subsidizing you somehow. It’s really just a matter of who eats more and who less.”

“I really have not,” Ma insisted, and Zhao Wei raised his own objection, “I haven’t either. I haven’t asked for a single cent from my family since I graduated from college.”

“Maybe you haven’t really experienced it yet. But wait until you have to buy a house. Think of Zhou...” Little Beijing reminded them of a former colleague who had recently gotten married and whose parents had helped him purchase an apartment in Beijing.

Zhao Wei admitted that he was right, but Ma Hui still appeared unconvinced. “Listen, Ma Hui,” Little Beijing appealed to him directly, “I don’t mean to specifically accuse you of anything. I’m talking about the majority. You might really belong to a small group of people who are the exception. But in China the majority of people are all living off their parents. Take me, for instance, I have to live in my parents’ house, because I can’t afford to buy one for myself. I don’t mean to complain. Life in Beijing, compared to the rest of China, is pretty good, right? At least I can take care of myself and raise my daughter. But if I needed to receive guests, for example, since I’m single, I would have to ask my parents to help me look after my daughter. And I’m not a special case, neither in Beijing nor in the rest of China. Most people are like this. So why come to Angola? I want to earn more money. I want to stop eating my parents. I want to take care of them. I want to show them my gratitude, to repay them.”

Zhao Wei started to quietly sing a popular song about gratitude, as if to soften the tone of the conversation, which had suddenly become very serious. But Little Beijing continued with his staid monologue: “In Angola, how does one make money? Actually it’s a very simple thing. It’s like Zhao Wei said, suppose right now Angola is lacking in some product. As long as Chinese people can see this, there is money for them to make. Remember, Chinese people here are like devils. They can survive in any conditions. You can find Chinese people in every corner of the world. Why? They have to survive! It’s a very simple principle. It’s really not because of market saturation or business opportunity or those other things that only leaders think about. In reality, for Chinese *people*, it’s a matter of survival. That includes me. What about you, Ma Hui, why did you come to Angola?”

Ma nearly shouted, as if the answer were so obvious that the question should not even be asked: “To make money!”

“Right!” Little Beijing also raised his voice, “It’s *simple!* We’ve come here *to live*. Problem solved. All those other things, we let the leaders worry about. I’m here for my daughter, for my parents. My daughter is my priority. She’s about to test into college. I feel that after all these years I owe her something. Actually if I stayed in China, I would also be able to live. My life might not be very entertaining or comfortable, but I would do fine for myself. The question is *whom* should I live *for*? At the very least, I should be able to take care of my parents. This is part of Chinese tradition. That’s where the principle comes from. Let’s say tomorrow my old lady gets sick. In the blink of an eye we might have to spend several hundred thousand. Where would she get the cash? Who would she borrow it from? And after she took a loan, how would she be able to live? This is the kind of thing I’m thinking about while I’m here.”

Like the “life” Wu Tao had referred to above, Little Beijing had implied that the life in China for which he worked in Angola was not his individual life alone, but the life of a multi-generational family. Moreover, his question—“whom should I live for?”—reflected the idea that the purpose of an individual’s life transcends the individual himself; for him, “survival” was not only about his own self-preservation, but about the security and well-being of his daughter and parents. In his studies of kinship in traditional Chinese society, Hugh Baker posited a major difference between what he generalized as Western and Chinese notions of the family; namely, in the way the relationship between the individual and family is conceived. In the West, he argued, the family is thought of as an institution in which the individual can be physically sustained and educated such that he ultimately leaves his home to become an independent, productive member of society. The goal of the family should be to provide for the life of the individual. By contrast, in the traditional Chinese communities that Baker studied, it was the goal of the individual to ensure continuity for the family. The principle underlying such thinking Baker termed the “Continuum of Descent,” which he explained as follows:

“...Descent is a unity, a rope which began somewhere back in the remote past, and which stretches on to the infinite future. The rope at any one time may be thicker or thinner according to the number of strands (families) or fibres (male individuals) which exist, but so long as one fibre remains the rope is there. The fibres at any one point are not just fibres, they are the representatives of the rope as a whole. That is, the individual alive is the personification of all his forebears and of all his descendants unborn. He exists by virtue of his ancestors, and his descendants exist only through him....”<sup>134</sup>

According to Baker, the individual alive at present is therefore not really himself, but an embodiment of the entire Continuum of Descent. His life as an individual was necessary for the continuity of the whole, but it was the continued existence of the whole that was ultimately significant. Baker goes as far as to say that, “In a way the individual *was* the family, just as he *was* his own ancestors and his own descendants.”<sup>135</sup>

Some of this thinking is evident in Little Beijing’s speech. Indeed, he had made his moneymaking activities sound like a very pure and noble quest to fulfill his filial duties. It would be impossible, however, to assume that Chinese thinking on kinship and family has remained essentially the same since the time of Baker’s writing. Even Baker admits that what he offers is an idealized account of the basic kinship principles of pre-twentieth century China, and in the last chapter of his book, he tries to account for how kinship institutions have changed since the establishment of the People’s Republic. Perhaps the most significant change to have been implemented was a process of land reform begun even before the Communists came to power, that, within only a few years, took over a hundred million acres of land from four million landlords and redistributed it to fifty million landless tenant farmers.<sup>136</sup> The redistribution of land removed the fundamental base of the lineage, the traditional supra-familial organization that drew its power to govern local areas from a system

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<sup>134</sup> Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 26-27.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

of corporate landholdings. In place of the lineage, Baker argues, the state emerged as the primary source of support for individuals outside of the family.<sup>137</sup> However, he notes, the institution of the family did not disappear. Although reforms such as a new Marriage Law encouraged greater equality between husband and wife, and emphasized obligations of parents to children alongside obligations of children to parents, the set of relations that made up the family unit was not abolished, and “the traditional power of the family over the individual” remained.<sup>138</sup> If in 1979 Baker could write that “the support which the individual required of his lineage is now given to a large degree by the state,” where would such support be drawn from in post-reform China, now that supportive role of the “family of the state” has greatly diminished?<sup>139</sup>

In the context of my fieldwork, it seemed that one extra-familial source of “support” was the Company. Specifically, I would like to suggest that Northwest Construction served as a kind of extended kinship group for its employees, in two different but related ways.<sup>140</sup> First, employees at Northwest Construction in Angola related to each other through a mode that followed kinship patterns. In the family, terms of address ideally reinforce a superior-inferior hierarchy of relationships, with members of a superior generation being addressed by appropriate kinship terms, while younger and more junior family members would be addressed by their personal names. Similarly, within the Company organization, personal names were used between men of similar rank or age, but younger men who wanted to show respect to men senior in age would address them by a formal title, or by the kinship term “elder brother,” even if they occupied a lower rank in Company hierarchy. So, for example, Li Jun, who was 27, addressed Ma Hui, who was almost ten years older, as “elder brother Ma,” even though Li held the position of Vice Manager of the department within which Ma Hui served as accountant. On the other hand, Li Jun addressed a contract worker named Ke, who managed the warehouse at ChinAngola, as “Little Ke,” even though Ke was older than him in age. Mid-level managers or technicians who were senior in age to the speaker would be addressed by job titles before their surnames, such as Section Chief Duan [部长 *buzhang*], or Captain Hu [队长 *duizhang*]. Only those with whom one had a “closer,” more friendly

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 206. Baker depicts the “traditional” lineages of southern China as self-governing organizations whose authority increased in local areas where state authority was weak; however, he notes that they were not rebellious organizations, and they relied on the state to enforce laws based in Confucian principles that would ensure orderly social relations (Ibid., Chapter 6).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>140</sup> Baker also discusses how among overseas Chinese, groups of non-kin were organized according to kinship principles, especially in Southeast Asia from the mid-eighteenth century on (see *Chinese Family and Kinship*, Chapter 7). Here, I argue for the importance of kinship as an organizing principle among Chinese working for an SOE in Angola; however, I am aware that the idea “Chinese” capitalism as a kind of benevolent paternalistic form of exploitation has its potential pitfalls. For a contemporary critique of how notions like “Confucian capital” or *guanxi* can be deployed in self-essentializing discourses among transnational Chinese, see Donald Nonini and Aihwa Ong, *Ungrounded Empires: the Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (Routledge, 1997).

relationship might ask for their name to be prefaced by “Old,” instead of the job title, which still emphasized seniority in terms of age but felt less institutional. The highest-level managers, or “leaders,” as they were often referred to, were almost always addressed with the title of Director (*zong jingli*), so that Director Fu would be addressed in Chinese as *Fu Zong*. Only someone of the same rank might call him “Old Fu.”<sup>141</sup> Respectful terms of address were not merely polite formalities; their use should have been accompanied by respectful treatment in accordance with the relation between positions in a hierarchy. As in the traditional family, subordinates were expected to be *both* obedient and caring to their superiors, and, in turn, good “leaders” not only supervised, but also cared for their employees.

This last point is connected to the second way in which the Company related to its employees as a kind of kinship group. For many “formal” employees—those who were not working in Angola on temporary contracts but had been hired by Northwest Construction in China and then transferred to work abroad—kinship networks were inseparable from Company relations. As I began to ask how various employees at Northwest Construction had arrived at their positions in Angola, I learned that most men employed by the Trade Department had learned about the opportunity through family members. Ma Hui’s case has already been mentioned above. Director Fu, for his part, was married to a woman whose father had been the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Northwest Construction in China. Fourth Brother was the brother-in-law of the man who was currently Chairman of the Board, and he had managed to secure a position in Angola for a delinquent 17-year-old nephew who oversaw a construction crew at The Media Center. Family connections were not the only way one might obtain a job at the Company. There were also employees like Li Jun or Zhao Wei, who had been hired after graduating from college with degrees in Engineering or Business Administration. Both of these men, however, had over their years at Northwest Construction also developed kinship ties to the Company, through marriage. When I attended Zhao Wei’s wedding to a woman from another division of the Company, in Lanzhou in 2015, nearly half the banquet hall was occupied by guests from Northwest Construction, and the Chairman of the Board of Directors was asked to give a blessing to the bride and groom. Li Jun, for his part, was introduced by Fourth Brother to the daughter of one of the most senior executives of the Company, who later facilitated his return to a well-paid, stable position in China. Even between employees who were not related by blood or marriage, kinship-like relationships developed. Ma Hui, for instance, borrowed a large sum of money from Director Fu to purchase an apartment for his grandmother and wife to live in. It would take him several years to pay off the debt, but a kind of trust and loyalty had been established between him and his boss such that they were both willing to take the risk. Thus, it could be said that practices often glossed as patrimonialism, or even “corruption,” in Africanist discourses, and which I noted in Chapter 1 are central to the politics of the belly, have also been central to the livelihoods of Chinese workers and managers.

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<sup>141</sup> After I had been living at The Media Center for a while, some Company employees began to address me as “Teacher Pan,” using the Chinese surname of my mother, while people who considered themselves to be senior or of the same “rank” as me, like Director Fu, Ma Hui, or Li Jun, called me simply by my Chinese personal name, Mei-ting.

Just as the traditional family would both nurture and constrain its members, the Company, while providing family-like support for its employees, also demanded certain sacrifices of them. The most obvious of these was a commitment to work abroad. The total length of time one spent in Angola before taking a return trip to China depended on an individual's status as either a contract worker or a formal employee of Northwest Construction's parent company in China. Contract workers signed agreements to work abroad for 18 months.<sup>142</sup> Once their contract time was up, these men were required to return to China, where they would have the option of renewing both visa and contract. Formal employees of the Company faced a slightly different situation. Although they were generally granted a return trip of 45 days in China after having worked for 18 months in Angola, many of these "permanent" employees—like Director Fu, Li Jun, Ma Hui, or Zhao Wei—had not signed a contract to specify how long they would continue to work abroad, and most returned to Angola for repeated 18-month periods. Without viable job prospects outside of the Company, which was a major employer in the Chinese city where it was based, and reluctant to forfeit the possible lifetime of stable employment they could maintain with a state-owned enterprise, most formal employees were very hesitant about giving up their current jobs. This was an advantage to senior-level management in China, who needed staff to continue expanding business overseas. Chairman Guo, an original founder of Northwest Construction's operations in Angola who later became Chairman of the Board of Directors in China, was reported to have "joked" with some of the junior managers that there were only two possible ways they would ever be able to leave Angola: either by quitting their jobs, or by getting fired. Without the prospect of a salary, or an extremely low one in comparison with what they could earn in Angola, most employees felt that, for the time being, they had no choice but to continue working abroad.<sup>143</sup>

Thus, even though the Company alienated the men of Northwest Construction from their families, it also simulated the family form by providing a temporary, artificial kinship group for them while they were abroad. The expectation was that, while they were in Angola, they "were" the Company, not themselves, and their goal was to work for the continuity of this trans-individual entity, from which they were inseparable.<sup>144</sup> They were meant to have faith that the Company would look out for their interests, as well as those of their immediate kin. This was the first sense in which the company could be thought of as a kind of kinship group. In another way, though, the company was very concretely entangled with kin relations. As much as employees wished they could free themselves from the constraints of Company

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<sup>142</sup> In practice, many of them stayed in Angola for two years, since after the first year they would have their visas renewed, and they savored the opportunity to receive an elevated salary for six more months.

<sup>143</sup> Wu Tao, for example, who had been earning a base salary of \$2000 USD per month in Angola, later managed to find a comparable position at the Company in China, where he was paid only 3000 RMB per month (less than \$500). His wife, a primary school teacher, received a monthly salary of 1000 RMB.

<sup>144</sup> I borrow the term "trans-individual" from David O. Carr, who proposes an investigation into collective subjectivity: "We are thinking here of groups that exist *for* the individuals involved and who consider themselves members" (Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indiana University Press, 1986), 133).

life, many of them would never be able to, either because of the family connections that had gotten them into the Company in the first place (and to which they were therefore indebted), or because they had established family connections through marriage or other kinds of debt-infused relationships during their tenure with Northwest Construction.

In the 1950s, sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote about alienation among white-collar workers at large corporations in the United States:

“The world market, of which Marx spoke as the alien power over men, has in many areas been replaced by the bureaucratized enterprise. Not the market as such but centralized administrative decisions determine when men work and how fast. Yet the more and the harder men work, the more they build up that which dominates their work as an alien force, the commodity; so also, the more and the harder the white-collar man works, the more he builds up the enterprise outside himself, which is, as we have seen, duly made a fetish and thus indirectly justified. The enterprise is not the institutional shadow of great men, as perhaps it seemed under the old captain of industry; nor is it the instrument through which men realize themselves in work, as in small-scale production. The enterprise is an impersonal and alien Name, and the more that is placed in it, the less is placed in man.”<sup>145</sup>

Certain qualities of the type of work Mills described were evident in the everyday lives of employees at Northwest Construction in Angola. The men whose working lives I have tried to describe here certainly felt that their labor, and the products of it, were meaningless. The time that they spent working was experienced as empty time passed, and the world around them was conceived as a series of points relatable to the life they wished to return to. The crucial difference between these Company men and Mills’ white-collar workers, however, lies in the way they related to their employer. For employees of Northwest Construction, the company was not an impersonal bureaucracy, but a network of relationships that they built up and could draw support from. Willingly or unwillingly, the company became part of them, both as an enterprise and as a kinship group.

In this chapter, I have tried to explain both why Company employees may have appeared to be “isolated” from the rest of Angolan society and why, while working in Angola, they would be primarily oriented toward a Chinese context. I have also attempted to outline how corporate and kinship structures, and the conditions of work, both constrained Northwest Construction employees and offered them unprecedented possibilities. In the chapters to follow, I explore what kinds of relationships developed when Company men engaged with the Angolan social world beyond compound walls.

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<sup>145</sup> C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: the American Middle Classes* (Oxford University Press, 2002 [1951]), 226.

## Chapter 3

### Learning How to Speak: Translation, Face, and Friendship

If the last chapter presented a scene of enclosure, of relationships formed and practices enacted within company structures and compound walls, this chapter and the next focus on social interactions that transcended the boundaries of what might be called a “Chinese community” in Angola. Specifically, this chapter examines modes of communication between Chinese- and Portuguese-speakers. As has already been suggested through the image of compound life presented above, many Chinese working in Angola did not speak more than a few words of Portuguese. The men at Northwest Construction tended to socialize almost exclusively with other Chinese expatriates. They spoke of Angola as a dangerous place, and Angolans as a culturally different, perhaps incomprehensible people. Among other factors, the monolingualism of Chinese- and Portuguese-speakers contributed to a feeling of separation between “China” and “Angola” within Angola itself. Still, in everyday interactions, between Chinese and Angolan coworkers, for instance, there was clear evidence of a kind of affinity, if not intimacy. In this chapter, by focusing on how Portuguese- and Chinese-speakers communicated across or through linguistic barriers, I give a preliminary interpretation of the character of Chinese-Angolan social relations. In doing so, I also begin to address an unavoidable issue regarding the nature of power dynamics between Chinese and Angolans. As the two groups have come together in the morally fraught context of Chinese financing for Angolan postwar reconstruction, a question has emerged about whether and to what extent China can be thought of as a ‘neo-colonial’ power in Angola. One way to answer, I suggest, is to examine how harm, pain, or humiliation might be inflicted on members of one group by members of the other in everyday communications. This would also involve an analysis of how respect, trust, or affection would be communicated in such interactions. Lastly, this chapter analyzes the role of the professional interpreter, who would often serve as a social and linguistic mediator in such interactions. Surprisingly, translation could be hindered, rather than helped, by the presence of an official translator. This shows how translation in this context was a delicate process of social interpretation, not merely a conversion of signs from one language into another.

Lena had been employed by Northwest Construction for over a year when I met her in November 2013. She was in her early twenties, and had a seven-year-old son. A very sweet young woman, and the only female employee of the company at the time, she was adored by the young Chinese men who worked with her at the Shopping ChinAngola store. Unlike Afonso, an Angolan sales manager who became the target of angry complaints or threats from the Chinese managers whenever he missed work, Lena was regularly allowed to take Sundays off to attend church or visit her parents, who lived near the center of town. While at the store, she spent much of her time at work sitting with Xiao Zhang, the 21-year-old Chinese sales manager who was technically her supervisor. While she addressed Ma Hui, the 36-year-old store accountant, with the same Chinese honorific “Ma Ge” (elder brother Ma) used

affectionately by younger Chinese employees of Northwest Construction, Lena liked to call Xiao Zhang by the Portuguese name João, which was also the name of her son.

Although Lena frequently complained of stomachaches and other ailments, she seemed especially ill one day when she spent nearly an entire afternoon resting her head on the counter next to the cash register. Presumably trying to cheer her up, Xiao Zhang and Ma Ge joked that they could use a technique from traditional Chinese medicine to diagnose her by feeling her pulse. “Really?” Her large eyes grew even bigger. She extended her wrist, and Xiao Zhang held it tenderly between his fingers and thumb. “Hmmm... You’re going to have a baby!” he announced. Xiao Zhang and Ma Hui laughed, while Lena scolded both of them for playing a joke on her. She continued to feel sick, though, and a few days later she called to report that she was not only pregnant, but had also contracted malaria. “What a bitter fate that girl has,” Xiao Zhang remarked in sympathy when he heard the news.<sup>146</sup> Lena stayed home to recover, and after several weeks decided she would not be coming back to work.

A few months later, Lena returned to the store at Shopping ChinAngola to visit her previous co-workers, as well as some friends who worked at other stores. She was very pregnant, and told us her baby was due in two months. She also planned to have a wedding in a few weeks. As Xiao Zhang lit a cigarette, one of many he smoked every day, Lena scolded him playfully, “João! *Fumar mata!* [Smoking kills!]”

Ma Hui’s Portuguese skills were limited and he asked, in his version of Portuguese, what she meant: “‘*Fumar mata*’—*que?* [lit: ‘To smoke kills’—what (does it mean)?]”

Lena tried to explain using words that Ma Hui would know: “*Fumar muito, kufala!* [To smoke a lot, *kufala!*]”<sup>147</sup>

Still speaking to Lena, Ma Hui said something in Chinese to the effect of, “There are many other things that could kill us here besides smoking,” to which Lena complained, using the English term of address, “*Ai, Mister Ma! Fala português!* [Oh, Mister Ma, speak Portuguese!]”

Ma smiled and said a typical phrase of his, “*Eu português pouco pouco* [lit: Me, Portuguese, little little].”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> In Chinese, he said “苦命的娃” (*kuming de wa*), which could be translated literally as “a bitterly-fated child.”

<sup>147</sup> The word *kufala* was used in conversations between Chinese- and Portuguese-speakers in Angola during the time of my fieldwork to mean “broken,” “finished,” “done for,” or, in reference to a person, “sick” or sometimes “dead.” Chinese employees of Northwest Construction claimed it was an Angolan word, but Angolan employees with whom I spoke said they used it only when speaking with Chinese people. Much later, I learned that *kufa* indeed is the infinitive form of the verb “to die” in Kimbundu, the Bantu language most commonly spoken in Luanda and other parts of Northern Angola. The ending *-la* sounds like Chinese particle *le*, usually added to the end of verbs to indicate a completed action, and sometimes combined with particle *a*, to make *la*, for emphasis. This word could therefore be a combination of Kimbundu and Chinese, unrecognized as such by the company’s Angolan employees because they did not speak Kimbundu. I am grateful to Iracema Dulley for illuminating me on this point.

<sup>148</sup> Ma’s phrasing—*eu português pouco pouco*—sounded like a direct translation of Chinese: *pouco*, meaning “little” or “few,” could be an equivalent to the Chinese *yi dian* (一点), and *dian* could be

To this, Lena offered a parallel response, “*Sim, eu também chinês não saber tudo!* [Yes, I also Chinese do not to know everything!]. At least Ma Hui spoke a little bit of Portuguese; Lena did not know any Chinese! Her grammatically ‘incorrect’ phrasing was an attempt to mimic the way her Chinese coworkers spoke Portuguese. Whether Ma Hui understood this or not, he seemed to get her meaning, and they both laughed.

When the laughter subsided, Lena, continuing to speak in non-standard Portuguese, told us that a Chinese young woman who worked at the shop behind Northwest Construction had visited her at home recently, “*Anteontem Lúcia passar casa eu* [lit: The day before yesterday, Lúcia to go house me].” The woman went by the Portuguese name Lúcia, and she had gone to see Lena with an Angolan employee of her store named Osvalda. Lena explained, “*Ela e Osvalda passar almoçar, depois passar casa eu* [lit: She and Osvalda to go to eat lunch, after to go house me].”<sup>149</sup>

It was unusual, among the businesses at Shopping ChinAngola, for a Chinese employee to visit an Angolan friend at home, but Xiao Zhang confirmed the story, saying in Chinese to Ma Hui and myself, “Yes, she (Lúcia) said the other day that the Angolan girl had taken her there by *taxi*.” A look of either pity or disgust passed across his face as he shook his head and reported, “She said it (the house) was *not nice at all*.”

Having missed this commentary in Chinese, Lena asked in an innocent-sounding tone, “*João! Depois você passar eu?* [lit: Later you to go me? (Will you come visit me sometime?)]”

Zhang answered without hesitation, “*Eu? Não!* [Me? No!]”

In this conversation, Lena, Ma, and Zhang found a way to achieve some shared understanding despite the impossibility of completely understanding one another’s words. Indeed, their playful joking may have been precisely what made communication possible in the near absence of a shared language. Speaking, for them, meant entering into a social relationship with a linguistic and cultural other. Still, it was impossible not to notice certain asymmetries in these spoken interactions between an Angolan young woman and her Chinese (former) employers. Lena had adjusted her Portuguese so that the Chinese-speakers would understand, whereas at certain points in the conversation both Ma Hui and Xiao Zhang had uttered words in Chinese that they should have known she would hear as gibberish, and this had inspired a certain degree of frustration on her part. Having seen the three work or socialize together at the store over several months before Lena left, I knew that Zhang and

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repeated in spoken Mandarin for emphasis. However, I have also been told that repetition of the adjective is common in Kimbundu.

<sup>149</sup> In Chinese-Angolan conversations that I witnessed, it was common to use the verb *passar* to mean “to go,” “to come,” and “to stop by,” instead of using *ir* (to go), *vir* (to come) or other verbs commonly spoken in European or Brazilian Portuguese. In her speech, Lena did not conjugate the verbs *saber* or *passar*, as one would in ‘grammatically correct’ Portuguese. This would have made her speech more intelligible to Chinese listeners, who tended not to conjugate verbs when speaking Portuguese. Moreover, she exclusively used the personal pronoun *eu* (I/me) instead of the possessive *minha* (my), which would usually be used in the phrase *minha casa* (my house). Presumably she knew her listeners would not understand the latter.

Ma sympathized with Lena and enjoyed her company. Despite the linguistic obstacles they faced, a kind of affection had grown between them, as evidenced by Lena's regular phone calls and occasional visits. However, as the example above shows, there were limits to these feelings of affinity. Zhang would never visit Lena at home, either because he did not want to or because it was unfeasible given his work schedule and company rules. Lena had not extended any invitations to her wedding either.

In what follows, I will show how interpretation between Chinese and Portuguese was often a process of encountering and testing such social, affective, or ethical limits. Instead of emphasizing mutual unintelligibility between Chinese and Angolan social actors, I attempt to show how a shared social context emerged through acts of translation between Chinese and Portuguese—processes that were never perfect or complete.<sup>150</sup> As a negotiation in social relations, this kind of translation involved more than the technical operations carried out by a professional translator moving between “start” and “target” texts.<sup>151</sup> Whether it is assumed that equivalence—of form, reference, or function—is “naturally” present between languages, or that the translator establishes equivalence through the act of translating, the problem of equivalence, or, relatedly, “fidelity,” has been a central concern in theories of translation that have developed over the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>152</sup> By contrast, I am concerned not so much with a search for equal values between linguistic terms as with the nonlinguistic factors that contribute to communication across linguistic and cultural difference. These social aspects of translation might amount to what George Steiner has called “tact.” In a discussion of how “fidelity” in translation must be both ethical and economic, Steiner has written, “By

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<sup>150</sup> The idea that interpretations of reality, and habitual behavior based on those interpretations, are influenced or even determined by language, is often referred to as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” of linguistic relativism. In his study of the difference between temporality as conceived through Hopi grammatical forms and those of European languages, Benjamin Lee Whorf showed that “Standard Average European” languages use spatial metaphors that allow time to be conceived as objective and quantifiable, whereas Hopi language conceives of time as duration, intensity, and tendency. Thus, repetition and preparation are more prominent features of Hopi “behavior,” whereas historicity and planning for the future are emphasized in European cultures. Although it is debatable to what extent this idea necessarily implies a kind of linguistic determinism, it does imply that certain modes of expression in language correspond to a range of acceptable behaviors. I am concerned here not with the difference between two “cultures,” but with how translation can or cannot make thoughts or behaviors interpretable despite linguistic differences. See Benjamin Lee Whorf, “The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language,” in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, ed. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf (Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956), 134-159.

<sup>151</sup> What I refer to as translation could be understood as a “family of operations” or processes including interpretation, bilingualism, and the emergence of contact languages. Notably, these practices were frequently undertaken by actors other than those designated as professional translators. See William Hanks, “The Space of Translation,” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4.2 (2014): 17-39.

<sup>152</sup> According to Anthony Pym, the preoccupation with equivalence in translation theory emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s as a response to Saussurean structural linguistics, which in principle denies the possibility of translation. He claims that all other paradigms of translation theory are a response to the “equivalence paradigm” ((Pym, *Exploring Translation Theories* (Routledge, 2009), Chapter 2).

virtue of tact, and tact intensified is moral vision, the translator-interpreter creates a condition of significant exchange.”<sup>153</sup> How this condition is established is just as important to the act of translation as is the “accurate” transmission of meaning. It becomes a crucial problem that the translator-interpreter must solve.

During my fieldwork with Northwest Construction, the phrase “to know how to speak” [*hui shuohua*] was frequently used to describe the “moral vision” Steiner refers to. Saying that someone “knows how to speak” would indicate that he or she had mastered an ability to communicate in a manner appropriate to a given social situation. Often this was a kind of speech that would create ease in social relations, that was humorous, or that pleased the listener, even if the contents of the speech were somehow negative.<sup>154</sup> For example, one evening after dinner at the Northwest Construction compound, as I sat drinking tea with Ma Hui and Fourth Brother in Ma Hui’s room, Fourth Brother asked me whether he had lost weight lately. I was surprised by the question, and told him that I had honestly not paid very much attention to his weight. But Fourth Brother responded with exaggerated hurt feelings, exclaiming in an affected whining tone: “You see? You don’t even pay attention to me!” At this point Ma had intervened to speak on my behalf: “No! What she means is that she sees you every day, so she can’t tell if you’ve gained or lost weight. Only someone who hasn’t seen you for a long time would be able to notice a difference.” Fourth Brother took this as an opportunity to teach me a lesson in manners: “See? That’s how you should speak, Mei-ting. You can’t tell me you haven’t paid attention to me—that isn’t something I would like to hear! You should learn to talk like Ma Hui.” Ma Hui knew how to speak to Fourth Brother in a way that would not provoke his sensitivity about gaining weight. Fourth Brother, on the other hand, knew how to turn a momentarily awkward situation into an occasion for laughter from everyone present. Indeed, he was known among employees at Northwest Construction as someone who really “knows how to speak.” For both of them, and others who invoked the phrase, *how* something was said was just as important, if not more, than *what* was said.

During my fieldwork, and especially on the frequent occasions when I helped with interpretation for the Trade Department, I had to learn how to communicate with listeners who held varying expectations as to how one should speak. Although previous language training had allowed me to achieve some level of fluency in both Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese, I had to learn how to navigate the socio-linguistic terrain of “China in Angola” alongside the Chinese workers with whom I lived. Over the course of my internship with the company, I witnessed Chinese and Angolan employees communicate with each other in interactions that were sometimes playful and sometimes tense; I watched Chinese employees struggle in their efforts to learn Portuguese, sometimes resisting the language-learning process themselves; and I observed other translators, Chinese and Angolan, who mediated communication between different parties with varying degrees of success. In all of these processes, the actors involved, including myself, had to learn “how to speak” by adopting

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<sup>153</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 190.

<sup>154</sup> Although this was a phrase uttered to me in Chinese, and was not used by Angolan or other Portuguese-speakers, I find that it points to a problem that emerged in interactions between speakers of both languages, and have therefore used it to anchor this chapter.

various ethical orientations toward their listeners or interlocutors in different social situations.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, however, that speakers involved in processes of translation sought to move closer to their listeners, they also resisted complete displacement from themselves. This dual process of displacement and resistance to displacement was intensified in certain moments of linguistic exchange between Chinese- and Portuguese-speakers, whether they occurred directly between speakers of the two languages or were mediated by a translator. In examining such moments below, I explore the possibilities for translation between Chinese and Portuguese, as well as the limits of translatability. These, I suggest, constitute some of the conditions of a shared Chinese-Angolan social world.

### Contact and Contestation

Before exploring how understanding was established across linguistic divides, often through the artful management of implicit understanding by those who “know how to speak,” I would like to look more closely at the kind of language used to communicate between Chinese- and Portuguese-speakers, already exemplified in the exchange between Lena, Ma, and Zhang above. This mode of speaking was a kind of translational practice that did not rely on interpretation through a bilingual person. However, unlike in other cases of intercultural encounter, between missionaries and natives of pre-colonial societies for instance, these neologistic forms were not the deliberate products of a technical operation.<sup>156</sup> Rather, they may have emerged as a result of interference or in response to practical needs. In his pioneering study of bilingualism, Uriel Weinreich introduced the term “interference” to

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<sup>155</sup> I am suggesting that, in order to understand and be understood, it was necessary for the translator herself to be transformed. In *The Ear of the Other* (1985), Jacques Derrida is cited from a 1972 interview: “In the limits to which it is possible or at least *appears* possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another” (Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation* (New York: Schocken Books), 95). This thinking on translation as transformation is part of Derrida’s contestation of the ‘classical’ model of interlingual translation, one of the three kinds of translation proposed by Roman Jakobson, alongside intralingual translation (paraphrase) and intersemiotic translation (Jakobson, “On linguistic aspects of translation,” *On Translation* 3 (1959): 30-39). Against “the fixation of a certain concept of translation: the idea that translation as the transportation of a meaning or of a truth from one language to another had to be possible,” Derrida proposes “translation as an active, poetic, productive, transformative ‘*hermeneia*’” (*The Ear of the Other*, 139-140).

<sup>156</sup> Hanks has used the term “commensuration” to describe a process by which new signs are established for concepts previously nonexistent in the “target” language. Analyzing the strategies of colonial Spanish missionaries attempting to render biblical concepts into Maya, he writes, “Commensuration is a practical solution to the existential problem of incommensurability. When two languages or systems make distinctions sufficiently different as to make it impossible to intertranslate directly, then one translates via neologism and periphrastic description” (“The Space of Translation,” 30). See also Hanks, *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross* (University of California Press, 2010).

describe “the rearrangement of patterns that result from the introduction of foreign elements into the more highly structured domains of language, such as the bulk of the phonemic system, a large part of the morphology and syntax, and some areas of the vocabulary....”<sup>157</sup> He argued that the potential for interference was higher where there were greater differences between languages—“difference” defined according to the number of “mutually exclusive forms and patterns” in each language.<sup>158</sup> Moreover, he made the tentative claim that some, though not all “situations of language contact have been productive of new, third languages.”<sup>159</sup> The mixture of Portuguese and Chinese exemplified below serves as an instance of this possibility. Combining elements of Portuguese and Chinese, Angolan and Chinese actors often spoke to each other in a language that was neither ‘purely’ Portuguese nor Chinese. Instead of searching for equivalent forms to transfer identical meanings from one language to another, Angolans and Chinese spoke directly to each other by means of a third term.

In March 2014, before embarking on the half-day journey back to Luanda from a business trip in Benguela, Fourth Brother, who was driving, stopped at a gas station outside of Lobito for fuel. Director Fu occupied his usual position in the front passenger seat, while Li Jun and I sat in the back. As Fourth Brother pulled up beside the gas station attendant, he rolled down the window next to my head, expecting me to tell the young man we needed to fill up the tank. Just as I began to formulate my request, however, Li Jun shouted over me: “*Cheio!* [Full!]”<sup>160</sup>

This interruption felt rude to me, but the attendant did not balk at the form of Li Jun’s statement. Instead, he surprised us all by replying, “*Cheio?*” then, in Mandarin Chinese, “*Jia man!* [Fill it up!].” Those of us in the car chuckled a bit at this phrase, which we guessed the man must have learned from other Chinese customers. Li Jun, satisfied with his communicative accomplishment, turned to me and said, “*Bushi yige danci keyi shuo qingchu ma?* [Isn’t a single word enough to communicate clearly?]” Perhaps aware of my reservations about his tone, he seemed to want to prove that a translator was unnecessary, that his way of communicating, which did not attempt to comply with Portuguese conventions, was just as effective as the way I would speak.

The attendant moved to the other side of the car, where he began to pump gas, and, while waiting, made small talk with Director Fu.

“Luanda?” he asked, inquiring as to our destination.

“*Sim* [Yes],” affirmed Fu with a forceful nod of his head.

“*Eu também passar Luanda* [lit: I also to go Luanda],” said the attendant, joking that he would be joining us on the journey.

“*Tá bom!* [Okay!]” replied Fu, apparently also joking.

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<sup>157</sup> Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact*, 6<sup>th</sup> Printing (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 1.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>160</sup> As in the example that opens this chapter, I have decided to include the original Portuguese and Chinese phrasing in the text, with glosses in brackets, and additional explanation in English where it seems necessary.

Looking inside the car, the young man pointed to an iPhone Fu held in his hand. “*Eu também querer iPhone* [lit: I also to want iPhone],” he pushed further, testing whether this request would also be easily fulfilled.

Fu cleverly countered, “*Tá bom, quinhentos!* [Okay, five hundred (kwanzas)!]” By naming a price, he suddenly became the one making demands.

But this did not dissuade the young man from continuing to play along. Pointing inside the car, at an iPad laying in Li Jun’s lap, he announced, “*Eu também querer esse. Esse quanto?* [lit: I also to want this. This how much?]”

“*Mil e duzentos* [1,200 (dollars)],” Li Jun deadpanned.

The attendant turned back to Fu, “*Eu querer passar China* [lit: I to want to go China (I want to go to China)].”

“*Não tem problema!* [(There is) no problem!]” Fu maintained his tone of exaggerated generosity.

The young man then asked, “*China grande ou Angola grande?* [China big or Angola big?]” The question seemed to be asked out of genuine curiosity, not with a presumption that either was bigger than the other. While it revealed his lack of geographical knowledge, therefore, it also meant he may have sincerely thought Angola was bigger than China.

“*China grande!* [lit: China big! (China is bigger)]” Fu answered proudly, “*Pessoa muito!* [lit: Person many! (There are many people)].”

The attendant’s next statement was a bit too crudely misogynistic for my taste, though it may have satisfied norms of masculine banter: “*Eu ir China buscar três mulher, depois fazer filho em Angola!* [lit: I to go China to find three woman, then to make child(ren) in Angola.]”

By then, the gas had finished pumping, and Fu’s Portuguese skills had also just about been exhausted. “OK!” he said in English, as Li Jun abruptly issued an order, “*Fazer factura!* [lit: To make receipt!]”

If a “contact language” can be said to have emerged between Chinese and Portuguese in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Angola, several features of it might be gleaned from the brief exchange outlined above. Most notably, it would appear that the speakers employed a Portuguese lexicon within the syntactic structure of Chinese. An utterance like “*Cheio!*” or “*China grande! Pessoa muito!*” would appear to be a direct or literal translation of the Chinese “*Jia man!*” and “*Zhongguo da! Ren (ben) duo!*” By keeping the verb in infinitive form, omitting articles and prepositions, and leaving gender and number undistinguished, the Portuguese speaker likewise seemed to adopt some of the linguistic conventions of Chinese. I heard “*Eu também passar Luanda*” and “*China grande ou Angola grande*” as direct translations of the Chinese “*Wo ye qu Luanda* [lit: I also go Luanda]” and “*Zhongguo da haishi Angela da* [lit: China big or Angola big].” Therefore, one might conclude that this linguistic form follows the patterns identified by certain linguists among many documented creoles and pidgins, where the language of a ‘dominant’ group tends to provide the lexicon while the language of the ‘subordinate’ group heavily influences syntax.<sup>161</sup> The mode of communication between

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<sup>161</sup> The possibility of new languages emerging through contact between two previously recognized linguistic systems has been discussed at length in studies of “pidginization” or “creolization.” Decamp, for example, wrote about “a contact vernacular” as a mode of communication “used in trading or in any

Chinese and Europeans at trading ports in Southern China at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century followed such a pattern: “Communication between foreigners and the Chinese was carried out in Pidgin English, a mixture of Portuguese, Chinese and English. The grammar, and especially the order of the words, followed Chinese, while the vocabulary was largely English.”<sup>162</sup> If this were the case for Chinese and Portuguese speakers in twenty-first century Angola as well, it might follow that Chinese and Angolans are positioned in clear relations of dominance and subordination. Could evidence of Chinese ‘neo-colonialism’ be found even in a linguistic form?

Even if the linguistic form could not provide evidence of an asymmetrical relation, the content of this conversation might raise questions around power dynamics. The exchange between the Angolan gas station attendant and his Chinese customer had proceeded through a series of demands from the Angolan gas station attendant to his Chinese customer. The young man asked for what Director Fu has, while Fu retained the authority to either affirm or deny his requests, sometimes by naming a price. Could we understand this conversation as comparable to one between colonizer and colonized? In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon opens his study of colonial mentalities by asking: “What does a man want? What does the black man want?”<sup>163</sup> He writes of *desire* as the first step for the colonized on the path toward recognition, and therefore full humanity: “As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions.”<sup>164</sup> The problem of desire, specifically the desire to be white, is explored at length through the domains of language and sexual relations.

Fanon conceives the psyche of “the black man” under colonialism as a kind of alienation arising from relations of economic inequality. The colonized, seeing himself in a

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situation requiring communication between persons who do not speak each other’s native languages.” Although he listed among the characteristics of such contact languages “a limited vocabulary, an elimination of many grammatical devices such as number and gender, and a drastic reduction of redundant features,” he noted that it was debatable whether a “pidgin” could be deemed simpler or more complex than a “standard language” (David Decamp, “Toward a Generative Analysis of a Post-Creole Speech Continuum,” in Hymes, D., ed., *Pidgenization and Creolization of Languages* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 15). Mufwene argues against the idea that creoles are more developed pidgins and refutes the “substrate hypothesis” for implying that Europeans mimicked Africans’ imperfect speech in their languages by speaking to them in a kind of baby-talk that later became a pidgin. Instead, Mufwene argues that pidgins, unlike creoles, develop at particular kinds of sites and around specific kinds of interactions: “Pidgins typically emerged in trade colonies which developed around trade forts or along trade routes, such as on the coast of West Africa. They are reduced in structures and specialized in functions (typically trade), and initially they served as non-native *lingua francas* to users who preserved their native vernaculars for their day-to-day interactions” (Salikoko S. Mufwene, “Pidgin and Creole Languages,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Elsevier, 2015), 11440).

<sup>162</sup> Franke, *China and the West*, 86-87.

<sup>163</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]), 1.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

position of economic inferiority, internalizes this position by thinking of himself as culturally or spiritually inferior.<sup>165</sup> One of the ways in which he attempts to resolve this is by adopting the cultural and linguistic mannerisms of his colonizer. If under European colonialism only white people are regarded as truly human, and if command of a language also means belonging to a certain culture or civilization, “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language.”<sup>166</sup> Fanon explores this problem—that there is a need to “become white” in order to be recognized as human—further in his chapters on interracial heterosexual relationships. In “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” he analyzes an autobiographical piece in which the author, a black Martinican woman, falls in love with a white man seemingly for no reason other than that he is white. Fanon cites a long passage in which she describes her desire to accompany her husband to elite social gatherings, and then her shame when she faces the derision of the other, white attendees: “It was Didier, the preserve of the richest people in Martinique, that magnetized all the girl’s wishes. And she makes the point herself: One is white above a certain financial level. ...It is in fact customary in Martinique to dream of a form of salvation that consists of magically turning white.”<sup>167</sup> Whiteness, in this account, is a matter of economics, not only of biology. However, as Fanon goes on to explain in “The Man of Color and the White Woman,” it is through sexual possession of the white feminine body that, for the black man at least, the twin problems of desire and recognition are most fundamentally resolved. He writes: “Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*. I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*. Now—and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged—who but a white woman can do this for me?”<sup>168</sup>

Could the Angolan gas station worker’s requests be read as expressions of Fanon’s colonial psychology? His desires, as expressed in concrete terms, were to go to his country’s capital, to acquire a mobile phone, then an iPad, then to go to China, possess multiple Chinese women, and bring them back to his own country to reproduce with them. However, despite the apparent similarity to Fanon’s description of material, cultural, and sexual aspirations, I would argue that these demands do not express a wish to be recognized as human by “becoming Chinese.” Rather, they would be better understood as demanding claims upon what ‘the Chinese’ had: mobility—economic, geographical, and social. Fu’s responses to the young man’s entreaties offer further clues as to the dynamics of this exchange. Fu answered each request, however unrealistic, with unhesitating affirmation. Even when the gas station attendant expressed his wish to visit China, Fu told him, “No problem!” in the same tone I had heard him use when inviting wealthy Angolan business partners on all-expenses-paid trips to Guangzhou. While setting a price for their fancy technological appliances may have been a way to assert the Chinese men’s class status, it also indicated their position as businessmen, not settlers or administrators. Director Fu and Li Jun were interested in making money, not providing charity, and the threat of being taken advantage by Angolans who

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 45.

appealed to them as wealthy patrons was something they often complained about. This gas station attendant seemed aware of such disinclinations, which his intensifying demands were designed to challenge. His final statement, not even a request, was the ultimate test of Director Fu's good humor, and although it momentarily generated an awkward pause, perhaps even causing slight offense, it was finally answered with a loud "OK!" In the end, it was not clear which group could be said to dominate the other, only that, as a customer, Li Jun was still able to order the gas station employee to make a receipt for him. Far from reflecting a fixed relation of dominance and subordination, the exchange conveyed a kind of competition in which each party struggled to make claims over the other, but this struggle was expressed in a playful form.

Radcliffe-Brown's classic discussion of "joking relationships" remains helpful in thinking about how to characterize social relations that are emergent or in formation, rather than fixed within a stable social structure. In his writings on the subject, Radcliffe-Brown defined a "joking relationship" as "a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence."<sup>169</sup> Such relationships need not be between two equals. In cases where they are symmetrical, the teasing would be mutual, but there are also asymmetrical relations in which only one person jokes at the other's expense. In other social contexts, such behavior might be read as hostility, but in joking relationships, the antagonism is understood to be a pretense overlaying a kind of friendship. This understanding is what makes disrespectful behavior permissible in the joking relationship. In Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalist framework, joking would typically take place between people in an ambivalent structural relation to one another. For example, a man in Dogon society might joke with his wife's younger siblings and their children. Through marriage, the man would have been brought into a new set of relations with his wife's family without completely losing his status as an outsider. In relation to his wife's family, therefore, the man would occupy a position of both proximity and distance; the relationship involving a combination of "both attachment and separation, both social conjunction and social disjunction."<sup>170</sup> Radcliffe-Brown defines these terms as follows: "Social disjunction implies divergence of interests and therefore the possibility of conflict and hostility, while conjunction requires the avoidance of strife."<sup>171</sup> Joking, he claims, is one way, apart from extreme avoidance, to stabilize a relationship that is structurally unstable.<sup>172</sup>

In short, Radcliffe-Brown proposes that there are two ways of preventing potential hostility between members of different groups from manifesting itself in antagonistic behavior: either complete avoidance, as in the case of a husband and his wife's father in certain societies,

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<sup>169</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "On Joking Relationships," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 13.3 (1940), 195.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Moreover, in keeping with structural-functionalist concerns, Radcliffe-Brown suggests that joking is only one answer to a much broader question of how and to what extent respect is shown to various people, things, and ideas—a question crucial to the maintenance of social order ("On Joking Relationships," 196).

or joking relationships, as in the case of cross cousins in certain societies. Although we no longer share Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalist preoccupation with stability and order, his insights as to how the contradictory tendencies of antagonism and affinity can coincide in various kinds of social relations remains relevant for our purposes here. Many studies of Chinese global migration to Africa have deployed the concept of "integration" as a way to think about relations between Chinese people and local communities.<sup>173</sup> The question such studies ask is to what extent Chinese migrants have or can integrate into their "host" societies.<sup>174</sup> For Radcliffe-Brown, however, separateness is not thought of as a problem; instead, the boundary between two groups is "not merely recognized but emphasized when a joking relationship is established." This claim would have to presuppose the existence of a group, within which an individual's "relations to others are defined by a complex set of rights and duties... and supported by definite sanctions." Beyond the set of relations defined as such, "there lie other groups with which, since they are outsiders to the individual's own group, the relation involves possible or actual hostility."<sup>175</sup> I hope to have shown, in my first and second chapters, that many of my interlocutors in the field associated themselves, discursively, with either one of the collectivities referred to as "China" or "Angola." The relationship between these two groups was moreover conceived as one of antagonism, real or potential. Below, I will explore further how such hostility was negotiated if not overcome.

### Losing and Saving Face

In the examples above, underlying tensions sometimes slipped through exchanges of overtly friendly words. However, the tone of both conversations was one of playful camaraderie. In other instances, however, interactions between Portuguese- and Chinese-speakers appeared to express direct or open hostility. In July 2014, I had taken a day off from the Shopping ChinAngola store, and was writing notes quietly at the Media Center, when suddenly a loud crash reverberated throughout my room. Outside, a large flatbed truck was parked, engine still on, just next to the dormitories. The truck had knocked down a pole near one of the buildings, and an electrical wire had snapped. I had just stepped out when one of the company's Angolan drivers, Patrick, came stomping past. He stopped when he saw me and announced angrily, "*Eu quero falar com o Mister Fu!* [I want to speak to Mister Fu!]" I asked him what was the matter, and he described what amounted to a very unfair situation: it was payday, and the other drivers had all been paid, but his boss had said he was not allowed

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<sup>173</sup> See Mohan et al., *Chinese Migrants and Africa's Development*, 75.

<sup>174</sup> The term "migrant," though popular in social science writing on Chinese communities in Africa, is not entirely adequate as a descriptor of Chinese people working in Angola. The large majority of the Chinese citizens I met in Angola had no intention of settling down there. Even if they stayed for up to a decade, they considered their stay in Angola temporary. One employee of Northwest Construction told me bluntly: "We are not immigrants (*yimin*); we are overseas workers." That said, the category of "worker" cannot encompass the many managers and entrepreneurs who also lived and worked in the country, and the term "expatriate" could imply a life of leisurely privilege. Therefore, I have in some cases settled for using "migrant" as a blanket term.

<sup>175</sup> "On Joking Relationships," 200.

to receive his salary. “*Eu não sei porque! Eu preciso comer!* [I don’t know why! I need to eat!]” He gestured agitatedly and dramatically extended the last syllable of each sentence as he relayed this injustice.

At this point, Patrick’s supervisor, a Chinese man by the surname of Xu, calmly approached us. He was someone I recognized from dinners at the canteen but with whom I had not interacted much beyond a few brief conversations. I knew him only as a soft-spoken low-level manager with a polite smile. Patrick turned to him and began to shout in unconjugated Portuguese: “*Você falar eu não salário! Não tá bom!* [lit: You to say I no salary! Not okay!]”

Patrick turned away to storm off, presumably still in search of Director Fu, and Xu called after him, “*Espera! Espera!* [Wait! Wait!]” After a few attempts, Patrick stopped, and turned back to Xu to state forcefully, “*Eles todos kwanza, eu não kwanza, porque?* [They all kwanza (Angolan currency), I no kwanza, why?]” I asked him to explain what had happened, and Patrick shifted to standard Portuguese to respond to me, “*Eu tenho que comer! Eu tenho que pagar propina aos meus filhos!* [I need to eat! I need to pay school fees for my children!]”

Xu began to explain to me in Chinese that Patrick *is* actually allowed to retrieve his salary, from someone named Mister Lu at another office several kilometers away. However, he would have to walk there, as that location was not on any *taxi* route. This was the real reason, according to Xu, why Patrick was unhappy, not that he was not being paid. I knew where the other office was located, and it would indeed have been too far to walk, especially in the hot sun. I wondered why Patrick couldn’t drive his truck. He was not allowed to, Xu said, because he had been drinking.

The situation had been utterly confusing for me up to this point. Patrick had presented himself as being unfairly denied his well-earned salary for no apparent reason, while Xu had made it sound as if Patrick was simply too lazy to walk to Lu’s office. Only at the end had Xu admitted what was perhaps the key reason for their dispute: that Patrick was being accused of drinking on the job.

Xu told me that Patrick’s breath smelled of alcohol, and I thought I smelled it too. I decided to ask Patrick, in as gentle a way as I thought possible, if he had had anything to drink that day.

“*Não!* [No!]” Patrick immediately denied the accusation, wagging his finger at both me and Xu, “*Eu e ele todo igual!* [I and he all the same!]” He repeated this statement many times, but when I translated, Xu said he was lying. He claimed to have seen Patrick drink a small bottle of whisky when they stopped somewhere for lunch.

When I translated this for Patrick, he was indignant once again. “*Eu conduzo há quinze anos!* [I have been driving for fifteen years!]” he shouted, and bent down to write the number 15 on the sand in front of us, as if this would solidify the sense of experience and responsibility he sought to convey.

Xu looked perplexed, and I translated what Patrick had said. To this, he laughed, apparently unwilling to be convinced. Xu then addressed Patrick directly, using a combination of Portuguese and Chinese (I have underlined the Chinese phrases here): “*Yaoshi* *você não beber whiskey, você carro lá tá bom! Você beber whiskey, Mister Lu yi wen dao* [he pointed at Patrick’s mouth and then pinched his nose], *Mister Xu não tá bom; Patrick não tá bom.* [lit: If

you not to drink whiskey, you car there okay! You to drink whiskey, Mister Li as soon as he smells it, Mister Xu not okay; Patrick not okay.]

I wondered how well Patrick could understand Xu's scolding, but before either of us could respond, Xu turned to me to make another point in Chinese. Usually, he explained, he and Patrick would have ended their working day at 6pm. It was only 3pm at the time, but he was letting Patrick go home. Instead of complaining, Xu said, Patrick should have appreciated having the time off for free.

Xu tapped his wristwatch repeatedly throughout this argumentation, and as Patrick watched, his mood seemed to undergo a dramatic change. As soon as Xu was done speaking, Patrick smiled at me and proclaimed, "*Ele está a dizer que o Mister Lu vai ver que nós largámos cedo! Tá bem, tá bem. Então vou amanhã.* [He is saying that Mister Lu will see that we have gotten off work early! Okay, okay. Then I'll go tomorrow.]"

Almost instantaneously, the tense atmosphere of conflict between a Chinese supervisor and an Angolan employee had completely dissipated. Shocked, I watched as Xu smiled back at Patrick, and gave him a warm pat on the back. As he walked toward the gate, a bounce in his step, Patrick turned back to wave at Xu. "*Amanhã!* [(Until) tomorrow!]" he shouted with a wide grin, and Xu repeated the word back to him. Somehow they were back on friendly terms, ready to work together again the following day.

What had caused this total transformation in the dynamic between Xu and Patrick? My mistake as a translator had been to assume that the problem between the two men had been one of mutual comprehension. Instead, it seemed their conflict was rooted in a perceived lack of mutual respect, or "face." Patrick's attitude changed when he saw Xu point at his watch because it was only then that the possibility emerged that Xu might be trying to help him save face, rather than humiliate him through an accusation of delinquency. The relationship between these two speakers was thus transformed from hostility to amity, and an "understanding" despite a lack of transparent linguistic communication. In other words, my attempts to intervene by translating each speaker's words may have been entirely unnecessary.

Although the term "face" was promulgated in part through Erving Goffman's sociological writings,<sup>176</sup> the notion of "face" may have been unfamiliar to Western readers when in the late nineteenth century an American missionary included it on his list of *Chinese Characteristics*. In 1889, Arthur Smith, a Protestant missionary who spent nearly twenty years living in a village in Shandong Province, wrote a series of essays for the *North-China Daily News*. These were later published as a book, *Chinese Characteristics*, which would become one of the books about China most widely read by foreigners through the 1920s. Smith begins his list of national features with "face," which he claims will be "a key to the combination lock of many of the most important characteristics of the Chinese."<sup>177</sup> For an anthropological reader, this chapter exemplifies both Smith's analytical method and his moral assessment of Chinese society. Positing emphasis on social appearances as a kind of theatrical dissimulation, Smith claims that Chinese people tend to behave insincerely in the presence of others, as if they were

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<sup>176</sup> See Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

<sup>177</sup> Arthur Henderson Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2002 [1894]), 17.

actors on a stage: “A Chinese thinks in theatrical terms. When roused in self-defense he addresses two or three persons as if they were a multitude. He exclaims: ‘I say this in the presence of You, and You, and You, who are all here present.’”<sup>178</sup>

The invocation of “you who are all here present” is crucial to the example Smith cites above, and it allows us to see how the maintenance of face can only take place through social relations. In a social scientific study of face in contemporary China, Andrew Kipnis interviews a man who says that giving face must involve at least three people: a giver, a receiver, and an observer:

“A person’s *mianzi* [face] may not be directly apprehended: to see Mr. Zhang’s *mianzi*, it is necessary to observe how other people look at Mr. Zhang. ... To give Mr. Zhang a *mianzi* means to allow an unnamed third party to observe a person deferring to Mr. Zhang—to allow Mr. Zhang to look good by demonstrating one’s favorable evaluation of him in front of a third party.”<sup>179</sup>

Kipnis’ interviewee indicates that face only has meaning within a set of social relations. Smith understood this social aspect of face, that it can only be recognized, saved or lost, in the presence of a witness, or an “audience.” Where Smith erred was in his assessment that social interactions in which face is at stake are artificial “performances” concealing a genuine reality. He writes:

“All this, be it clearly understood, has nothing to do with realities. *The question is never of facts, but always of form.* If a fine speech has been delivered at the proper time and in the proper way, the requirement of the play is met. We are not to go behind the scenes, for that would spoil all the plays in the world [emphasis added].”<sup>180</sup>

In condemning face as a kind of public lying, Smith misses something crucial highlighted by Chinese attention to “social surfaces,” to use Kipnis’ formulation: that form may be just as, if not more, important than fact.<sup>181</sup> Although he sounds sarcastic when admitting that “the principles which regulate ‘face’ and its attainment are often wholly beyond the intellectual apprehension of the Occidental, who is constantly forgetting the theatrical element, and wandering off into the irrelevant regions of fact,” Smith is correct to admit that he cannot

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>179</sup> Andrew Kipnis, “Face’: An Adaptable Discourse of Social Surfaces,” *positions* 3.1 (1995), 126. In his analysis of contemporary Chinese discourses involving terms translated into English as “face,” Kipnis distinguishes *lian*, which he says is the part of a person directly visible in social interactions, from *mianzi*, a person’s broader social reputation or influence.

<sup>180</sup> Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*, 16-17.

<sup>181</sup> The concern with form over fact becomes an ethical or moral problem for Smith, because he presumes that “face” emphasizes surface appearances, rather than essential truths. In one of his last chapters, “The Absence of Sincerity,” he laments the “indirection, prevarication, and falsehood” he encounters not only among the villagers he lives with but also even in his reading of Chinese classic texts (*Chinese Characteristics*, 267). He finds that excessive concern with propriety in Chinese society leads to socially condoned lying and the concealment of facts, which for Smith also constitute the truth: “The ordinary speech of the Chinese is so full of insincerity, which yet does not rise to the dignity of falsehood, that it is very difficult to learn the truth in almost any case. In China it is literally true that a fact is the hardest thing in the world to get” (Ibid., 271).

properly understand the significance of *form*, to which the notion of face draws our attention.<sup>182</sup> An emphasis on the form of social interaction allows people to be seen not as individuals who (factually) possess status or prestige, but as interconnected parts of multiple social relations through which esteem is communicated.

“Face” becomes especially relevant in an investigation of Chinese-Angola social relations because, as I have already shown, they tend to entail a combination of enmity and amity. In Smith’s descriptions of village life, conflicts are resolved through a distribution of “face,” rather than power or wealth. He writes that in the event of a quarrel in a Chinese village, whoever is responsible for mediating the conflict and making peace must:

“...take as careful account of the balance of ‘face’ as European statesmen once did of the balance of power. The object in such cases is not the execution of even-handed justice, which, even if theoretically desirable, seldom occurs to an Oriental as a possibility, but such an arrangement as will distribute to all concerned ‘face’ in due proportions.”<sup>183</sup>

Even if Smith’s racist or Orientalist characterizations are unacceptable, he was correct to identify “face” as a key concept in Chinese social life. Moreover, the example drawn from my own fieldwork above would suggest it is applicable beyond exclusively Chinese social contexts. One could easily interpret Patrick’s dramatic gestures as a performance intended to elicit sympathy from both his supervisor and myself, witnesses to his exaggerated display of indignant frustration. Patrick’s insistence on his own sobriety, expressed through a desperate appeal to equality--“I and he all the same!”—was a response to the loss of face that resulted from Xu’s accusation that he had been drinking on the job. As Smith observed, “To be accused of a fault is to ‘lose face,’ and the fact must be denied, no matter what the evidence is, in order to save face.”<sup>184</sup> The situation was resolved as soon as a reason emerged, even if it was not what Xu had intended, that allowed Patrick to “save face.” I played the role of third party observer, without whom face could be given or received, in the interaction between this Angolan driver and his supervisor. It was crucial that Patrick tell *me*, as Xu pointed at his wristwatch, that Xu was preventing him from collecting his salary not because he was drunk, but because he did not want the other Chinese manager to see that they had ended work early that day. Thus, the presence of a third party allowed a conflict to be resolved through the preservation of face.

If we overlook his moralistic evaluation of fact over form, Smith’s treatment of “face” helps us to see how proper form in social interaction facilitates communication even in the absence of a shared language.<sup>185</sup> Smith writes: “Properly to execute acts like these in all the

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>185</sup> Herbert Fingarette’s reading of *The Analects* offers a contrast to Smith’s denigration of “form over fact.” Drawing on J. L. Austin’s theory of performative speech, Fingarette argues that Confucius recognized how properly executed social forms were ceremonial acts with the power to cultivate human virtue: “Men become truly human as their raw impulse is shaped by *li*. And *li* is the fulfillment of human impulse, the civilized expression of it—not a formalistic dehumanization. *Li* is the specifically humanizing form of the dynamic relation of man-to-man” (Fingarette, *Confucius: the*

complex relations of life, is to have ‘face.’ To fail of them, to ignore them, to be thwarted in the performance of them, this is to ‘lose face.’”<sup>186</sup> The dispute between Patrick and Xu shows that a shared language is not necessary in order to successfully enact such a performance. In what follows, I would like to look more closely at the role of the professional interpreter in interactions between monolingual Chinese and Portuguese-speakers. If, as I have tried to suggest, face is often at stake in such interactions, the translator would not only be responsible for the technical procedure of transposing words from one language into another, but would also have to serve as a mediator of face.

### The Two-Faced Translator

One afternoon, as I worked out of the office at Shopping ChinAngola, Director Fu asked me to make a phone call for him to an Angolan man named Malaquias. The man had previously worked as a supervisor (*fiscalizador*) during construction of The Media Center, and recently he had approached Fu with another potential contract, a road-building project in Uíge Province. Although Northwest Construction had no experience constructing roads themselves, they knew other Chinese companies with the technical capacity to do so. Director Fu could introduce some of his friends to Malaquias, who would also benefit if they won the bid. Fu did not reveal these layers of subcontracting in his request to me, however. He simply told me to ask the man to come to the store: “We need to know the situation of the roads project that he introduced to us.” The “we” in this sentence served as a blanket term to cover the relationship between Northwest Construction and the private company that belonged to Fu’s friend.

Malaquias arrived later that afternoon, accompanied by two other men who waited for him outside the office. He was older, perhaps in his 60s, and he presented himself in a very dignified manner, holding his head up high and speaking in an authoritative tone. Everything about him gave me the impression that he was a serious, respectable figure of authority, except that I noticed he was wearing Velcro sandals which did not quite match his dress pants and shirt. His feet were swollen and yellowish, and later in the conversation he mentioned, with some pride, that he suffered from the same disease as Chairman Guo, diabetes. Fu explained that Malaquias had met the Chairman of Northwest Construction when the company had arranged for him make a month-long visit to China the previous year, on the pretense of inspecting construction materials for The Media Center, but also to shop and be entertained. Malaquias had studied in the Soviet Union for many years; he showed me photos of his Polish wife and his two daughters. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” he said proudly.

Director Fu had called an acquaintance of his, the owner of a private construction firm, to send over two of his employees, and a few minutes after Malaquias had arrived, a Chinese

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*Secular as Sacred* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1972), 7). In his study of post-reform China, Borge Bakken makes a more Durkheimian point about the positive aspects of form: “Politeness and decorum must not be seen as mere forms without purpose, nor as moral ends in themselves; there is more reason to regard them as instrumental acts of order maintenance, and the formalized action also gives a feeling of social security” (Bakken, *The Exemplary Society* (Oxford University Press: 2000), 418).

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

man and woman stepped into the office. The woman, officially a translator for the company, was in her early twenties and later told me she had only graduated from college the previous year; this was her first job. She had majored in Portuguese but said she did not know why; she had chosen it randomly and had not had a chance to study abroad. The man was a few years older, an engineer for the company. The two greeted Director Fu pertly, then shook hands with Malaquias. Producing a printout of the tender announcement, Malaquias proceeded to go through a list of official bidding requirements. He explained that the company would need to provide copies of all their licenses, a formal proposal, and a guarantee from their bank, among other things. He said the governor of Uíge was a friend of his; therefore, it was certain that “we” would get the contract. However, he would still need to present all the correct documents, and as quickly as possible. I translated. In response, speaking on behalf of his friends, Director Fu told Malaquias not to worry; this company had submitted public tenders before and was familiar with the process.

The employees of the road building company presented to Malaquias two laminated and bound booklets: one contained all of the company’s official documents, while the other was a portfolio of their previous work. Malaquias flipped through them, nodding his head. He seemed satisfied, even impressed by their professionalism. Then he asked a doubtful, perhaps accusatory, question: “But are the roads you’ve built *good*?” I don’t want those kinds of ‘disposable’ roads. We need roads with quality. Because you know there are some Chinese companies here that build roads and after two months they fall apart.” He turned to me: “I wanted to give this project to Fu because I know his company his good. But I don’t know *this* company at all.”

This was not the first time I had heard of Chinese roads falling apart; the road just outside Shopping ChinAngola had crumbled to pieces only a few months later, during the annual heavy rains, and several years earlier, the cracking walls of the Luanda General Hospital had been scandalized in Angolan and international media as a symbol of shoddy Chinese construction.<sup>187</sup> Whether Malaquias was genuinely concerned with the quality of construction or not, however, the poor reputation of Chinese constructors here served as a good negotiation tactic: it made him appear tougher, not so willing to give in to a deal that had already been arranged for him. On the other hand, he may have offended his potential partners; though this was a risk he seemed willing to take.

As the young female translator murmured that her company’s work was of high quality, Malaquias continued to talk to me, even though she could understand: “Tell them I have projects in Malanje, in Lunda Norte and Lunda Sul,” he said, listing names of Angolan provinces, “I can get the projects for you, but you will have to give me something as well.” He turned to the translator now, “Do you understand?”

She nodded, her face expressionless: “Yes, *comissão* [commission].” She then whispered in Chinese to her colleague: “Do you think this guy’s reliable?”

Malaquias continued to flip through the company’s portfolio, asking further questions that appeared designed to test his potential partners: “Do all your construction materials come

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<sup>187</sup> “Safety fears for a Chinese built hospital in Angola,” *BBC World Service* July 7, 2010, accessed February 28, 2017, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/2010/07/100707\\_angolahospital.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/2010/07/100707_angolahospital.shtml).

from China?” The Chinese engineer answered affirmatively, but Malaquias turned another page and said, “No!” as if to catch them in a lie, “This PVC is from Portugal and you purchased it in Angola. I know these things because I am also an engineer of civil construction.” He went on to discuss labor issues: “Do you hire Angolan workers? You can’t only work with Chinese anymore; you have to hire Angolans! Now,” he warned, “When you hire Angolan workers, you have to treat them well. If you don’t give them food, they’re going to complain. They’re going to say: the Chinese don’t feed us; they are murderers!” He smirked a little, looking at me for complicity in his joke. The allegations of Angolan worker abuse by Chinese companies, disseminated as serious social criticism in other circles, were for him ammunition in lucrative dealings with Chinese business partners—threats he could make, on ostensibly ethical grounds. It was unclear whether he was genuinely concerned about the treatment of Angolan workers, since he framed his comments in a teasing tone. Regardless, the road company representatives did not laugh.

Just as abruptly as he had begun his questioning, Malaquias shifted to discuss some logistical issues. The road company would need to provide a formal bid for the project, and he would travel to the provincial capital to submit it for them.

“Are you sure we’ll get the project?” The translator expressed her doubt to Malaquias directly.

“I’m sure!” he responded emphatically, repeating that he was friends with the Governor, “but we still need to have all the documents in order.”

At this point, Director Fu intervened with a joke: “If he’s friends with the governor,” he said to me in Chinese, as I translated for Malaquias, “can’t he manipulate the process a little more? Why doesn’t he arrange some more false bids from other companies, to make it seem more realistic? We could submit one from Northwest Construction. That’s how we usually do it in China, anyway.” Everyone laughed. He had teased Malaquias by openly referencing the dishonest nature of his work, but included himself and the Chinese road company as the butt of his joke by implying that in China they would do the same.

Once the laughter had subsided, Malaquias resumed a serious tone as he spoke with the translator. He said he would need to stay in Uíge for five days, and he would be bringing two other men with him: “I never travel alone, for safety reasons.” The three of them would have to stay in a hotel every night, and eat out, and add fuel to their car, and fix the car in case it broke down. “Who is going to pay for all that?” he asked, then he told the translator he would need 500,000 kwanzas (\$5000 dollars) to cover his costs for the trip. Beyond this, he would need another 400,000 kwanzas to cover the filing fees for submitting the company’s bid. “But I will pick it up just before I leave,” he said, “I don’t like to hold on to a lot of other people’s money.” Fu later told me that Malaquias had been shot in the leg once while withdrawing money at the bank with another Chinese business partner; ever since then he had been afraid of carrying cash.

The translator looked at her colleague with an expression of shock; she thought he was asking for a lot of money. In Chinese she said, “How can black people be like this?” She asked Director Fu whether he knew Malaquias well, but instead of answering her question, Fu replied that she could tell him she would pay him later, when she gives him her company’s proposal; before then she could discuss with her boss how much they wanted to give him.

Meanwhile, Malaquias complained to me, “This is the problem with working with the Chinese. They distrust! I don’t have a bad heart!”

“*Depois, depois* [later, later]” came the answer from the translator, as she and her colleague stood up. They thanked Director Fu, said goodbye to me, and left.

Malaquias likewise thanked Director Fu and prepared to leave, but as I opened the door for him, he said playfully, “Aren’t you going to accompany me?” I walked the few steps with him to his car, where the two men who had come with him were waiting. He climbed into the vehicle. “Later we will talk more, yeah? *Estamos juntos.*” His departing words were an MPLA slogan from the anticolonial struggle, still frequently used in Angola when greeting or leaving friends, as if it were a reminder: “We’re together.”<sup>188</sup>

In “A Further Note on Joking Relationships,” published several years after his first piece on the subject, Radcliffe-Brown synthesizes his theory and elaborates further by means of the concept of “friendship,” which he contrasts against social relations of either alliance or solidarity.<sup>189</sup> In his typology, “alliance” describes a relationship between two groups that would unite and cooperate in the case of war against a third group. Relations of “solidarity,” on the other hand, are those between people whose ties to one another are more or less fixed, such as brothers or members of a political community who share rights and obligations.<sup>190</sup> Like relations in which two people or groups are obligated to exchange gifts with each other, joking relationships constitute one kind of a third class of relation: friendship. The specificity of the joking relationship lies in that it permits insults to be exchanged; because there is an obligation not to take offense, it is a relationship which, “by means of sham conflicts, avoids real ones.”<sup>191</sup> Friendship, in Radcliffe-Brown’s rendering, refers to relations “in which the separateness of the groups is emphasized, but open conflict between the groups or the members on the two sides is avoided by establishing a relation in which they may insult each other without giving or taking offense.”<sup>192</sup> It is significant that two groups in a relationship of this kind are opposed to one another; the joking is a kind of regulatory mechanism that moderates potential antagonism between them. This idea of “socially controlled and regulated antagonism” is one I will return to in the next chapter, which deals explicitly with regulation in Chinese-Angolan business partnerships.<sup>193</sup>

For the moment, it is crucial to recognize that in a joking relationship something is *exchanged*. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Levi-Strauss describes a scene of strangers

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<sup>188</sup> See Marcelo Bittencourt, *Estamos juntos!: o MPLA e a luta anticolonial (1961-1974)* (Luanda: Kilombelombe, 2008).

<sup>189</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “A Further Note on Joking Relationships,” *Africa: Journal of the International Africa Institute* 19.2 (1949): 133-140.

<sup>190</sup> Radcliffe-Brown and other structural-functionalists can be easily criticized for failing to take account of the porousness and flexibility of social boundaries, painting a picture that is perhaps overly mechanistic or bounded. Still, his analysis remains enlightening for the differences it presents between different kinds of social relations.

<sup>191</sup> “A Further Note,” 134.

<sup>192</sup> “A Further Note,” 137.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

who temporarily come together while sharing a communal table at a cheap restaurant in France. There is a tension in such a situation, as the usual reserve or even hostility between strangers persists, while at the same time the people eating together are forced into a state of spatial and social intimacy for a short period of time:

“An almost imperceptible anxiety is likely to arise in the minds of these table-companions with the prospect of trifling disagreements that the meeting might produce. When social distance is maintained, even if it is not accompanied by any sign of disdain, insolence or aggression, it is in itself a matter of sufferance in that any social contact entails an appeal, an appeal which is a hope for response.”<sup>194</sup>

As Levi-Strauss explains, a simple exchange of wine provides the resolution to this particular situation of mutual uncertainty. Once a person at the table has offered his neighbor a glass of wine, the tension is broken, and, according to unspoken rules of cordiality and grace, the neighbor must return the gesture, unless he wishes to insult. Moreover, the exchange of wine facilitates the exchange of words in the form of a conversation: “In this way a whole range of trivial social ties are established by a series of alternating oscillations, in which offering gives one a right, and receiving makes one obligated, and always beyond what has been given or accepted.”<sup>195</sup> Levi-Strauss thus reiterates the Maussian principle of reciprocity.

The above example of attempted sociality between strangers shows how reciprocity must be established in order for relations not to deteriorate into hostility. We might take it as a microscopic case of the broader situation of two groups coming into contact and trying to figure out how to get along. In this chapter, I have tried to show how there is not a clear asymmetric power relation of domination and subordination between Chinese and Angolans. By focusing on joking as a central aspect of Chinese-Angolan social relations, I have indicated the ambivalence with which various individual Angolans engage with the Chinese group I happened to work with. The figure of the translator and the processes of translation at work here highlight the qualities of Chinese-Angolan relations that combine distance and proximity, attachment and detachment, hostility and friendship. Moreover, this chapter makes clear that successful translations involve not only conversions from one language into another, but also the subtle management of social relations: to maintain face, participate in jokes, to prevent conflict from erupting in this new, uncertain configuration.

Later that evening, as we took our nightly after-dinner walk with the other Chinese employees, Director Fu criticized the performance of the young female translator from the road company in our conversation with Malaquias. “That translator was no good,” he complained, “There’s something wrong with her brain! You have to make people *like* talking to you, don’t you, Mei-ting?” I agreed that she and her colleague had been perfectly polite, but they had maintained a social distance from Malaquias in part through their failure to laugh at any of his jokes; the way they responded to Director Fu provided a clear contrast. If joking and not taking offence are ways of “playing the social game”; to not joke, in turn,

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<sup>194</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Beacon Press, 1969 [1949]), 59.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

would be to reject social relations entirely.<sup>196</sup> This is where the role of the translator became important: an effective translator could not only convert words from one language into another; she should be able to show that she understands the intention of a speaker when he is making a joke. If she wished for herself or the party she represented to enter into a social relationships of friendliness with another party, she should have been able to take a joke. This would mean both accepting the offering, and returning it with an appropriate response of laughter. Although it was understandable that she would be wary of a stranger, Director Fu implied that the translator should have made him feel otherwise. Even if he did turn out to be “unreliable,” there was no reason to threaten the budding partnership between Malaquias and her company by acting unfriendly, or making him lose face. One needed to give an illusion of friendliness, even if the trust was not substantially there yet, or perhaps precisely *because* it was not.

At the same time, Director Fu sympathized with the suspicions of the road company employees; her questions about Malaquias’ “reliability.” Fu had known Malaquias for a few years, since he had formerly been employed by The Media Center while it was being built, to supervise construction. He said that Malaquias had helped Northwest Construction in many ways, but he worried about some of his “bad habits.” “If I give him money for something,” Fu said, “I’m afraid he might go to a party, get drunk, and spend it all right away instead of using it for what it was intended.” He spoke about other Angolans he had known with similar “habits”—employees of the Company who had taken out loans from their Chinese employers, only to run away with the money or stop paying it back. “So, when we are working with Angolans,” Fu concluded, “We are always a little bit doubtful of how much we can trust them.”

As usual, while we were walking, we passed by several Angolan guards employed by The Media Center. Each of them, when they saw Director Fu, recognized him immediately and shouted an excited, “Mister Fu!” Some of them gave enthusiastic thumbs up. One guard, jogging in the opposite direction to which we were walking, shouted “Mister Fu!” every time he passed us. Another, sitting outside the surveillance room where he worked, called after us, “Mister Fu! *Tem kwanza?* [lit: Have kwanza?]”

Without looking back at him, Fu smiled and shouted sassily, “*Tem muito!* [lit: Have many!]”

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<sup>196</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships,” 198.

## Chapter 4

### When the Law is Unreasonable: The Politics of Regulation

On my second day of work at the Northwest Construction Trade Department, I showed up two hours late. The streets of Luanda were still unfamiliar to me, and my attempt to drive a new route from the city center to a suburb 20 kilometers away got me caught in a seemingly endless traffic jam. Not sure whether to submit, and sit still, waiting for movement that might not begin for hours, or to take a chance on some dusty side roads that wound through unmapped settlements, I impulsively chose the latter, and promptly got lost, pulling over to the side of an alley to plead with a passerby for guidance. The young man chuckled as I asked for directions. “Trying to escape the *engarraamento* [lit: bottleneck], are you?” He smiled at my innocent, futile attempt. The *engarraamento*, he seemed to imply, would not let me go so easily.

When I finally walked through the doors of Northwest Construction’s store at Shopping ChinAngola, I was so busy wiping dirt and sweat from my face that I initially failed to notice three Angolan men sitting at a table in the showroom. “Hey, what are these guys doing?” Ma Hui, the accountant, nudged me and asked with a curious smile. They were all dressed in sharp business attire, one with a badge from the ChinAngola administration around his neck. The other two were speaking with Lena, the Angolan salesgirl, as one of them filled out a form at the top of which was written *Auto de Vistoria*, Record of Inspection.

Ma Hui and I approached the men, and he stood in a formal yet unimposing position, with his hands held behind his back, as I translated for him. The two men who had been speaking with Lena said they were from the Ministry of Commerce. In their inspection, they had found a major problem with the store. Motorcycles could not be sold alongside household appliances and building materials, they explained, as one of them pulled out a book of codes for various commercial classes to show me that these three things belonged to different categories.

When he welcomed me to conduct research with his company, Director Fu had explicitly asked me to familiarize myself with Angolan law and share any relevant information with his Trade Department. Keeping this duty in mind, I asked the men to show me where it was written that a store could only sell one class of product. They seemed offended by this question, and again pointed to the classifications as proof. By now, a small crowd of customers, Angolan and Chinese, had gathered around, and Li Jun, who had been quietly standing in the background, asked us to move into his office to speak. As we sat down, one of the young men from the Ministry said, “To make it simple, I will just ask you to remove the motorcycles. We can count the construction materials in the same class as the air conditioners. Motorcycles are just *too* different.” The man from the ChinAngola administration chimed in, “In *Europe* you wouldn’t find stores selling such vastly different products all in the same place!” They ended the conversation by saying they would give us 30 days to either remove the motorcycles or construct a dividing wall. If we did not comply, they had the authority to both fine and close the shop.

Once the men were gone, I asked Ma Hui what he thought we should do. In contrast to my nervous agitation, he seemed uninterested in the question, even bored by it: “We just have to do as they say,” he sighed, “since we are working in their country.”

“But how can we listen to them,” I protested, “when they seem to misunderstand their own law? Either that or they choose to read it flexibly.” The law, I naively assumed, should be the ultimate authority in such a situation, not a group of self-proclaimed inspectors, whose credentials could not be verified, and whose interpretation of the written legal code was questionable.

Ma smiled, “That sounds a little like Chinese companies. *People* have the final say (*ren shuole suan*). That doesn’t mean there are no rules at all, but ultimately it’s the people involved who make the decisions.”

It was unclear whether, by invoking this general principle, Ma Hui meant to say that we should simply obey the commands of these inspectors or wait for instructions from someone else. Still focused on what practical measures might need to be taken, I went to Li Jun, the store manager, to ask what he was going to do. “Those people are not our customers; they came here to do their own business,” he summarized angrily, “And actually, we could have resolved everything by giving each of them a tip (*xiaofei*), but I just didn’t want to.”

Thus I was initiated into the Company’s dealings with representatives of Angolan legal authority. During my fieldwork, the question of who should regulate Chinese business activities in Angola, and how, was one of great urgency for those who might be alarmed by the purportedly chaotic or corrupt way in which Chinese entrepreneurs had spread across the country.<sup>197</sup> It was also a matter of curiosity for distanced observers who wondered about the respective reaches of the Chinese and Angolan states. As indicated in the above example, however, for Chinese expatriates working in Angola, the problem of regulation was not only about how to conduct business according to local laws, but also about how to avoid exploitation by those who might appropriate the authority of the law. Ironically, Chinese managers and entrepreneurs, posited as a class of ‘vampires’ in popular criticisms, often found themselves vulnerable to certain kinds of predation both because they may have lacked familiarity with the Portuguese language or local institutions and because they were thought to possess vast amounts of wealth. A major concern for them was how, and with whom, to forge appropriate alliances that would provide support when the law was absent, unclear, or ineffective.

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<sup>197</sup> In a study of Angolan perceptions of China based on 71 interviews conducted in 2013 in three Angolan cities, respondents cited “lack of control over Chinese activities in Angola,” including Chinese employers’ failure to comply with labor laws, as a major negative aspect of Chinese investment: “Although most of the respondents agreed that the investments should be continued, a significant number of them suggested that this process must be controlled by Angolans, that conditions should be redefined and some (5 of them) said that after finishing ongoing projects, the Chinese should withdraw from Angola” (Jaroslaw Jura, Kaja Kaluzynska, and Paulo de Carvalho, *Events over Endeavors: Image of the Chinese in Zambia and Angola* (Jagiellonian University Press, 2015), 140).

In Luanda at the time of my fieldwork, it was not a secret that many government employees leveraged the privileges of their office to engage in clandestine economic transactions for personal gain. Angolan citizens sometimes disparagingly referred to such activities as *bisno*, derived from the English word “business.” For example, a news article from 2006 described how people trying to obtain identity cards in Luanda were paying up to three times the official fee to get their documents on the black market. One man complained, “You stay here, for a long time after handing in the documents, and even then they do not serve you. There is no other solution except to do *bisno* (business).”<sup>198</sup> Only those who could provide solutions to seemingly unsolvable procedural problems were in a position to gain from *bisno*, whether they worked for the government themselves or were closely connected to someone who did. However, as the example above implies, the situation may have been purposely arranged to make *bisno* the exclusive option. Such arrangements were artfully described in a saying I often heard in Luanda, “*Criam dificuldades para vender facilidades*”—they create problems in order to sell solutions, or, they create difficulty in order to sell ease.

Like the roads of Luanda, which at certain points of the day were invariably jammed for miles with vehicles brought to a standstill, bureaucratic processes in Angola were often blocked or congested to the point where it was hard to see a way out or through. In this context, to have *facilidades* meant having access to channels of ease. Such access, despite its illegality, was both normal and desirable. It offered not only social mobility, but also, fundamentally, a strategy for survival and a means for fulfilling the obligations of providing for one’s kin. An Angolan high school administrator who lamented his own lack of “facilities,” told me that *facilidades* were “the only way to have secure living conditions in Angola.” Even someone with a relatively stable white-collar job, he explained, could barely meet the costs of basic necessities like medical care or housing, without some kind of access that would either decrease costs or increase income. He went so far as to say that he was reluctant to have children because he was afraid the costs of raising them would drive him to participate in corruption. He already could barely afford the contributions to school fees and medical bills of extended family members for which he was responsible. When considering practices frequently glossed as “corruption,” it would therefore be important to remember the widespread social expectation in Angola that wealth should not be enjoyed by an individual alone, but shared among his dependents.

Numerous social scientists of Africa have demonstrated that illegal activity is not necessarily inimical to state regulation, as would ordinarily be assumed. Mariane Ferme provides an overview of discussions around illegality and the African state in contemporary social science, as well as giving ethnographic examples of how illegal practices among Sierra Leoneans living outside their national territory could be productive of a state effect for Sierra

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<sup>198</sup> Rádio Ecclesia, “Cidadãos pagam 4 a 5 mil Kz para tratar do bilhete de identidade em Luanda” (Citizens pay 4 to 5 thousand kwanzas [\$40-50 USD] to process identity cards in Luanda), *Angonotícias*, January 14, 2006, accessed August 28, 2015, <http://www.angonoticias.com/Artigos/item/7808/cidadaos-pagam-4-a-5-mil-kz-para-tratar-do-bilhete-de-identidade-em-luanda>.

Leone.<sup>199</sup> Janet Roitman has also written about the perceived legitimacy of illegal activities among traders in the Chad Basin, while Bayart et al. argued that many African states actively facilitate criminal activity.<sup>200</sup> In their Introduction to *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Jean and John Comaroff situate a rise in criminal violence, and its connection to modes of legal ordering, within “neoliberal mechanisms of deregulation and new modes of mediating human transactions” that arose at the end of the Cold War.<sup>201</sup> They argue that the unleashing of market principles and the unfettered pursuit of profit contributed to an intensification of criminal activity, and not in a way that is necessarily inimical to the authority of the state. Indeed, as my discussion below will also show, “government” can become less a set of bureaucratic institutions and more “a licensing-and-franchising authority” that “provides fresh opportunities ...for capitalizing both on the assets of the state and its imprimatur.”<sup>202</sup> Moreover, the ambiguous application of the law, or the establishment of zones of uncertain legal jurisdiction can also prove to be sources of economic sustenance.

Although they did not employ local terms like *bisno* or *facilidades*, Chinese managers and entrepreneurs in Angola recognized the systematicity of the phenomenon in which they participated.<sup>203</sup> Given the segmentary nature of Chinese business networks, which operated through multiple layers of contracting and subcontracting, the sharing of visas and permits, and the cementing of affinities through social gatherings like banquets and karaoke singing, it may have been easy for someone like Li Jun or Director Fu to see that working through personal channels was the most effective, perhaps even the only possible way to do business in Angola. Rather than assume that state institutions should perform the function of regulation, therefore, I ask in this chapter how regulation might have been effected by other means. Some contemporary anthropologists have tried to show how interpersonal interactions, between

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<sup>199</sup> Ferme, “Deterritorialized Citizenship and the Resonances of the Sierra Leonean State,” in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, eds. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004): 81-115.

<sup>200</sup> See Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton University Press, 2004) and Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Béatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>201</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, “Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction,” in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Jean and John Comaroff, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>202</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, “Law and Disorder in the Postcolony,” 16-17. The authors make the important point that the criminality which they and others identify as co-constitutive of state authority in “the postcolony” must be understood in relation to the way African economies are situated within global market processes.

<sup>203</sup> *Bisno* and *facilidades* each emphasized different aspects of a broader phenomenon. Where *bisno* connoted illicit, even criminal behavior by persons in certain strategic or powerful positions, *facilidades* were desired by those excluded from ‘the system’ and perhaps even a way to avoid exploitation from *bisno*. Having *facilidades* did not mean that fees were never exchanged for favors, but it did mean that the fee might be lower, and, ideally, that the channel would remain open in case of future need. Whereas *bisno* indicated a one-time transaction, *facilidades* depended on long-term relations that could be relied on as resources in times of need.

bureaucrats and ordinary citizens, for instance, can reveal the workings of state power.<sup>204</sup> My interest here is not in social relations as a means of encountering ‘the state,’ per se, but as mechanisms of regulation that may or may not invoke state authority. Although I begin with a discussion of Angolan law, therefore, my primary aim in this chapter is to outline the form of politics that predominates in Chinese–Angolan relations. First, an additional example might illustrate how Chinese managers at Northwest Construction related to Angolan law.

### An Unreasonable Request

A few weeks after the inspection incident, Afonso and I were chatting as we put up Christmas decorations in the store. He had been working for Northwest Construction for two years, longer than any of the other Angolan employees at the store, and at 32 years of age he was also the oldest. He told me he had two teenage daughters, one through an extramarital affair: “At the time I was drinking a lot, and when I drank, I liked to find women.” His wife eventually forgave him, and he quit drinking. “Now I only go to church and home, then back to church, and back home. But of course since I started working at Northwest Construction I haven’t had as much time to go to church because I have to work on Sundays.” Technically, the Chinese managers at the Shopping ChinAngola store gave their Angolan employees the option of taking Saturdays and Sundays off, but also motivated them by paying double for work on weekends, the busiest days for the store. Perhaps more importantly, there was an implicit threat that any Angolan employee who did not work seven days a week, like their Chinese managers did, could be replaced by someone who would be willing to keep up with the unrelenting schedule. Thus, although they were officially permitted to take weekends off, the norm, enforced by managers’ expectations, was that they would work every day. Afonso explained, “Lena and I tried to work something out where we would take turns going to church on Sundays, and make sure one of us would be in the store, but they,” he referred to the Chinese managers, “didn’t agree to it.”

Although he never asked me outright to reason with the Chinese managers on his behalf, Afonso’s subtle complaints about the conditions of his work continued to creep into our conversation. When I told him I was impressed by how much everyone at Northwest Construction worked, he agreed, saying it was necessary to work hard, but then added that sometimes he felt he was not compensated properly. For example, the Company did not provide a *Décimo Terceiro*, a “thirteenth month” of pay. “In Angola,” he explained, “most companies pay employees double salary for the month of December so that they’ll have more money to spend during the holidays. We Angolans usually have a lot of family visiting during the Christmas festivities, and we must buy a lot of things—cake, juice, wine...” He counted on his fingers all of the necessary feasting items. “Of course, many people spend too much and then end up suffering in January. But this is the way things are done in Angola!” He chuckled to himself.

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<sup>204</sup> See Akhil Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries: the Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State,” in Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, eds., *The Anthropology of the State* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 211–242.

Later that day, I verified what Afonso had said and found that indeed, the obligatory payment of year-end bonuses was clearly written into Angolan labor law.<sup>205</sup> When he had welcomed me to conduct research with Northwest Construction, Director Fu had requested that, should I become familiar with any pertinent Angolan legal regulations over the course of my research, I share that information with the Company. Knowledge of the law, he said, would allow Northwest Construction to avoid the expensive and dubious demands of police, inspectors, or intermediaries on whom they relied to complete administrative tasks. The goal was to become more “regular” (*zhenggui*), both in terms of the Company’s internal coherence and its adherence to official Angolan bureaucratic procedures. Given Director Fu’s stated desires, as well as the broader context of Chinese business in Angola having a poor reputation for legal compliance, I thought Li Jun would appreciate my discovery that the Company had been inadvertently breaking the law. However, when I approached him to share what I had learned, I was immediately rebuffed. “At the moment you needn’t concern yourself with these matters. First find out how we can get our visas changed so that they are under our company’s name, instead of the general contractor’s,” said Li, referring to another long-term task I had been assigned.<sup>206</sup> I reminded him that it was already December, the month in which the Christmas subsidy was supposed to be paid. He snapped back: “That is *not reasonable (bu heli)*! They wouldn’t come to *us* to ask for money, so *you* do not need to worry about it either.”

How could a rising manager of the Company, whose boss had specifically asked me to research Angolan legal regulations, now tell me that what was codified in law was unreasonable? Among the Chinese managers at Northwest Construction, Afonso did have a reputation for missing work and then making up excuses, but I had verified his claim by looking at the regulations myself, therefore it could not have been that Li simply thought Afonso was lying. The notion of a year-end bonus should not have been inconceivable to Li Jun or other Chinese employees of the Company either, since this was also relatively common practice in China at the time of my fieldwork.<sup>207</sup> What kind of reason was missing then?

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<sup>205</sup> The 1981 “General Labor Law” states in Article 165 that all workers have a minimum right to two bonuses for every year of work: one holiday bonus, calculated at 50% of the employees “base salary” (monthly salary), plus one Christmas subsidy, also 50% of base salary. The payment of these two subsidies, obligatory for employers in Angola according to the law, amounted to an additional month’s salary, or what is referred to colloquially as a thirteenth month bonus. According to the legal code, even workers who had not been employed for one year were entitled to year-end subsidies in proportion to the duration of their employment. See Article 165° (Gratificações anuais), *Lei Geral do Trabalho de Angola*, accessed July 23, 2014, <http://www.cidadao.gov.ao/VerLegislacao.aspx?id=376>. The practice of paying an extra month’s salary in December is not exclusive to the Angolan context.

<sup>206</sup> The larger Chinese companies that subcontracted Northwest Construction to work on their projects also facilitated procurement of visas for their employees. Thus, during the time of my fieldwork, no Northwest Construction employees held an Angolan work visa in the name of Northwest Construction. This was a problem for the Company as they sought to expand operations beyond subcontracts with their original Chinese partners.

<sup>207</sup> A 2010 blog post on Chinese business law warned foreign employers in China about this convention: “...In many parts of China, it is customary to pay the salary on a 13 month basis, with the final month paid just prior to the Chinese New Year. This is completely optional, but it is important to state clearly whether or not you will be using this approach. Many employees just expect this ‘New

Li Jun's final statement intrigued me. He implied that Afonso, along with the other Angolan employees, might speak to *me* about financial issues like their salaries or subsidies, but they would not bring up such demands with their Chinese managers. I understood that I may have appeared more approachable or sympathetic to Afonso than his Chinese managers for a variety of reasons related to gender, linguistic proficiency, or demeanor. I was an outsider who could listen to Afonso's concerns without preconceptions about his character, but I also maintained close enough social relations with the Chinese managers that I could communicate with them freely and perhaps more convincingly about issues the Angolan employees may have been intimidated to bring up. Li Jun was in part reminding me to know my place and mind my own business. But in asserting that "they wouldn't come to use to ask for money," he was also telling me that his relationship with his Angolan employees constrained what kind of speech and action was possible. According to this line of thinking, the reasonableness of demands would be determined by the relationship between employer and employee, not by appeals to abstract principles or codified laws.

In *The Nuer*, Evans-Pritchard already suggested an alternative to institutional or state-centered understandings of the law. "Law" for the Nuer, a "stateless society," would be best understood as a moral obligation to settle conflicts between men according to practices that have been standardized through convention: "If a man commits an offence against a fellow tribesman he places himself and his kin in a legal position towards this man and his kin, and the hostile relations that ensue can be broken down by payment of cattle."<sup>208</sup> However, the law is not uniformly applicable, and what Evans-Pritchard calls "structural distance," or the distance between persons who occupy certain positions in relation to each other in a social structure, determines legal jurisdiction. Thus, if a person commits a crime against a member of his village, the elders of the village, who would be closely tied to both parties through kinship, can intervene to mediate an agreement and oversee payment of compensation. Their authority would be respected and all members of the village would, in theory, recognize that the settlement serves the best interests of the group. However, a dispute between members of two different villages would less easily be resolved, and conflict between two tribes would likely be settled only through physical violence. The bonds of kinship and conviviality between members of a clearly defined group co-residing within a delimited territory are a precondition for the efficacy of Nuer law: "Law operates weakly outside a very limited radius and nowhere very effectively. The lack of social control to which we have often referred is thus shown in the weakness of law, and the structural interrelations of tribal segments are seen in the relativity of law, for Nuer law is relative like the structure itself."<sup>209</sup> Evans-Pritchard's emphasis on structural relativity is in line with his broader project, to demonstrate that the political system that governs interdependent territorial groups is characterized by balanced antagonisms between different segments: thus, "a man can be a member of a group and yet

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Year's Bonus' and a failure to pay it (if expected) can cause many problems." Dan Harris, "China Employment Contracts. Ten Things to Consider," *China Law Blog*, April 21, 2010, accessed July 23, 2014, [http://www.chinalawblog.com/2010/04/china\\_employment\\_contracts\\_ten.html](http://www.chinalawblog.com/2010/04/china_employment_contracts_ten.html).

<sup>208</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 122.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

not a member of it.”<sup>210</sup> This principle will become important in my discussion of hostility in a Chinese-Angolan partnership below.

Relativity in both social structure and “legal” regulation has also been addressed in another structural-functionalist text of the mid-twentieth century, Fei Xiaotong’s study of rural Chinese society, *From the Soil*.<sup>211</sup> Fei uses the term “differentiation,” to stress the hierarchical aspect of traditional Chinese social relations.<sup>212</sup> Just as Evans-Pritchard defines “law” as shared moral obligation, Fei elaborates a discussion of “morality,” which he defines as “society’s sanction on individual behavior,” or that which “makes people conform to established social norms.”<sup>213</sup> Fei contrasts two modes of social organization: the “associational mode,” typical of Western societies and founded on a notion of individual equality, and the “differential mode” of rural China. Unlike in the West, where each individual deserves equal treatment within an association of which she is a member (just as each Christian receives love equally from an all-encompassing God), in traditional China, people are expected to be treated differently depending on their social position in relation to one another. In this model, there is no overarching moral principle that can govern each person in the same way. Rather, “A society with a differential mode of association is composed of webs woven out of countless personal relationships. To each knot in these webs is attached a specific ethical principle.”<sup>214</sup> Moreover, the moral or ethical principles that would govern personal relations are flexible; they change depending on the nature of the social relation in question:

“The degree to which Chinese ethics and laws expand and contract depend on a particular context and how one fits into that context. I have heard quite a few friends denounce corruption, but when their own fathers stole from the public, they not only did not denounce them but even covered up the theft. Moreover, some went so far as to ask their fathers for some of the money made off the graft, even while denouncing corruption in others. ...In a society characterized by a differential mode of association, this kind of thinking is not contradictory.”<sup>215</sup>

One could interpret Li Jun’s statement above as an appeal to the morality of Fei’s differential mode, one based on ethical principles specific to the relationships between people differently situated within a hierarchy. However, in Fei’s analysis of rural Chinese society, such principles

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>211</sup> Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: the Foundations of Chinese Society* (University of California Press, 1992 [1947]).

<sup>212</sup> He finds the basis of this emphasis on differentiation in the Confucian tradition: “In a society based on a Western organizational mode of association, people in the same organizations apply universal moral principles to themselves and so regard each other as equals. This kind of thinking, however, is exactly what Mencius most opposed. He said, ‘That things are unequal is part of their nature.... If you reduce them to the same level, it will only bring confusion to the empire.’ Motzu’s idea about universal love is exactly opposite to the Confucian idea of differential human relationships. It is for this reason that Mencius accused Motzu of being both fatherless and rulerless” (*From the Soil*, 79).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 79.

derive their power from the force of tradition. Fei argues that abstract, codified law is unnecessary in rural China because social order is maintained through rituals, “publicly recognized behavioral norms,” and the tradition from which they are thought to derive has authority because it is recognized as “accumulated social experience.”<sup>216</sup> In such a system, each person can determine their social position in relation to others, and should be able to appeal to tradition to determine the correct ritual behavior. Fei readily admits that this “rule of ritual” is particular to rural, traditional China: “A society governed by rituals cannot easily appear in an era of rapid changes.”<sup>217</sup> Perhaps it is even less likely to appear in the meeting of multiple traditions or ethical regimes that characterizes Chinese-Angolan relations.

Moreover, both Evans-Pritchard and Fei Xiaotong, influenced by Durkheimian sociology, emphasize that a “force” must be present if social order is to be maintained. To quote from Fei, “The difference between ruling by people and ruling by laws does not lie in the words *people* and *law* but, rather, in the force used to maintain order and in the nature of the social norms.”<sup>218</sup> For him, the force behind Chinese morality was tradition. In Evans-Pritchard’s ethnography of the Nuer, by contrast, law between tribal sections is enforced through the threat of violence: “We must not be misled by an enumeration of traditional payments for damage into supposing that it is easy to exact them unless a man is prepared to use force. The club and the spear are the sanctions of rights.”<sup>219</sup> The question for us could then be: If we can recognize a shared sociality between Chinese and Angolan collaborators, what is the force that holds it in place?

## The Disciplining of ChinAngola

On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014, around 200 employees of Northwest Construction gathered at the company’s largest construction site to celebrate the last day of the lunar calendar. Red lanterns and colorful metallic streamers hung from the ceiling of the dining hall, whose rows of plastic tables had been adorned with various fruits, snacks, and beverages. Many of the men, still groggy after sleeping in for the first time in months, had stumbled over from their shipping-container dormitory a few feet away, and remained dressed in sleeveless undershirts and flip-flops despite an announcement from the management that the occasion required more formal attire. I was sitting with a few Angolan and Chinese employees from the ChinAngola store, cracking sunflower seeds and chatting, when Lena, looking up from her phone, announced to our table that there was news from the shopping center today: several Chinese people had been arrested, and the whole place had temporarily closed down.

Shopping ChinAngola had been opened in 2012 through an investment partnership between a private Chinese construction firm, Sichuan (S&C) Construction, and the Staff Pension Fund of the Angolan National Police. Boasting hundreds of shops selling materials for construction and home decoration, as well as several Chinese supermarkets, restaurants, and even a vegetable farm, the shopping center had become known as a hub of Chinese

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>219</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 169.

business activity in Luanda. As all of the shops were owned and operated by Chinese entrepreneurs (Northwest Construction was the only state-owned enterprise to run a shop out of ChinAngola), communications between the shopping center administration and shopkeepers took place in Chinese, often through announcements on an instant messaging group set up for ChinAngola shop-owners. A few days after the New Year's Eve arrests, representatives of S&C Construction sent out a message with an official explanation of the incident. The police had taken in sixty people in total, though it remained unsaid what they had been arrested for. S&C had called upon the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Interior to intervene, and they claimed these higher authorities had rebuked the police for not having approval to conduct an inspection. After this reprimand, the message said, the police knew that they could not fine or arrest anyone at the Shopping without conducting a proper inspection first. The shop-owners were told not to worry, but to remember that they must abide by legal regulations, including labeling all products in Portuguese, and making sure employees' visas were in order.<sup>220</sup>

Northwest Construction's store had been closed on the day of the arrests, and Li Jun took great satisfaction in knowing that his company was relatively more 'regular' than so many of the other businesses at ChinAngola.<sup>221</sup> All employees of Northwest Construction had valid visas permitting them to work in Angola. The Company also possessed several other documents legally required for running a commercial business: an Import-Export License, a business license (*alvará*) to conduct retail and wholesale trade, proof of tax payment, and publication of the company's incorporation in the Official Gazette (*Diário da República*), among others. In 2009, the company had registered with the National Private Investment Agency. These other documents had been obtained around that time, though no one, not even Director Fu, could tell me how. "At the very beginning," one junior manager explained to me, grinning out of either embarrassment or amusement, "when we were taking care of these formalities, the company was a little... disorganized (*luan*), so I guess some information may have gotten lost."

Lack of information became a persistent theme in the events that unfolded at Shopping ChinAngola over the following months. After the arrests in January, business continued as usual at the shopping, and there were even announcements of a planned expansion after Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Angola in May, but at the end of June, ChinAngola received a visit from agents of both the Economic Police and the Angolan immigration authority, SME (*Serviço de Migração e Estrangeiros*). Up to 38 people were arrested over the course of two days, after which the shopping center stayed closed for three days. On the instant messaging group, representatives from S&C explained that they were "cooperating" with the Economic Police and Immigration Service to "legalize" (*hefa hua*) Shopping ChinAngola. Although none of the shopkeepers had been warned in advance, S&C maintained that the closing was part of a pre-scheduled inspection that would continue over

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<sup>220</sup> Several months prior to this, the entire shopping center had been temporarily shut down when a consumer protection organization discovered that many of the stores were selling products without any labeling in Portuguese.

<sup>221</sup> He found especially quaint the small mom-and-pop stores run by entrepreneurs from southern China, which often sold a vast array of small, cheaply produced items.

several days. Moreover, they assured the shop-owners that, after a long negotiation, the police had agreed to release everyone who had been detained and promised not to make further arrests.

Over the following days, the shopkeepers of ChinAngola speculated as to whether or when they would be able to reopen their businesses. Some shops opened tentatively for a few days, then closed in a panic when they saw cars from the Economic Police arrive on ChinAngola premises. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, another official announcement from S&C explained that the police inspections were meant to ensure that all shops had proper licensing and other legal documentation before the planned expansion for “Phase II” of Shopping ChinAngola: “At the moment, the Economic Police have already completed their inspection work for the legalization of the ChinAngola market, and ChinAngola leadership have held discussions with the relevant government officials. We are now waiting for recommendations for the next stage of legalization. In the meantime, the market has resumed normal operations, and we welcome everyone to enjoy your shopping at ChinAngola.” The next day, however, the employees of Northwest Construction’s store were surprised to find, when they arrived to open for the day, that the gates of the shopping center remained shut. There was an absurd contrast between the appeasing explanations emitted by S&C through the instant messaging group, and the sobering sight of Angolan policemen preventing shopkeepers from entering the closed gates of the shopping center. As we turned around to drive back to The Media Center, Ma Hui sighed, “This feels more and more like a giant trap.”

In this climate of opacity and conflicting messages, rumors began to circulate as to the political forces behind the closing of ChinAngola, which many claimed had to be greater than S&C and the Staff Pension Fund. One version stated that during Li Keqiang’s visit to Angola, it had been announced that a new loan of \$150 million USD from the China-Africa Development Fund (CADF)<sup>222</sup> would be extended to Angola, but that these funds were to be managed by S&C Construction. Various influential parties seeking a piece of the pie had suddenly become interested in Shopping ChinAngola, and, taking advantage of recent discussions in the National Assembly about a need for greater regulation of the retail industry, had ordered the inspections. The head of S&C’s Angolan partner organization had unfortunately been in Macau gambling with some S&C executives at the time of the police raid. Another version claimed that a deal had been signed between the CADF, S&C, and the Pension Fund (S&C’s Angolan partners). This deal was “illegal,” according to the narrator, because Chinese government entities cannot give funding directly to any organizations in

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<sup>222</sup> I have not changed the name of this organization. According to its official website, “The China-Africa Development Fund (“CADFund”) is one of the Eight Measures which was announced by Chinese President Hu Jintao at the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006. It is a fund which aims to support Chinese companies to develop the cooperation with Africa and enter the African market. ...The Chinese government officially approved the establishment of the CADFund, with first-phase funding, USD 1 billion, provided by China Development Bank, and will eventually reach USD 5 billion” (China-Africa Development Fund, “The Company Overview”, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.cadfund.com/en/NewsInfo.aspx?NIId=48>).

Angola without working through the Angolan government. In this case, the head of the Pension Fund received the money directly, bypassing “the Executive.” Vice President Manuel Vicente himself had ordered the closure and inspections, to discipline not only the Chinese but also their Angolan partners.

Whichever story was true, their combined effect was to convince the Chinese shop-owners that their landlords, and their businesses, were in a lot of trouble. The main gates of ChinAngola remained locked, and although some shops operated clandestinely, encouraging clients to enter through a side gate, or selling out of their warehouses, eventually that was put to a stop as well. Losing revenue by the day, shop-owners were anxious to reopen, but what was needed to do so was unclear. In the midst of this confusion, a number of resourceful individuals appeared with offers of help. Paulo, a young Angolan man who had once bought a motorcycle from Northwest Construction, showed up one day while Li Jun and Ma Hui were picking up some documents from the store. “I’m just making my rounds [*dando as voltas*],” he explained, “Lately, there have been some problems here. DEFA<sup>223</sup>, you know DEFA? SME, they’ve been coming here a lot lately, and they’ve found that a lot of shop-owners here do not have residence permits. Now, it’s mandatory to have a residence permit in order to open a store in Angola. So probably S&C is going to make everyone get them. Really they should have resolved this problem a long time ago, but they are taking care of it now.” I commented that this sounded like a very costly procedure. “Yes, it is going to be very expensive,” he replied, “It usually costs over \$6000 dollars to do it, but I can do it for less. If I’m doing it for someone I know, I can get one for \$4000.” “Is that so?” I asked, “And how long does it take to complete?” “With me, it takes about 3 days.” “3 days?!” I was incredulous. “Yes, more or less,” he said, “If you go through someone else, it will probably take a week. But my brother is a *grande chefe* over there. He works with the head of SME, so he can get the signature quickly. That’s what takes a long time, getting the signature. People spend all of their time following the boss around trying to get his signature, but because my brother works with him he can get it quickly.”

Paulo represents a familiar figure to Chinese entrepreneurs and managers in Angola. Poor language skills in Portuguese, lack of familiarity with the Angolan legal system, and weak or nonexistent personal connections to the government pushed Chinese companies to seek out intermediaries who could help them settle bureaucratic procedures. Unlike the inspectors who visited Northwest Construction’s store in the opening to this chapter, he presented himself as a friend, willing to provide assistance, but the function he performed was the same. He was selling *facilidades*, without which Chinese companies would be unable to survive. Indeed, Chinese businesses and the Angolan government coexisted in a complex relationship of economic interdependence. If we follow Evans-Pritchard, such relations of interdependence would compel the various parties involved to adopt the “conventions of a political order.”<sup>224</sup> In other words, relations of interdependence imply the necessity of a political system that extends beyond territorial units—in this case, a system that extends

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<sup>223</sup> DEFA, Direção de Emigração e Fronteiras de Angola (Department of Immigration and Borders of Angola), was the name for the immigration authority before 1999, when it changed to SME, but the organization was still frequently referred to by its former name during my fieldwork.

<sup>224</sup> *The Nuer*, 93.

beyond the boundaries of nationality or even of 'state' and 'society.' Intermediaries like Paulo embodied the point at which Chinese and Angolan organizations were drawn into a single political system, but, as I will show below, the structure of this system was relative, alliances could shift, and different values came into play in different situations.

While the shops remained closed, and S&C claimed to be in the midst of negotiations with the Ministry of Commerce and the Economic Police, I spoke with a Portuguese lawyer I had met at the Shopping, to hear his opinion on the situation. The lawyer, Felipe, greeted me in a dark conference room at his office in central Luanda. There had been a power outage, but, he complained, none of his staff had called to let him know before he showed up for work.

"So, what's your store's problem?" he asked almost immediately.

I reminded him that I was meeting with him for research purposes, not on behalf of the Company, and I tried to omit details pertaining to Northwest Construction from our conversation. "I think for a lot of stores, it's hard to know what to do during this time," I said, "because the ChinAngola administration does not openly communicate about what is necessary in order to 'regularize,' and some shops are worried that at the end of these negotiations they are going to be penalized further, that S&C is going to demand that they pay more." A major complaint at that time among the Chinese shopkeepers was that a company called Silver Dollar, which had been established as a subsidiary of Shopping ChinAngola and was run by some of the family members of the Police Chief who headed the Angolan side of the partnership, had demanded payments from many of the shops, ostensibly for the service of acquiring proper legal documentation for them. This had happened only a few months after the Shopping initially opened, but the documents had never appeared, and it was suspected that whoever ran Silver Dollar had pocketed the money.

"Yes, well a lot of things were found missing with the shops," Felipe referred to the results of inspections, "They are going to have to have new commercial licenses, and employment contracts for both foreigners and nationals. I was at one of those meetings with S&C, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Economic Police, and they said they found a lot of violations. They found workers there who were being paid 100 kwanzas (roughly 1 dollar) per day."

I was dismayed at this pitiful amount: "100 kwanzas per day?!"

"That's what the Economic Police said. Conditions at ChinAngola really do need to be improved, Cheryl. I have a friend, a civil engineer from Portugal. I helped him get a job at S&C, and they said they would provide housing for him." I had seen the man at the Shopping before, and I asked if he was still living in the dormitories. Felipe exclaimed, "Not anymore! He got the hell out of there! He couldn't handle it. They didn't even have a mattress on the bed, Cheryl. Can you believe that? There was no mattress on the bed." I thought of my own bed at The Media Center, which was very narrow and covered by only a thin piece of hard padding on top of which I had piled several extra blankets, at the suggestion of Zhao Wei and Ma Hui. Could it be that the conditions he spoke of at the ChinAngola dormitories were similar, and the mattresses were simply not what his friend had been accustomed to in Portugal? "And the bathroom, it was in no condition for use." Felipe made a face of disgust as

he continued describing his friend's dormitory. "I saw the bathroom there myself, and I was horrified. I told them, 'If you have another inspection here you are going to be fined heavily, if not penalized criminally.' This is no way to treat people! It demonstrates a lack of basic respect for the human being."

Although he started out by noting that shops were underpaying their Angolan workers, the main thrust of Felipe's discourse was about a universal figure of "the human being." He spoke of "conditions" generally, not the poor treatment of one group by another. This made a defense of ChinAngola seem morally impossible. He continued with his list of grievances: "They don't let anyone go out after 6pm there. 6pm!" He repeated a fact he found absurd, but I thought only of how common this practice was among Chinese companies I had known in Angola, including Northwest Construction. As discussed in Chapter 2, the employees had found ways to accept such restrictions, and even appreciated the sense of security they provided; at the very least they did not openly denounce them as a form of oppression. Felipe, on the other hand, was outraged: "That is no way to treat people! They cannot be kept locked in their dormitories, without any freedom of movement. Even if they live in the periphery of the city, they can take a taxi to the center, or get a ride to one of the malls. Human beings need time to walk around (*passar*), to read, to do things other than work!" He made a comparison: "I had some Portuguese friends who went to work in Germany, construction workers. There, the work went on 24 hours a day, so they worked in 8-hour shifts. And the company wanted to ask them to work overtime. They said, 'No. What I should be doing is working as hard and as well as I can during the 8 hours of my shift, to make sure the overall project stays on schedule. Then I should go home and rest, or go out and refresh my mind and body, so that I arrive at work the next day in the best condition possible.' Now, to stay trapped at one's place of work for 24 hours? No, this won't do. It's a basic violation of human rights!" I thought of Li Jun's comment to me at our very first meeting—"Chinese people in Angola do not live, we only work." Was it possible that what Felipe described was not a universal human need, but one particular to Western societies of the twenty-first century? Or in making such a claim would I be relegating Chinese practices to some primitive past, would I be deeming Chinese workers unworthy of the basic protections and comforts I would want for myself?

Felipe continued to marvel at some of the things that had been discovered in the course of inspections at the Shopping: "You know what I find incredible? How can the Chinese have developed such successful businesses without a system of accounting, without any modern bookkeeping, without a list of their employees' names and salaries? These are all basic components of modern commercial enterprise.<sup>225</sup> It's amazing how they can function without them!" As he was speaking, I imagined the inspectors not being able to recognize financial statements written in Chinese, or not being understood when they asked for specific documents, then assuming they did not exist. I asked Felipe if it was possible the businesses did have accounting systems, but in Chinese, and the inspectors had missed them. "But they have to have them in Portuguese," he said, in a slightly scolding tone. "Some of the shops, do

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<sup>225</sup> In his comparative study of world religions, Max Weber made a historical argument about the failure rational calculation, "the soul of capitalism," to spread in China. See Weber, *The Religion of China* (The Free Press, 1951 [1915]), 62.

you know what they had? You know those small corner groceries we have in Portugal, where you can buy rice, potatoes, basic food items? In the past, those grocers would keep their accounts in a ledger book, where they would write *all* their expenses on one side, and *all* their revenue on the other.”<sup>226</sup> He made a gesture of handwriting down the length of a sheet of paper, his tone shifting to one of gentle mockery for this antiquated form. “That is what they found in some of the shops! Just pieces of paper! Things cannot be done this way. As a business owner, you are supposed to have official receipts, so you can keep track of your sales and pay the associated taxes.”

In Felipe’s discourse, the problem with Chinese companies was not only that they did not obey Angolan law as it was codified, but also that they did not behave as modern or European businesses should. As if to counterbalance his impassioned tirade against the backwardness of Chinese accounting practices, Felipe followed this rant by stating in a slightly calmer tone, “But you know, all of this happened because of a lack of supervision on the part of the Angolan state.” He added ominously, “And *someone* had an interest in this.” Aware of the many rumors circulating around the connections ChinAngola had to various high-profile political figures, I did not dare to ask whom he was referring to, or what that “interest” might be.

I asked Felipe how long he thought it would take for the situation to be resolved, leaving the question open as to what a “resolution” might mean.

“It’s going to take a long time, Cheryl,” he said, shifting to a tone of lament, “and the worst part of it all is that the shop-owners are being punished heavily, while the gates remain closed and individual stores are not allowed to open, even though none of this was their fault to begin with. I tried to tell people at the meeting that these are people with families, trying to make a living. They shouldn’t be the ones suffering damages, and I know the financial losses incurred from having the gates closed must be extensive, all because of a big fraud (*burla*) committed by an organ of the Angolan state! I think what the shop owners need to do now is to form an association, a Commission of Shopkeepers, maybe choose the owners of the five or six biggest stores in the Shopping, and demand that they be present at all of these meetings with S&C, the Ministry of Commerce and the Economic Police. That way, all of the information about the negotiations could be directly transmitted to the shop owners, who deserve to know what is going on. They should go to Silver Dollar, who stole from them, and demand to know what is being done with their money. The shop owners have to put pressure on these people, in whom they placed their trust, who they thought would help them, and who ended up tricking and cheating them. They have to put their fists on the table and make demands! The shop owners should be demanding resolutions to their problems, which were created through the negligence of the state. And if their problems are not resolved, they should threaten to make publicity, to hold press conferences, to do what in Portugal we call

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<sup>226</sup> Although this particular Portuguese lawyer cited the practice of double-entry bookkeeping as a sign of the backwardness of Chinese entrepreneurs, Mary Poovey has argued that the modern fact originates in such accounting practices. See Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), cited in Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 12.

‘put the mouth on the trombone.’ Get it? That means they would bring the whole story out into the open and reveal these people for who they are!”

Felipe’s impassioned speech left me feeling wary, although he appeared to be in high spirits as I left. Only a few minutes after I said goodbye to him, I received a text message: “Dear Cheryl, I am available to participate in a shopkeepers’ association. A big hug, and thanks for the visit. –Felipe.”

Unlike Paulo, who was unabashed, even playfully cynical, about his economic motives for working with “the Chinese,” Felipe presented himself as a defender of human rights, a purveyor of justice. However, even while his speech was infused with appeals to human dignity and retribution for the downtrodden, I could not help but wonder whether his interest in “participating” in the shopkeepers’ association was also motivated by potential financial rewards. After all, Felipe charged high fees for his legal services, and he knew the Chinese shopkeepers would be vulnerable, in desperate need of both legal expertise and political protection. Felipe’s deployment of ethical discourses allowed him to position himself as a neutral, disinterested observer on the scene of the shopping center’s disintegration; however, if he aligned himself with the shopkeepers, would he adopt the values particular to that “segment” of Shopping ChinAngola? For, as Evans-Pritchard noted in the case of the Nuer:

“...Political relations are relative and dynamic. They are best stated as tendencies to conform to certain values in certain situations, and the value is determined by the structural relationships of the persons who compose the situation. Thus whether and on which side a man fights in a dispute depends on the structural relationship of the persons engaged in it and of his own relationship to each party.”<sup>227</sup>

In this situation of apparent confusion and chaos, one wondered how to identify “sides” at all. A process of restructuring seemed to be taking place, one that would demand a reassessment of political alliances.

## **Fission and Fusion**

Turning down Felipe’s offer, Li Jun instead sought the assistance of José, a Brazilian engineer with whom Northwest Construction had collaborated on several private construction projects. Over the following months, the two met nearly every day under the premise of making sure Northwest Construction’s store at ChinAngola was “regularized.” However, Li Jun did not trust José completely; he continuously sought out other individuals to try to verify information he was getting from multiple sources. He asked the Company accountant about which taxes they should be paying, and how to set up social security for Angolan employees. He met with an Angolan military general to see if someone who worked in the immigration service could help Northwest Construction get visas for their employees in the company name instead of those of their general contractors. He even had me go with Old Duan on several trips to the Ministry of Commerce, to ask how a business might alter its commercial license

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<sup>227</sup> *The Nuer*, 137.

through “regular channels.” Perhaps sensing that he did not have a monopoly on the business of rectifying Northwest Construction, José began to contact Li Jun every day. Late one evening, I received a phone call from him myself—he explained that there would be an important meeting the next day at the ChinAngola administration: “I need Li to come with me to represent the shop owners and make sure their interests are heard.” I asked who else would be attending the meeting, and he answered by dividing the expected attendees into two ‘sides’: “On one side, there will be representatives of the Ministry of Commerce, and on the other side will be us, representatives from the Pension Fund, and someone from S&C, since they have to allow them to take part in the meetings. It is very important that Li comes with me. So please pass this information along to him.” After hanging up, I translated for Li Jun, who, without looking up from his phone, only grumbled, “How annoying!”

In his comment that “they have to allow them to take part in the meetings,” José already implied that S&C’s power had been greatly diminished. The major alliance that would have to be forged now was between the Pension Fund and the Ministry of Commerce, while S&C participated in the meetings as a mere formality. José could most easily secure a position for himself in this reconfiguration of alliances by claiming to be working with the Chinese shop owners, another crucial party, that could be distanced from S&C and brought closer to the Pension Fund. However, since he was not actually a shop owner himself, he needed Li Jun to serve as the official representative. Li Jun, for his part, wanted to avoid involving himself or his company in the politics of Shopping ChinAngola; his sole concern seemed to be to legalize Northwest Construction’s store, and continue fulfilling the tasks delegated to him by Director Fu. If he followed José, he risked the alliances he had already established, with S&C administrators, or even with other Chinese shopkeepers at ChinAngola.

At 8am the next day, when Old Duan, Li Jun, and I arrived at the Shopping ChinAngola store, José was already sitting in the Trade Department office. After discussing some technical details of a construction project they had been collaborating on, José asked if Li would be attending the meeting. Li Jun initially resisted, claiming he had another meeting to go to, but when at 9:30 a man from the Pension Fund showed up, telling “Senhor José” that they were waiting for him, José simply shouted, “*Vamos, Li!* Let’s go!” First busying himself with something at his desk for a few more minutes, Li Jun finally gave in, and the three of us walked over to the ChinAngola administration.

We entered the conference room, which was bustling with suited dignitaries from the Ministry of Commerce. Five men and one woman who appeared to be of more senior positions moved into place on one side of a large table, while two younger men who must have been junior staff took seats behind them. High-level managers of both S&C and the Pension Fund sat on the other side of the room. Angolan secretaries in colorful business-casual attire stood in the background. They had likely been the ones who had set out on the table bottles of water, notepads and pencils, and several platters of carefully arranged assorted cookies. Following the orders of one of the secretaries, José, Li Jun, and I sat against the wall on the S&C/Pension Fund side, while several Chinese managers from S&C took their places near the door, mumbling that they were still waiting for someone to arrive—a woman who

was supposed to translate into English for the Chinese managers. A chair for her was left empty next to Director Shi, the highest-level manager of S&C in Angola, who sat quietly next to the Chief of the Pension Fund.

The Chief spoke first. He introduced himself, then went over the history of Shopping ChinAngola: “My associates and I were designated to manage an investment from the Pension Fund. We partnered with a Chinese company, S&C Construction, and ChinAngola was our so-called *Kinaxixi*,” he referred to a historic market in the center of Luanda, “a commercial center we established together. When we opened this market, we also created an independent company called Silver Dollar, to handle administrative issues for the shopping center.”

A man sitting directly across from the Pension Fund Chief spoke next. In a low, serious voice that was almost too quiet for everyone to hear, he introduced himself as Director of a major division of the Ministry of Commerce. He named each of the people who had accompanied him to the meeting, pointing out that they represented all levels of the Ministry. A man to his left then proceeded to speak, in an exceedingly formal tone: “Our team has come here today to follow up on a multi-sectoral investigation that was conducted around a month ago, under superior orders. The Ministry is interested in facilitating the reopening of the Shopping, pending fulfillment of recommendations that have already been proposed. These include that all shops with an area of under 200 square meters be reserved for Angolan merchants, and that all Chinese individuals working at the Shopping have a legal migration status.” The phrase “under superior orders” did not necessarily mean that the President or his office had been involved, but it did not exclude the possibility either; in any case, it evoked some higher authority, beyond that of the Ministry of Commerce. This authority, moreover, according to the speaker, had left specific instructions for the Chief and his Pension Fund, but, since we were hearing them for the first time, it seemed that S&C had either not known about them or had chosen not to share the information with the shopkeepers.

With these formal introductions over, the Chief went to the heart of the matter. He continued to speak in a soft tone, very eloquently, in a way that felt both like a sincere attempt to elicit empathy from the other side of the table and an impressive performance for the entire room. “As you know, our National Police suffer from a lack of funding, and this sometimes leads to unfortunate actions, like officers on the street asking for *gasosas*.<sup>228</sup> We decided to initiate this private investment, using resources from the Pension Fund, so that we could empower the Fund to empower the police. Now, what has happened is that our Chinese partners move very quickly; sometimes, they continue to work even while they are sleeping!” A few laughs rippled across the room at this joke. “So before we knew it, by the time we finalized our partnership, they had already gone out on their own to find merchants to occupy the spaces here. The result has been that all of the shops are currently rented to Chinese. Of course, since the shop owners are Chinese, and our partners are Chinese, they communicate with each other in Chinese, and this whole time we have been scrambling to keep up with them! At a certain point, we realized that they were committing so many irregularities that it would be impossible for us to rectify everything on our own. I lost many nights of sleep over

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<sup>228</sup> The term literally means “soft drink” but was also a euphemism for bribes.

this; my secretary also suffered major health problems from the stress. Finally, I decided to write a letter to the Ministry of Commerce, explaining our situation and asking for help. Unfortunately, the response we received was the opposite of what we needed: the investigation resulted in the Shopping being closed. Since then, we have begun work to resolve many of the problems that were found. We have even set up a computer information system in Portuguese and Mandarin. It's all ready, we just need to implement it."

At this point, Director Shi's official interpreter, a middle-aged Angolan woman named Clarisse, entered the room, smiling sweetly as a number of people noted her delayed arrival. She sat down next to Director Shi, and began to translate the Chief's words into English. Her interpretation was so loud, though, that many of us were distracted from the Chief himself. His tone shifted suddenly to one of urgency and indignation, as he said forcefully, looking sideways at Clarisse, "I am here *for the nth time* to discuss these problems and come to a resolution, because it has always been *my* head on the line, not *theirs*," he pointed at the employees of S&C, "not the shop owners', *mine!* But we are here under orders from above, and by these orders we will try to legalize the comrades!" After exposing the acrimony that had developed between himself, on the one hand, and S&C and the shopkeepers, on the other, the Chief used a term, "comrades," that would indicate solidarity amongst them all, at least in relation to the Ministry of Commerce.<sup>229</sup> "That said," he continued, "I hope that everyone here understands that *I* am the one who has the authority to call these meetings; *I* am the representative of Shopping ChinAngola. I don't understand why, after I met with our friends here from the Ministry of Commerce last week, *other* individuals from this Shopping went to meet with them without me." His voice had been getting louder and louder, and at this climactic moment he slammed his fist down on the table: "This is over, Madame Clarisse!"<sup>230</sup> Then he shouted, "Please, translate!"

A young Angolan woman who must have worked for the Chief stood up and repeated what he had said in English. His calling on her had been a clear undermining of Clarisse's position as official translator, and his direct address to Clarisse just before—"This is over!"—led us to believe it was highly probable that she had been one of the "other individuals" meeting with the Ministry behind his back. He went on, "I am here as a police officer, and as a friend, and if anyone is not legalized, I am the one who will send him or her away. Translate!" The woman interpreted for him again.

Clarisse jumped at the provocation, though her speech remained formal and controlled. "Please allow me to point something out to our comrade," she said, referring to the main

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<sup>229</sup> In a memorable account of how a stranger would have approached one of the numerous checkpoints set up throughout the country during the civil war, Kapuscinski emphasizes the significance of the term "Comrade" in determining one's allegiances: "Now we have to summon up all our courage to say one word, which will determine our life or death: "*Camarada!*" If the sentries are Agostinho Neto's people, who salute each other with the word *camarada*, we will live. But if they turn out to be Holden Roberto's or Jonas Savimbi's people, who call each other *irmão* (brother), we have reached the limit of our earthly existence" (Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Another Day of Life*, (New York: Vintage (2001) [1976]), 41-42).

<sup>230</sup> In Portuguese, he used the respectful title *Doutoura*, conventionally applied to anyone who has received the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree.

representative of the Ministry, “This must start with the conditions in which people are living, the conditions of the dormitories, and the kitchens, of which I have photos. I have documented everything very well. The authorities have been trying to help us solve these problems since last year, and we simply don’t have time for this kind of discussion anymore! *We must regularize!*” Like Felipe, the lawyer, she took a pseudo-humanitarian position. Rather than criminalizing S&C or the shop-owners, she raised examples to illustrate the potential suffering of Shopping ChinAngola residents. Lack of regularity, in this discourse, was not the fault of those who had broken the law but rather a result of poor supervision, perhaps by the Chief himself.

Apparently ignoring Clarisse’s outburst, the Ministry Director looked only at the Chief and spoke in a tone of sympathy: “Look, I know how these things work. There was a time when I was working in the provinces, in Lunda Sul, trying to regulate the sale of water. We knew that the Chinese were selling water illegally, and we knew that they had some Angolan partners behind them.” Chuckles could be heard around the room, as if many had heard similar tales of mischief. “The fact is that at some point we have to put our fist down and make a point, which is that whoever wants to do business in Angola must be legalized. When the President called on the Minister of Commerce to take up her current position, he told her, ‘Bring order to the market!’ [*Organize o comércio!*] This was instruction number one. And it’s not an easy task; it will only be possible with all of our support.”

One of the men from the Ministry timidly reached for a cookie, then ate several in quick succession, while the woman to the right of the Director asked the Chief a concrete question about the legal status of the shops: “Our first recommendations were that each shop acquire its own commercial license (*alvará*), and that the small shops, with spaces under 200 square meters, partner with Angolans. You said this was not possible because of the terms of your partnership with the Chinese.” Several of the shops had up to that point been operating under the business license of S&C Construction, and the Ministry disputed the legitimacy of this practice.

The Chief responded: “Yes, fortunately or unfortunately, we established ChinAngola as a partnership, and after we established this partnership, our partners decided to bring several others along with them. It was like a marriage, where the wife came with several children.” The delegates laughed at this gendered metaphor. “Now, we are trying to help these comrades get their things in order. But many of the merchants do not even know how to find the entrance to the Ministry of Commerce on their own. You try to tell them it’s next to the Port of Luanda, and they don’t even know where the port is! Many of them don’t speak any Portuguese. And they’re afraid to go out. Do you know why so many of the shop owners choose to live inside here? It’s because they’re afraid of going even as far as to the main road outside our gates! Now, since the inspections took place, a few of the shop owners here have taken initiative and gotten their businesses in order, while others have turned into babies, who can’t do anything on their own and are just waiting for someone to come and help them. That’s why we have brought your team here, to help us find the best path to take in order to legalize everyone. But, given the circumstances, we think the best way to move forward is to legalize Silver Dollar, and have all the shops get their visas and licenses through us. This would be a first step.”

A lawyer for the Pension Fund stepped in with an addition, “This partnership was a very good one, strategically speaking, and it was important at the beginning to give some security to our partner. However, unfortunately the marriage ended in dissolution, and it is now up to the Pension Fund to regularize the Shopping.” He explained that Angolan law was ambiguous when it came to regulation of shopping centers, because they did not exist in the country until very recently, but in principle wholesalers and retailers should not work under the same license as this would be a conflict of interest.

Interrupting this subdued discussion, Clarisse stood up again and began an impassioned speech: “In the investigations that were done here, terrible things were found! There were people working here without visas! Shops without sales receipts! Taxes were not being paid! I’m sorry, my comrade,” she addressed the Chief, “but you have to tell the truth. The shop owners also paid Silver Dollar to resolve these problems for them, and what did they get in exchange? Their stores were shut down and they were arrested on January 31st, which was the day of their new year!”

Unfortunately for her, Clarisse’s performance fell flat. As soon as she finished, the man who had been eating cookies asked calmly, “Does this company, I’m sorry, what’s its name again?”

“S&C,” said the Chief.

“Right, does S&C have a business license to operate in Angola?”

“Yes,” said Clarisse.

“And what is the principal activity listed on that license?”

She could only reply solemnly, “Construction.”

The man smiled, “Then we have yet *another* problem!”

With Clarisse silenced, the Director from the Ministry of Commerce gave some concluding remarks, saying that a commission had been created to review laws pertaining to shopping centers, but in the meantime, their recommendations should still stand. The delegates began preparing to leave, when an announcement from Clarisse interrupted them: Director Shi had something to say.

He spoke carefully in English, as Clarisse interpreted in Portuguese: “I believe this is my first time sitting at a table with you,” he addressed the Ministry representatives, “Two years ago, when we opened Shopping ChinAngola, it was our understanding that our Angolan partners would help us and make sure we complied with all Angolan laws. That means that perhaps we should have had this meeting two years ago. Unfortunately, that did not happen. And now we find ourselves in this situation. I don’t think the fault is mine, nor does it belong to the Chief. I came to Angola to take this position in April. Before that, S&C had been working for a year with Silver Dollar to legalize all the shops in Shopping ChinAngola. We had one Chinese employee, and one Angolan employee who were supposed to visit each of the shops together and make sure all of them complied with Angolan legal regulations. Yet, despite these efforts, during the recent inspections several shops were still found to not be in compliance with Angolan law. Now, we hope that with your help, we can find a way to make sure all of Shopping ChinAngola becomes legalized, and that our joint-venture will continue to operate successfully in the future. Therefore, we welcome you to

ChinAngola, and hope that we can count on your help and support as we find the best way to resolve these problems.”

Director Shi had been exceedingly diplomatic in his speech. He had ignored the lawyer’s remark about the dissolution of the partnership between his company and the Pension Fund, and he had emphasized the work that the two partners had already done together. Yet even before Clarisse finished translating his last sentence, the Ministry representatives had started packing their things, like impatient students just before the end of a professor’s lecture. As we walked out, José stopped to greet some of the men from the Ministry. Li Jun called to him, “*Vamos!* [Let’s go!]” and nearly ran to the door. He did not want to be confronted by any acquaintances from S&C, who would have begun to question which ‘side’ he was on.

Back at the Northwest Construction store, José gave me his interpretation of what we had witnessed at the meeting: “Do you understand what just happened in there? It was ridiculous, wasn’t it?” He said with a big grin on his face, “What happened in that room just now, was that Angolan man, who once shook the hand of that Chinese man, turned around and blamed all of his problems on his former partners. He did what the Angolan does very well, which is to play the victim in front of another Angolan. Those two Angolan men, the Chief and the man from the Ministry sitting across from him, they were commiserating about their problems dealing with Chinese people, laughing over shared experiences. It was all a show, to make everyone in the room aware that they are working together now, and they are the ones in charge. You saw the Angolan bang his fist on the table, right? He said it: ‘I give the orders’ [*Sou eu que mando*]. And that Chinese guy must have been thinking the whole time, ‘How can this guy be such a bastard?’” Li Jun had disappeared for the moment, busying himself with work in the showroom or perhaps simply avoiding José, who seemed content to talk to me alone and continued with his analysis: “But really that whole meeting was simply a procedural affair, because the real conversation had already taken place between those two men. That was when what really mattered”—he made a gesture of rubbing money between his fingers—“was settled between the two of them. I know those people,” he boasted, “I know every single one of those people from the Ministry who was sitting in that room, and I know they are all corrupt, because I’ve also corrupted them! Of course, when I was sitting there in the meeting I couldn’t let anyone know it, but I have met with each of them individually in their offices, and I know how they are. They aren’t going to say what’s actually going on at a meeting like that.”

Up to this point, within Shopping ChinAngola, Li Jun had been part of a group called “the Chinese side,” represented in the ChinAngola administration by S&C Construction. Now that S&C had been expelled from its former partnership with the Pension Fund, he became part of a group called “the shopkeepers,” but within this larger group, his smaller group, the Northwest Construction store, was also opposed to other shopkeepers. They were economic competitors, after all, and he had a direct line of resources through José that might facilitate his business’ reopening or expanding, while other shops remained closed. José presented an opportunity to Li Jun, to ally itself with the Pension Fund, which was allied with the Ministry of Commerce, against S&C and potentially against other shopkeepers. The

process of segmentation of which he found himself a part was classically outlined by Evans-Pritchard:

“A man is a member of a political group of any kind in virtue of his non-membership of other groups of the same kind. He sees them as groups and their members see him as a member of a group, and his relations with them are controlled by the structural distance between the groups concerned. But a man does not see himself as a member of that same group in so far as he is a member of a segment of it which stands outside of and is opposed to other segments of it. Hence a man can be a member of a group and yet not a member of it. This is a fundamental principle of Nuer political structure. Thus a man is a member of his tribe in relation to other tribes, but he is not a member of his tribe in the relation of his segment of it to other segments of the same kind. Likewise a man is a member of his tribal segment in its relation to other segments, but he is not a member of it in the relation of his village to other villages of the same segment. A characteristic of any political group is hence its invariable tendency towards fission and the opposition of its segments, and another characteristic is its tendency towards fusion with other groups of its own order in opposition to political segments larger than itself. Political values are thus always, structurally speaking, in conflict. One value attaches a man to his group and another to a segment of it in opposition to other segments of it, and the value which controls his action is a function of the social situation in which he finds himself. For a man sees himself as a member of a group only in opposition to other groups and he sees a member of another group as a member of a social unity however much it may be split into opposed segments.”<sup>231</sup>

Although I cannot claim, as Evans-Pritchard tried for the Nuer, to have identified an overarching system here, the combined tendencies of fission and fusion were also at work in the case of Shopping ChinAngola. Evidently, different groups had formed alliances through which resources were shared among members: first, a partnership had been established between S&C and the Pension Fund; then, S&C had offered a venue for the businesses of Chinese shopkeepers in exchange for multiple benefits; and lastly, if what José had said was true, the Ministry of Commerce had forged a connection with the Pension Fund to exclude S&C. At this moment, the dissolution of the partnership between S&C and the Pension Fund, although it felt chaotic on the day-to-day level, could be analyzed not as the disintegration of the structure, but as a reconfiguration of alliances. Shopkeepers who wanted to remain part of ChinAngola would have to distance themselves from S&C Construction and instead ally themselves with the Pension Fund, through intermediaries like José, or Felipe, who were each in their own way connected to the Pension Fund and the Ministry of Commerce. The breakdown of ChinAngola may not have been a way to cut down on the

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<sup>231</sup> *The Nuer*, 136-137.

power of “the Chinese” in Angola, as many observers had speculated, but a way to check the power of S&C as representative of the Chinese merchants.<sup>232</sup>

By the end of August, Shopping ChinAngola was still closed, and the Angolan employees of Northwest Construction’s store were starting to ask if they should find new jobs. One afternoon, José asked to meet at the store with Li Jun and myself. “I participated in another meeting the other day with S&C and the Ministry of Commerce,” he said in a somber tone, “They said that the Chinese shop-owners had not been paying taxes, and what they owe in taxes should be enough to repay all of the debt that Angola owes to China.<sup>233</sup> What has happened is that the Executive [the President] wants to clean up all the illegal Chinese businesses in Luanda, and everyone knows there are only a few points of concentration for the Chinese. The other parts of the city with large Chinese populations do not have centralized institutions like Shopping ChinAngola, so the attack has been aimed here, but this is only the beginning. The Chinese thought they could rely on S&C, who were relying on protection from the Pension Fund, but, as you know, that protection is gone now. Maybe it was only ever there in speech. And now they are left with no one to trust. That’s why everyone is coming to me for help now!”

Was José sharing information that reflected the reality of the situation, or was he trying to emphasize his role as a kind of savior for “the Chinese”? The latter appeared more likely as he continued his rant with a twist on ‘culture and personality’: “You Americans have a saying: if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. For the Chinese, it’s more like: if it’s not relevant, don’t pay attention to it. They don’t do things in advance; everything is done with immediacy. They think: why waste time getting documents when I could be making money? So now the pressure is on, and now that the time has come to legalize, they can focus all their attention on this single task, which is what they like to do. They are a very pragmatic people. But everyone should realize this is actually a good thing, the Shopping getting shut down. In the future, the shops that survive will be stronger for it.”

Although officially I was meant to be interpreting José’s Portuguese utterances into Chinese for Li Jun, I had a feeling that these ‘anthropological’ observations were intended for my ears rather than Li Jun’s. In any case, before I had a chance to repeat what he had said, José began speaking again: “Do you want to hear something interesting, Li? The administration of ChinAngola wants to remove all the shops in the first row facing the main road, and replace them with something very special.” Li replied that he had always wanted to open a store there, and we walked over to take a look. “This first row,” José waved his hand in front of the shops, “It will all have to be very beautiful, very modern, different from the others.” We looked through the darkened windows of the half-abandoned stores. A supermarket had already begun to be converted into a furniture store, but now, if what José

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<sup>232</sup> Hugh Baker described a similar situation of balanced antagonisms among lineage groups in southern China: “The lineage landscape was thus composed of cells held in tension by a complex web of alliances and enmities, the end result being a balance of power which tended to prevent the acquisition of over-weening influence by any one lineage or the prolongation of active hostilities to a point where bloodshed and damage could reach serious proportions” (*Chinese Family and Kinship*, 146).

<sup>233</sup> A sum of multiple billions of dollars.

said was true, it would soon be replaced by something else. As we walked back to Northwest Construction, Li Jun asked whether the decision to get rid of the stores in the front row was made by the Chinese or Angolan side of ChinAngola. “Li!” Andre said with stress, then spoke to him directly in broken English, “No two sides anymore, only Angola! S&C out!”

Evans-Pritchard and other anthropologists of the so-called structural functionalist school were harshly criticized in the 1970s for having portrayed non-Western societies as overly stable or bounded.<sup>234</sup> A close reading of *The Nuer* reveals, however, that although Evans-Pritchard was not primarily interested in the encounter between the British colonial government and Nuer polities, he was very much interested in change.<sup>235</sup> In his assessment of Nuer politics as being constituted through conflicting values, Evans-Pritchard posits a political structure composed of sets of dynamic relations, not “parts of a kind of fixed framework in which people live.”<sup>236</sup> This view of politics allows us to see people of different statuses not as members of fixed classes, but instead as occupying categories whose values change as alliances form, break down, and reconfigure.<sup>237</sup> Indeed, at the end of *The Nuer* Evans-Pritchard comes to the conclusion that the task of anthropology should not be to identify “social masses,” but to study “relations, defined in terms of social situations, and relations between those relations.”<sup>238</sup> The problem for a study of relations between people variously affiliated with “China” and “Angola” is that the balance of antagonisms takes place not only between these two groups, broadly defined, but also involves the figure of the West, the bearer of universal principles. In the next chapter, I turn to this question through an investigation into conceptions of national difference among the men of Northwest Construction.

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<sup>234</sup> Talal Asad famously wrote that Fortes and Evans-Pritchard mischaracterized African states “in terms of balance of powers, reciprocal obligations and value consensus,” thereby failing to take into account the effects of colonial intervention or historical change more broadly. See “Two European Images of Non-European Rule,” in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Talal Asad ed. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1973), 105.

<sup>235</sup> Indeed, historical and political change appeared as key concerns elsewhere in Evans-Pritchard’s work. For instance, he wrote about the rise of Nuer prophets as political leaders, alongside intensifying Arab and European invasions of Nuerland, in “The Nuer of South Sudan,” in *African Political Systems*, Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, eds. (Oxford University Press, 1940): 272-296.

<sup>236</sup> *The Nuer*, 149.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

## Chapter 5

### A Chinese Idea of Africa: Finding a Place in the World

I visited some employees of the Trade Department one afternoon as they chatted and smoked cigarettes in Ding Ding's dormitory room before dinner. Xiao Zhang had left for China the day before, on his first visit home in two years, and Zhao Wei, the young manager from the Engineering Department with whom he was close friends, was on the phone to check that Zhang had arrived safely in Beijing. Sitting around the table, drinking sodas and idly gazing at an action film playing on Ding Ding's laptop were Xiao Ke, manager of the warehouse at ChinAngola Shopping, and Feng, a junior manager who had recently arrived in Angola. Zhao Wei passed the phone to Xiao Ke, who exchanged a few words with Xiao Zhang on the other end of the line. When he hung up, he chuckled and remarked, as if it were a humorous statement: "Xiao Zhang really hates black people!"

I could not hide my shock, both at the amused tone of Ke's utterance and at the content of what he had said, which I hoped and believed to be untrue. Xiao Zhang was officially responsible for managing the showroom at Shopping ChinAngola, which meant working directly with Angolan customers and supervising two Angolan sales clerks. He had learned Portuguese through the daily interactions required of his work, and he often spent slow afternoons at the store in friendly conversation with his Angolan co-workers. I protested: "That's impossible! He works with black people every day! He probably has to talk to more Angolan people than anyone else at this company."

Zhao Wei replied, "That's true, but he really does hate them, ever since he was arrested. Every time we play basketball he rants that we should take over this place, that we should colonize them!"

Xiao Ke chimed in, adding, "And then we should make them Chinese!" He and Zhao both giggled. Perhaps they knew the statement was politically incorrect, and yet they took pleasure in the minor act of rebellion. Maybe they laughed because it would have been absurd for China, having suffered humiliation at the hands of Western imperialism, to become a colonial power itself. Or could it have been that their parody of European colonialism comically indicated the impossibility of Africans ever being "made Chinese"?

Feng, who was also grinning by then, joined in the conversation by pointing to one of the walls of Ding Ding's room and whispering: "*He* really hates black people!" On the other side of the wall was the room of Old Guan, the middle-aged Section Chief who was generally very introverted and mild-mannered, but who I had myself witnessed spitting and swearing in fits of rage against Angolan traffic police.

"I know," I said, as the others continued to giggle.

Feng then addressed me directly, "Mei-ting, do you hate black people?"

I was taken aback. How could such a question even be possible? We were living in the twenty-first century, a time where "hatred" towards people of different races had been universally condemned. We had been through the tragedies of racialized colonialism and genocide, from which we had learned the dangers of racist thinking. Moreover, in my

upbringing through the American educational system, I had been taught repeatedly that anti-black racism was not about individual “hatred” but about the unconscious practices of disrespect or institutionalized systems of exclusion inherited from the legacies of slavery and segregation upon which our country had shamefully been built. The questions I had been taught to ask, as a good democratic citizen, were about how to restore institutional equity for a group that did not deserve to be treated *as if* it were hated, about matching equal treatment in practice to the equal consideration in mind already granted, at least ideally, to people of all different races. Underlying this practical or political concern, moreover, was a fundamental recognition, achieved with the help of social science, that “race” was a spurious category to begin with.

Because they used the term “black people” (*heiren*), the comments of these Northwest Construction employees sounded heavily racialized, and I had been trained not only to recognize racial categories as false and injurious social constructs, but also to guard against any kind of blanket generalization about a group of people. Instinctively, I answered by indicating how outrageous I thought the question was: “How could I hate black people?” The question implied that a racially defined group of people *could* be hated, and rather than indulge this possibility, I decided to shut it down. I had found a limit to the participatory aspect of my observation. Would a reminder that an African American man held one of the most powerful offices in the world dissuade my coworkers from making general condemnations about black people? As if to imply that Americans could not hate their own president, I added hastily, “Our president is black!”

This statement did not discourage Feng, who replied as if the question merely required further specification: “I meant black Angolans.”

Still clinging to the principles of American multiculturalism, I responded by saying that it was difficult for me, as an American, to hate an entire country of people. “There are so many immigrants in America, you know. Our country is made up of people from every country in the world.”

“That’s right,” Feng conceded. “That makes it different from China. We often hate people from a certain country—Japan, for example, or Vietnam. Our national situation is very particular.”

How can we understand the racialized discourses that circulated among Chinese working in Angola? And what did they indicate about the status of a newly globalizing China? At the time of my fieldwork, the heavy historical weight of Portuguese colonialism and slavery continued to burden the question of ‘race’ in contemporary Angola, but Chinese attitudes carried echoes of evolutionary ideas imported from Europe and translated by Chinese intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>239</sup> Below, I examine further how employees at Northwest Construction conceptualized national differences, and

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<sup>239</sup> For a comprehensive study of racialized colonialism in Angola, see Bender, *Angola Under the Portuguese*. Two treatments of racial conceptions in the Lusophone world are offered by Miguel Vale de Almeida, *An Earth-Colored Sea: ‘Race,’ Culture and the Politics of Identity in the Post-Colonial Portuguese-Speaking World* (Bergahn Books, 2003); and Patrícia Ferraz de Matos, *The Colours of the Empire: Racialized Representations during Portuguese Colonialism* (Bergahn Books, 2013).

how their ideas of Africa reflected an uneasiness about where China stands as a rising power “going out” into the world. In the interaction above, it is already apparent that Chinese thinking about ‘race,’ while easily mistaken for the racism with which we Americans are unfortunately so familiar, and ready to condemn, must be understood in relation to the “national situation” of China. This includes the memory of Chinese encounters with European imperialism and racial science at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, what appear to be racist attitudes among Chinese working in Angola could instead be interpreted as reflections upon China’s uncertain status in the world, and the challenge of ascribing value when standards of value derive from those of the Europe and North America. Perhaps the giggling at Xiao Zhang’s stated wish of colonizing Angola and “making them Chinese” had to do more with an illusive fantasy of power than an assured feeling of superiority. Even in my own statements alluding to the multiculturalism of the United States, which at that time was in fact experiencing extreme racial tension, had inadvertently reinforced an idea of Western moral superiority, one that went unchallenged in this exchange. My coworkers had not responded by claiming that Chinese thinking about race and nation was better than my own, but they had emphasized their “particularity.” This chapter tries to outline what these particularities were. In what follows, I suggest that by thinking about how China has historically responded to Western ideas of race, development, and civilization, we might better understand the meaning of these concepts as they circulate in global Chinese discourses today.

### Colonial Characteristics

In the middle of *cacimbo*, the rainless Angolan winter during which a thick layer of clouds hung low in the sky every day, I was sent to run an errand for the Trade Department in the city center. Ding Ding, a chain-smoking, wisecracking 38-year-old whom everyone addressed by his baby name, drove me in his pickup truck. Ding Ding often served as driver for Li Jun or Director Fu, though he had other responsibilities in the Trade Department, overseeing sales from an oil depot and brick factory the Company ran out of one of its bases. He was a familiar face at the ChinAngola store, where he often went on his breaks from running around to watch movies on someone’s laptop, or nap on one of the desks. With me, he also frequently shared observations about Angolan “cultural” practices. He had noticed, for instance, that whenever he gave Afonso leftover food from the canteen, he would share it with the other workers. This became a dictum: “Angolans always share their food.” He had also concluded that Angolan women were, in general, very promiscuous, as he remarked to me one day while watching Lena joke with a male Angolan employee of another store. Ding Ding seemed to enjoy teaching me, a newcomer, what he had learned about local people after a few years working in Angola, although I often cringed at his remarks.

When we discovered that the office I had been looking for had not yet opened for the day, Ding Ding and I went to a nearby cafe to wait, and he launched into another one of his lectures: “You know, Angolans, they’re not very friendly. It’s not easy to make friends with them. We all think black people are pitiable. Sometimes when I’m distributing salaries to black people at the base, when I’m done giving them their monthly pay, I’ll take some of my

own money and give it to them, but *they* have never once helped *me* with anything. They think all Chinese people are rich, and we *should* be giving them money. So it's really difficult to be friends with them." Like those who accused "the Chinese" of taking without giving back, Ding Ding pointed to reciprocity as the crucial missing piece in Chinese-Angolan social relations.

The source of Ding Ding's dissatisfaction was not limited to lack of reciprocation. He went down a list of complaints: "Angolans are lazy, Mei-ting. They want money, but they don't like to work. The guys at our brick factory, they could easily collect leftover bricks from our projects. I would happily arrange a truck to take leftover bricks to their houses, or wherever they want. Then they could slowly build a house for themselves, or a small shop to rent out. They would have a steady income. But not a single one of our workers there has ever worked hard enough to do this. When I was in China, I built houses for about 2 or 3 friends using only surplus materials from our company. They weren't the prettiest houses, since they had to randomly add on rooms here and there, but at least they were houses! Black people's houses are simple anyway. But none of our workers thinks to do things like this. Some of them use their salary to take care of their wives and children, but others just spend it all on food and booze. In a few days it's gone, then they come back to work." I had heard many Chinese supervisors at the Company complain that Angolan workers would disappear after payday, then reappear later when they needed work again. This time, Ding Ding connected their spending practices to a conceptual deficiency: "They don't come to work regularly and they don't work hard while they are at work. They don't have a concept of 'hard work.'"

Another notion Ding Ding and his colleagues in the Trade Department frequently identified as lacking in the Angolan mind was a "sense of time" (*shijian guannian*). I often heard Li Jun complain that Angolans had no notion of time when he had to wait for hours to take care of something he said in China would only take a few minutes. At the bank, for example, he would sometimes wait in agony for several hours as heavily made-up and exceedingly polite female bank tellers calmly sauntered from room to room, seemingly oblivious to the long line of people waiting to be served. This time, Ding Ding connected Angolan time-sense to the work ethic he had just finished discussing: "When there is work to be done, I always think that if I do it quickly and thoroughly, then when I'm done, I can sit down and rest. Isn't that the way things should be? But then look at Afonso," he mockingly moved his hand in a gesture of wiping something, while looking around self-consciously, as if to check if anyone were watching, "He's just pretending to look busy! And he thinks we don't notice? This doesn't have anything to do with Chinese people being smart. It's just that black people don't like to work."

Although by then I had heard similar comments many times, I still balked at Ding Ding's characterization. My immediate reaction was to challenge him, and I did so by trying to give our Angolan colleague the benefit of the doubt: "Afonso's not that bad. He comes to the store almost every Sunday. Do you really think he's not hardworking?"

My intervention did not convince him. "Afonso's no good," Ding Ding continued to complain, "I used to think he was really hardworking. I even used to give him money sometimes—200 kwanzas here, 300 there. When his wife had surgery I bought food at the supermarket and gave it to him to take home to her. I was even going to give him a pair of

shoes I had, since he'd always said he liked them. But then he kept showing up late, or missing work without saying anything to us. And he kept asking for money for different things. Maybe from *your* point of view he's pretty hardworking, but I don't think so anymore." He looked at me and said seriously, as if it were something I really needed to understand, "Black people," he paused for emphasis, "*love* to take advantage. You give them a little today, and tomorrow they'll ask for even more. They think they *deserve* to receive your money! That's why we cannot treat them too well." It pained me to hear this, not only because it was an impossibly broad negative generalization that did not account for class differences within Angolan society, but also because, as I had indicated before, it condemned Angolan workers at the Company, who I had witnessed performing hard labor under difficult conditions. Perhaps sensing that I still did not agree with him, Ding Ding reinforced his position by using himself as a point of comparison. "When I was in China, Mei-ting," he said, "I *never once* talked back to my bosses. I've driven for all of the leaders of our company in China, and I never once told them I couldn't do something they asked, or complained about the workload. These Angolans," he squinted in palpable bitterness, "they are not hardworking at all!"

But just at the point when Ding Ding's diatribe had reached an alarming climax, he moderated his commentary. As we watched a woman walk past, balancing on her head a large basin filled with items for sale, he observed: "Of course, I don't mean that *all* Angolans are lazy. These women, on the street, they have to work hard (*tamen bijiao xingku*). Did you know, in Angola, if a woman gets pregnant, she's not allowed to have an abortion? So all these women, they have babies and then they have to take care of them themselves because the men won't give them money. One of the policemen at The Media Center told me he gives one of his wives 4000 kwanzas (\$40 USD) a month for child support. That's not very much at all! So you see these women out here selling stuff, *they* are hard working."

Finally, I received a message from the person I was supposed to meet, telling me he had arrived at the office. As we walked back up the street, Ding Ding stopped to buy a bag of salted peanuts and manioc for 300 kwanzas, from a woman sitting on the sidewalk, an infant tied to her back. "The poor things," he said, catching my gaze. Then he offered me some peanuts, "They're pretty good, roasted." I thought for a moment how I had been in similar situations with Director Fu and Li Jun, for instance when an Angolan business partner had offered to buy them food from an outdoor vendor, and they had refused, citing questions of hygiene. Unlike those two more senior figures in company hierarchy, Ding Ding stood somewhere in between a manager and a manual laborer; he worked closely every day with members of the Angolan poor and working class, and yet he was one of the most vocal employees of Northwest Construction when it came to deficiencies of Angolan or African character. Such was the twisted irony of an Arthur Smithian position: the more one cared for "the poor things," the more one despised them.

There is a notable similarity between how Ding Ding and other Chinese expatriates spoke about the characteristics of Angolan people, and how Western observers described China at the end of the nineteenth century. Arthur Smith, whose writings on "face" I introduced in Chapter 3, did not attribute to the late-nineteenth century Chinese a lack of industry or economy—indeed these are two of the first national characteristics he outlines in

his book. He did, however, fault the Chinese for their “intellectual turbidity.” Admitting that highly educated people did exist in China, Smith mocked the uneducated Chinese who could not understand simple questions like “How old are you?”<sup>240</sup> He criticized the “wretchedly poor” and “utterly ignorant” for their “dormant or blighted” sense of curiosity, an instinct “common to all races,” taking as evidence the lack of visitors he received in his own village. Moreover, Smith supposed that the intellectual deficiency of the Chinese was related to a spiritual deficiency from which they also suffered:

“They know how to struggle for an existence, and they know nothing else. They do not know whether they have three souls, as is currently supposed, or one, or none, and so long as the matter has no relation to the price of grain, they do not see that it is of any consequence whatever. They believe in a future life in which the bad will be turned into dogs and insects, and they also believe in annihilation pure and simple, in which the body becomes dirt, and the soul—if there be one—fades into the air. They are the ultimate outcome of the forces which produce what is in Western lands called a ‘practical man,’ whose life consists of two compartments, a stomach and a cash-bag. Such a man is the true positivist, for he cannot be made to comprehend anything which he does not see or hear, and of causes as such he has no conception whatever. Life is to him a mere series of facts, mostly disagreeable facts, and as for anything beyond, he is at once an atheist, a polytheist, and an agnostic. An occasional prostration to he knows not what, or perhaps an offering of food to he knows not whom, suffices to satisfy the instinct of dependence, but whether this instinct finds even this expression will depend largely upon what is the custom of those about him. In him the physical element of the life of man has alone been nourished, to the utter exclusion of the psychical and spiritual. The only method by which such beings can be rescued from their torpor is by a transfusion of a new life, which shall reveal to them the sublime truth uttered by the ancient patriarch, ‘There is a spirit in man,’ for only thus is it that ‘the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding.’”<sup>241</sup>

Contradicting his earlier criticism of Chinese emphasis on form over fact, here Smith claims that the poor and uneducated of China can comprehend nothing but facts. As a missionary, he predictably argues that the only solution to China’s ills would be a conversion from the practical life to the spiritual life of Christianity. This would not only cure Chinese of their shortsighted stupidity, but it would also, crucially, liberate them from an “instinct of dependence” that plagues them. Indeed, a struggle against weakness, thought to be curable through the cultivation of self-reliance, would emerge as a core problem in the century of Chinese revolution and reform that followed publication of Smith’s book.

While Arthur Smith saw an infusion of Christian spirit as the solution to nineteenth-century Chinese weakness, some Chinese critics of Angolan society in the twenty-first century saw religion as one of the main vices of Angolan society, and a contributor to widespread

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<sup>240</sup> Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*, 84-85.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

poverty. When I talked to Li Jun and Old Duan one evening about whether the Company had considered the potential benefits of a weekly day of rest, for both Chinese and Angolan employees, they argued that the notion of ‘rest’ was itself relative. “Actually this thing about resting one day per week was originally a concept that came from the West,” Old Duan had said, somewhat defensively, “Think about it, before the Republican Period [1911-1949] who had ever heard of ‘rest’?”

Li Jun agreed, “That’s right. Some elderly people in China today, they may have never had a day of rest in their lives, except for a holiday at Spring Festival, but celebrating a festival is different from resting. People always need time to acclimate to new conditions. If you got used to working every day you wouldn’t feel like you need to rest either.”

Old Duan reinforced Li Jun’s assertion: “Angola is actually a very good example of that. Before, local people always asked to take Sundays off, because on Sundays they would rest and go to church. Later, Chinese people explained to them: if you go to church will God pay you a salary? Then, when they saw that Chinese businesses here stay open even on Sundays, some local people started to open their shops on Sundays too, and they stopped going to church.”

“Yeah,” said Li Jun, laughing, “They realized that if they opened on Sundays they could make more money!”

If such discourses are to be taken as possible evidence of Chinese colonial attitudes toward Africans, it would be helpful to look more closely at the broader context in which figures like Arthur Smith emerged: that of China’s encounter with Western imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. Up to the mid-1800s, trade between Europe and China was conducted exclusively on the terms of the Chinese state. In the previous century, trade had been concentrated at the port of Canton (Guangzhou), where foreign merchants who operated there were strictly supervised and allowed to live only outside the city walls.<sup>242</sup> The balance of power between Europeans and Chinese shifted, however, after trade disputes over opium erupted into “the first decisive military encounter between China and the West.”<sup>243</sup> From 1839 through the end of the nineteenth century, China suffered a series of military defeats, settled through “unequal treaties” that opened ports and ceded territory to Britain, the United States, France, and other Western powers. The treaties placed citizens of these countries under extraterritorial jurisdiction, so that they would no longer be subject to Chinese legal regulation even when residing in China, and they allowed Christian missionaries to work on Chinese territory under protection of foreign military. The European powers, along with the United States, no longer aimed primarily to expand trade with China, but sought to establish positions of political authority that would allow unrestrained economic exploitation.<sup>244</sup> Chinese defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 brought further—to some, shocking—evidence that China had become a victim of imperialism: “...It was already customary at that time to speak of ‘German China’ in the same way as of ‘German East

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<sup>242</sup> Franke, *China and the West*, 67.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

Africa.’ Thus at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century China seemed close to being divided amongst foreign Powers in the same way as Africa.”<sup>245</sup>

The comparison to Africa is significant, as it was around this time that Chinese intellectuals began to use the figure of Africa as a threatening example of what could happen to China if it did not stand up to the West. In some reformist discourses, the comparison between China and Africa was highly racialized. For instance, Liang Qichao posited the red and black races as “unhistorical” in comparison to the white and yellow. In such configurations, the systematic enslavement of African peoples was taken as evidence of their weakness and civilizational inferiority. However, Chinese evaluations of African deficiency were not meant to justify imperial interventions; instead, they were warnings, meant to incite the actions necessary to avoid a similar fate. Thus, one might say that, “...Just as Africa was seemingly pushed to the far margins of historicity and world historical significance, it was also drawn conceptually closer to China.”<sup>246</sup> As a continent enslaved, cut into pieces at the discretion of Europe, the image of Africa presented itself as a terrifying possibility from which China had not entirely escaped.

Although China never came under European rule as a unified territory, there must have been a reason why Sun Yat-sen, revolutionary founder of the Republic of China, could claim that it was a “hyper-colony.” Multiple European and American powers benefited from economic and legal policies that privileged foreigners, while foreign residents in the country lived in conditions of leisure and luxury. “Old China hand” Wolfgang Franke writes: “Any individual foreigner regarded himself anywhere in China as a colonial ruler, and consequently looked down upon the natives as a category of persons essentially far inferior to himself.”<sup>247</sup> Thus a vast social gap was established between foreigners and Chinese:

“An unimportant foreign employee without any particular qualifications, occupying a subordinate position in a foreign business, could lead a luxurious life by comparison with his circumstances at home or with those of a Chinese holding a similar post. The lower the educational standard of the foreigner, the higher, as a rule, was his presumption and arrogance towards the Chinese.”<sup>248</sup>

It is tempting to draw a parallel between the privileged lifestyles of foreigners in China at the turn of the twentieth century and the comforts enjoyed by Chinese, relative to the local population, in Angola at the beginning of the twenty-first. Even if I were to argue that the housing on most Chinese compounds in Angola was far from luxurious—one junior manager at Northwest Construction said his wife in China was shocked when he told her we lived in “migrant worker housing”—it was undeniable that reliable shelter, 24-hour electricity and running water, a variety of food, and a regular salary were all highly treasured and unavailable to most of the Angolan population. The arrogant superiority displayed by someone like Ding Ding could be taken as further evidence of colonial attitudes among Chinese in Angola.

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 120.

<sup>247</sup> Franke, *China and the West*, 85.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

However, there is a crucial difference between Chinese interventions in Angola and the European imperial projects that occurred in centuries past. This difference lies in the historical conditions in which China had made its way to Angola. Chinese in Angola remembered the humiliation their country had suffered under European imperialism; the revolutionary projects of the twentieth century had been built on a struggle against it. China was a country that, like Angola, had experienced European colonization. Even in the 1920s, Chinese were forbidden from entering certain restaurants in foreign settlements; they were not allowed to travel first-class on trains or ships; and they were excluded from “international clubs” in some Chinese cities up to World War II.<sup>249</sup> Echoes of these discriminatory policies could be felt in favored treatment toward foreigners in China through the twentieth century.<sup>250</sup> Moreover, as I will explore further below, the legacies of an earlier encounter with the West could be felt in the reflections of Chinese expatriates in Angola on their own place in the world.

### Struggle, Development, and Quality

One afternoon at The Media Center, on my way back from washing clothes, I passed Fourth Brother sitting by his open door, savoring a Cuban cigar. He had been among the first Northwest Construction employees to arrive in Angola in 2005, and through a combination of experience and family connections, had attained the high-level position of Vice-Manager of the Trade Department. Nonetheless, he maintained casual and friendly relations with most employees, and insisted everyone call him Fourth Brother, as he was born fourth among his siblings. He invited me in for a chat, and I asked about his impression of an international trade fair he had attended the day before.

“It wasn’t that great,” Fourth Brother said, unenthused, “The main thing is that the government doesn’t give it importance. You see, in these developing countries, the government has to *support* the development of agriculture and light industry. A developing country cannot rely completely on foreign investment to develop. After all, foreign investment comes from outside the country, and one day it will go away, so a country has to develop its own enterprises. But they haven’t done a good job.” I nodded as he continued his analysis, “Right now I think the main problem for the government to solve is unemployment. See how many of these young guys come from the provinces to Luanda looking for jobs?” Many of the Angolan workers at Chinese companies in Luanda had traveled from Lubango, Malanje, or Huambo looking for work; for some of its projects Northwest Construction had even sent people directly to the provinces to look for workers. Fourth Brother went on, “They can find work because right now Luanda’s construction market is booming, but all of this is only temporary. The biggest mistake that this country has made is that they haven’t given the common people employment solutions and social stability. Have you noticed that they are always doing these image-related projects? Of course building roads, setting up electricity and

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 124-125.

<sup>250</sup> In 2015, I heard an American man who had recently moved to San Francisco after living for several years in Beijing lament that China had become a less enjoyable place to live because “they’re even starting to make foreigners obey the law.”

running water, these are all necessary. But African countries like this need to develop industries, whether they're producing electrical products, high-tech, or whatever, they must develop. That's the only way a country can solve the problems of unemployment and social instability."

Fourth Brother assessed Angola's development problems in a tone of lament similar to that with which Ding Ding had bemoaned the lack of spirited hard work he saw among Angolan workers. Now, just as Ding Ding had negatively compared Afonso's attitude at work to his own model behavior with the bosses in China, Fourth Brother used China's own development success as an example of what Angola had failed to achieve: "Foreign investors should receive a country's protection, but in this place there is no protection at all. During reform and opening up, China had policies to attract foreign investment. In China, all foreign investors initially received very beneficial conditions to invest, so that they could help us develop, but Angola hasn't done this. They always depend on these ready-made models to do things; they depend on the government to get more loans. Then *we* always have to hear them [construction clients] say that the government's money hasn't arrived yet! They absolutely have not relied on their own efforts to develop. They think their country is wealthy, so they can just depend on oil to survive."

I guessed that Fourth Brother's complaints about the lack of "protection" for Chinese investors were being made in at least partial reference to extortion by Angolan police officers, as well as a recent elevation of tariffs on imported goods.<sup>251</sup> I wondered if anything had been different at the beginning of the National Reconstruction Program. "When we first arrived," Fourth Brother said, "black people, both police and workers, were *very* friendly and kind to Chinese people. I remember when we were in Benguela building the stadium, we used to have to go to the local market to buy food. A lot of people would line up to make their purchases. Even though they only bought small quantities they had to go shopping every day because they didn't have money. After we had gone a few times, the security guard started to let us go straight to the front of the line, and no one complained. He would say, 'The Chinese people are here, let them pass!' We used to drive around without driver's licenses or anything then. The police on the road would just wave us through. In general, safety was much better then. We didn't have these fences around our compounds," he gestured to the aluminum panels surrounding us, "On long car trips we would sometimes just pull over to the side of the road and sleep for a few hours. Ah, we would get bitten to death by mosquitos! Now we don't dare to do such things. After 2009 it started to get bad. It wasn't that anything in particular happened. Too many Chinese people started coming to this country, and in the construction

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<sup>251</sup> In March 2014, the Angolan government implemented a new regime of customs tariffs, with the intended purpose of stimulating local industry. Prices of certain imports, like steel, went up by as much as 40%, and many constructors who had not taken the tariff hike into account when formulating bids ended up losing money on contracts. Chinese businesses may have been especially harmed by this sudden change as news of the new policy reached many of them only after prices had already increased ("Angola: Nova Pauta Aduaneira entra hoje em vigor" [New customs tariffs enforced today], *Angop*, March 1, 2014, accessed December 1, 2014, [http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/economia/2014/2/9/Angola-Nova-Pauta-Aduaneira-entra-hoje-vigor,67019a18-3750-45f3-b789-dc89a42dc3b6.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/economia/2014/2/9/Angola-Nova-Pauta-Aduaneira-entra-hoje-vigor,67019a18-3750-45f3-b789-dc89a42dc3b6.html)).

industry there are bound to be people, workers, for instance, who are not very cultured (*wenhua cengci di*). They probably didn't treat the Angolan workers they supervised very well. I mean, even if you can't understand what someone's saying you can understand when they're insulting you, right? So somehow this came to have certain negative effects. Angolans started to have a bad impression of Chinese people, because of these low-quality people (*suzhi di deren*), and because they started to think that Chinese people have a lot of money."

Fourth Brother's tirade had started off on a note of confidence: he seemed to be proud of what China had achieved, and annoyed or frustrated that Angola could not do the same. However, as Fourth Brother had begun to relate the changes that had occurred in Chinese-Angolan social relations since he arrived in the country, what he revealed was not the unchallenged virtue of Chinese investors unfairly appreciated by Angolan recipients of their beneficence. Rather, he had exposed an embarrassing aspect of Chinese involvement in Angolan National Reconstruction—as more Chinese companies had come to the country, the secret of China's imperfect development had been exposed: Chinese workers, or even self-made entrepreneurs, were not as "cultured" as those with more education would have wished. As evidence of this, some of them beat or insulted Angolan workers, while others flaunted their wealth in a way that invited robberies. In Fourth Brother's narrative, the negative attitudes of Angolans toward Chinese people did not result from Angolan misconceptions but from Chinese deficiencies.

The twists and turns in Fourth Brother's discourse reflect some of the problems that have troubled Chinese intellectuals over the course of the twentieth century. Shaken by the incursions of Western imperial powers in the late nineteenth century, Chinese reformers sought ways of both explaining both how China had sunk to such a point of weakness and how it might rise once again to acquire the "wealth and power" of the West. Significantly, they blamed the subjugation of China not on European imperialism as a system, nor on the brutal behavior of the imperial powers themselves, but on problems internal to China: "Disturbance within and attack from outside' (*nei luan wai huan*) followed each other as symptoms of a bad and ineffective government. ...According to Chinese traditions the quality of those who conducted government was the decisive factor in the political situation."<sup>252</sup> As the meaning of China shifted from "the world" to one country among many, reformers embarked on a series of self-criticisms that were to persist up to the present.

A major figure to emerge during this period was Yan Fu, the translator into Chinese of canonical texts in Western social theory by Herbert Spencer, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and others. According to historian Benjamin Schwartz, he was "the first Chinese literatus who relates himself seriously, rigorously and in a sustained fashion to modern Western thought," and his work was to influence generations of Chinese thinkers from Lu Xun to Mao Zedong.<sup>253</sup> As a student in the late 1870s, Yan Fu traveled to England with a burning question that was not his alone, but a question of his time: "What was the secret of

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<sup>252</sup> Franke, *China and the West*, 106.

<sup>253</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 3.

Western wealth and power?”<sup>254</sup> He searched for the answers in the writings of European scholars, finding in Spencer the power of science to transform society for the better. After he returned to China, only to face the blow of Chinese defeat to Japan in 1895, he began to publish his own essays, in which he called attention to a fundamental difference he had discovered between China and the West. Specifically, Yan Fu found in the “thought” of China as compared to the West different notions of time and different valuations of change. Whereas in China, value had traditionally been placed on harmonious order and balance that could be achieved by relying on ancient tradition, in the West what modern thinkers had valued was the inexhaustible forward motion of progress.<sup>255</sup> Moreover, in his reading of Darwin, Yan Fu discovered the motor of this progressive development resided in the active energy of struggle:

“People and living things struggle for survival. At first, species struggle with species, then as [men] gradually progress, there is a struggle between one social group and another. The weak invariably become the prey of the strong (*chi’ang-jou*), the stupid invariably become subservient to the clever.”<sup>256</sup>

Following Schwartz, we might see Yan Fu’s interest in the Darwinian concept of struggle not as an embrace of the biological theory of evolution. Although he did cherish science, what he stresses here the value of *struggle*: “assertive energy, the emphasis on the actualization of potentialities within a competitive situation.”<sup>257</sup> The idea that evolution through competitive struggle would lead inevitably toward further strengthening originated in the nationalist impulses of a scholar reading Darwin and Spencer at a moment of Chinese weakness.

Darwin and Spencer were not the only nineteenth century thinkers to advocate violent struggle as a means to social advancement. Although he moved the arena of struggle from the realm of nature to that of the relation between labor and capital, Marx similarly believed in the necessity of competition for the progress of history.<sup>258</sup> This Marxist emphasis on the importance of struggle was of course taken up in China by Mao, in combination with the notion of self-reliance that was a core part of his ant-imperialist program. Little more than two decades after the founding of the People’s Republic, a European visitor witnessed firsthand what Mao’s version of collective struggle could achieve. Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, an Italian journalist permitted to visit China in 1971, explained Chinese success

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>256</sup> Yan Fu quoted by Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, 46.

<sup>257</sup> Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, 46.

<sup>258</sup> According to Marvin Harris, “Although Marx and Engels thought it highly amusing that Darwin had been able to understand the animal kingdom by an analogy with the animal-like behavior of British capitalist society, and although they detested Malthus, they were not beyond having their own principle of the survival of the fittest. Indeed, both Spencer and Marx warned against the deleterious effect of diminished competition. The only difference was that for Spencer, the danger lay in the possibility that individuals would somehow manage to avoid natural selection because of misguided altruism; while in Marx’s version of progress-through-struggle, the danger lay in the failure of one class to perceive the other as its enemy” (*The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1968), 222).

in part through a comparison between Shanghai and another great Asian metropolis:

“Today, Shanghai and Calcutta are, in a way, the alpha and omega of an alphabet which can deliver us from the illiteracy of our Eurocentrism and enable us to understand Asia, and hence China. One has to have known the other Asia—the smell of India, with its blend of foulness and incense, the eyes filled with horror, the sickening decay—in order to understand China. I remember India as a country inhabited by shadowy people, bereft of light, living in darkness, groping their way. In India, little children, their hollow eyes ringed with purplish circles, cling to your legs like leeches, brandishing their sores and stumps. They are hardened beggars. Hordes of lepers, blind men, and cripples imprison you in a circle of tainted flesh, rapacity, mystical neurosis, squalid devotion. They sleep on the ground, spread out over the vast reaches of the city of Calcutta. They die, on the average, at the age of twenty-seven. I remember Benares—the impassive holy men covered with dust, and a cataleptic people, afflicted with every imaginable disease, lying along the steps that descend to the Ganges, waiting for death; and the blazing funeral pyres, the sacred cows that go in and out of the temples; and the Parsee cemeteries on whose towers the vultures feed on rotting corpses, letting a shred of flesh fall on the unwary passer-by as they take to the air. All this must be remembered, I think, if one is really to understand the strength of China, to understand what cities like Shanghai—once as tragic as Calcutta—started from.”<sup>259</sup>

A devoted Marxist herself, Macciocchi saw in Shanghai—in the skyscrapers, the busy vessels on the river, the flurry of public political expression—glorious evidence of the superiority of socialism. More than that, however, she detected in the contrast between India, for her a land of “amorphous resigned masses” and China, “bursting with floods of human energy,” an incredible possibility for human transformation. In China, there had been a “metamorphosis ...of the dregs of humanity into an immense political vanguard.”<sup>260</sup> The passive, weak China of Yan Fu’s time was nowhere to be seen.

Fourth Brother had attributed Angolan underdevelopment to the passivity of the country’s leaders, which he implicitly contrasted against the active role the Chinese government had taken to provide solutions for common people. The values of progress and development, perhaps even self-reliance, could be heard through his complaints. Nonetheless, in Fourth Brother’s story, China did not appear as an undisputed model toward which Angola must aspire. In referencing China’s reform and opening up, he implied that his country had been through a phase similar to the current one in Angola, in which it had had to make use of foreign investment. However, that did not mean that Chinese people were more civilized than Angolans. In his view, China was developmentally ahead of Angola, but some characteristic of its citizens abroad somehow still held it behind.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Macciocchi, *Daily Life in Revolutionary China*, 302.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>261</sup> This ambivalent stance recalled the attitudes of early-20<sup>th</sup> century reformers: “At the same time as *minzu zhuyi* [racial] nationalists posited a primordial *minzu* essence that could be mobilized, these very same commentators continued to lament Chinese peoples’ ‘backwardness.’ However enabling, this new

The term Fourth Brother had used to evaluate his fellow citizens was *suzhi*, a word that could be translated as “human quality.” It is a term that emerged in the context of Deng Xiaoping’s liberalizing reforms. As a program of modernization replaced the revolutionary ideology of the Maoist era, tradition was reconstructed as a “memory” that was strategically deployed to maintain social order. At the same time, the technological management of “human quality” was aimed at a “dream” of civilizational progress.<sup>262</sup> The word *suzhi* is made up of two characters: *su* [素], meaning pure or simple, and *zhi* [质], meaning matter or substance. However, as Borge Bakken has noted, the notion of ‘human quality’ that was widely debated during the reform period did not refer to pure or innate properties but to characteristics that could be manipulated or fostered. This change in the meaning of the term itself reflects a broader shift in post-reform Chinese society toward an interest in the management and administration of the population. ‘Quality’ signified the human input in a process of economic growth and modernization that Deng Xiaoping, answering Yan Fu’s question with a different answer, claimed would “[make] the country rich and strong.”<sup>263</sup>

In the early 2000s, *suzhi* was typically attached to two figures in popular Chinese discourse: on the one hand, rural migrants was feared to be lacking in *suzhi*, while on the other hand, middle-class children was forced to undergo an array of educational and nurturing activities designed to instill *suzhi*.<sup>264</sup> Fourth Brother’s description of the low quality of Chinese workers in Angola transported this image of the uncouth migrant worker into the international sphere. Other employees at the Company made similar comments. One manager complained that workers on his plane ride from Beijing to Luanda had “*such* low *suzhi*” because they took their shoes off and stank up the cabin. “It was so disgraceful,” he said, “And they didn’t only disgrace themselves; they disgraced the whole country.”<sup>265</sup> Another employee told me that in the past some of the Chinese workers had been caught beating the Angolan laborers for whom they were responsible. “The contractor told them they had to stop,” he had explained the phenomenon as if it were a matter of simple common sense, “Those workers didn’t speak any Portuguese and disciplining the black people was part of their job, so they thought they just had to use whatever means possible. This has to do with their level of *suzhi* and education.” The categorical divisions that *suzhi* established between different types of Chinese made it easy to displace serious transgressions onto those deemed to have ‘low quality’. At the same time, these low quality workers made a bad name for China. They were a source of shame for the managers, and could cause problems for all Chinese

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*minzu* recognition was an elite nationalist proposition, therefore, the anxious displacement of China’s problems onto the figure of the people was reinforced. ...The working out of this problematic and this contradiction has informed ever since a large part of twentieth-century China’s historical passage” (Karl, *Staging the World*, 143).

<sup>262</sup> Bakken, *The Exemplary Society*.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>264</sup> Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*),” *Public Culture* 16.2 (2004): 189-208.

<sup>265</sup> “特别丢人，而他们丢的不是自己的人，是一个国家的人” (*tebie diuren, er tamen diude bushi ziji de ren, shi yige guojia de ren*).

working in Angola. Their widely acknowledged faults made it difficult for Company employees to unconditionally assert Chinese superiority.<sup>266</sup>

The “quality” of Chinese people became more pressing of an issue in the context of Chinese globalization. In the ‘global’ construction market of Luanda, Chinese expatriates encountered people from all over the world, and they had to decide how to situate themselves in relation to them. Chinese citizens were only the most numerous in a truly international group of people attracted to Angola’s booming postwar economy. Working alongside them were Portuguese and Spaniards, fleeing financial crisis in Europe, Brazilian builders cashing in on the construction boom, and Vietnamese who had come to sell their labor or set up small businesses. One night, after a few rounds of toasts over dinner at the home of a Chinese business partner, the topic of national difference came to dominate the conversation.

“I used to hire Vietnamese laborers to work for me,” said the owner of a small construction business, “but then I realized they are just as unreliable as Angolans.”

Li Jun agreed, “I don’t like Vietnamese people because they are always complaining about China and Chinese people.”

“That’s right,” said the first guy, “They are always saying China is no good, but it was us who gave them their name anyway!”<sup>267</sup>

Fourth Brother chimed in: “I don’t like them because they have low *suzhi*.”

A few minutes later the dinner guests began to discuss the term *heigui*, “black devil.” “It’s not very polite,” explained our host, “And I think some Angolans know what it means.”

“That’s right,” said Director Fu, “Even *heizi* (black) is not a very good term.”

“Right,” agreed Li, “Simão [an Angolan business partner who had learned Chinese while studying in Beijing] was in our office once and told us, ‘You can’t call Angolans that!’ So we’ve gotten used to it now. We always call them ‘locals’ (*dangdi ren*).”

Director Fu proceeded to tell a story about an Angolan policeman acquaintance who had come to Guangzhou while he was in China recently. Although the policeman visited Director Fu frequently at The Media Center, Fu could never seem to remember his name, and referred to him only as “the big fat policeman” (*da pangzi jingcha*). The man had travelled with his sister to Guangzhou without any luggage. She had been there before to do business, purchasing and exporting items like furniture and clothing, but it was his first time in the country. “They kept talking about how beautiful China is, how Angola could be this beautiful

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<sup>266</sup> Essays on the bad qualities of Chinese people in Africa sometimes circulated among Chinese-language readers on the Internet, such as one that Ma Hui showed me, entitled, “The Bad Habits of Chinese People in Africa.” The “bad habits” it listed included cheating or fighting with other Chinese, consuming pork excessively in Muslim areas, and selling low-quality or “fake” products. If Chinese in Africa behave like this, the author asked, how can Africans “believe that China has five thousand years of civilization?” See Liu Zhirong, “The Bad Habits of Chinese People in Africa” [中国人在非洲恶习 *zhongguoren zai feizhou de exi*], *People’s Daily Online*, January 30, 2011, accessed March 7, 2017, <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/13845947.html>.

<sup>267</sup> He may have been referring to the origin of the term “Viet” [越 *yue* in Chinese], which was used in China from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to refer to peoples living in contemporary southern China and northern Vietnam. “Nam” [南 *nan*] means “south” in Chinese.

if only their *grande chefe* [big boss, referring to the president] didn't put all the money in his own wallet! The two of them brought almost nothing with them, and they spent all of their money. They even borrowed some from friends they knew in Guangzhou, and sent an entire full container back to Angola!"

Everyone laughed at this image, and the host added, "Those people who go to China are just like Chinese people; they are also *tuhao* (nouveau-riche)!"<sup>268</sup> The dinner guests roared in happy agreement as I witnessed Afro-Asian brotherhood transformed from Third-World anti-imperialism into the solidarity of upwardly mobile consumerism.

"Right, they are not like Europeans and Americans," Li Jun added, "who come to China and look down on Chinese people."

"Angolans who have gone to China probably wouldn't look down on Chinese people, right?" someone asked.

"They've seen the greatness of China!"<sup>269</sup> Fourth Brother responded triumphantly.

Fu agreed, implicitly contrasting Chinese hospitality against Angolan hostility toward Chinese expats: "They definitely would not look down on Chinese people. After going to China they would have realized how warm and friendly Chinese people are to foreigners!" This was a contrast frequently made among Northwest Construction employees when complaining about how Angolan policemen target foreigners, especially Chinese, for extortion.

"Anyway," our host concluded, "I think Angolans who've been to China *shouldn't* belittle Chinese people."

If China was so much more developed than Angola, why were Chinese and Angolans, unlike Europeans, both *tuhao*? If China had already achieved greatness, why did this greatness still need to be recognized by non-Chinese? And why would Chinese people need to be worried about being looked *down* upon not only by Europeans, but also by Angolans? The chauvinistic-sounding comments of these Chinese expats inadvertently exposed their insecurity about where China and Chinese people stand in a world order. Even though China was beating Angola in the race toward development, the low *suzhi* of its common citizens, among other things, indicated that it had yet to claim a status that would exempt it from comparison with African countries. Then there was the curious problem of Angolan perceptions of China. Despite unabashed negative stereotyping, Chinese expatriates remained concerned with what Angolans thought of them. It was important not to use an offensive word like *heizi*, at least in certain company, and to prove to Angolans that China deserved respect, especially since it was assumed that this respect could not be gotten from Europeans and Americans. At a new historical moment of Chinese global expansion, these Chinese

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<sup>268</sup> *Tuhao* (土豪) is a term recently popularized in China to refer to a new class of mostly uneducated but extremely wealthy people. The term literally means 'local tyrant' and was used in Maoist parlance to demonize feudal landlords. At the time of my fieldwork, it was often used to joke about the vulgar, expensive taste of the nouveau riche. "土豪 (*tuhao*): the Uncouth Rich," *China Daily*, October 18, 2013, accessed March 3, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/18/content\\_17041971.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/18/content_17041971.htm).

<sup>269</sup> "他们看到了中国的强大!" (*Tamen kandaole zhongguo de qiandaj!*)

overseas seemed uncertain about where they stood as they suddenly found themselves building an image of China for the world to see.

## Hearts of Darkness

In August 2014, I traveled with Li Jun and two other Northwest Construction employees to Zaire, a province in the north of Angola that borders the Democratic Republic of Congo. Bound for the provincial government in M'banza Congo, the men were ready to embark on an unprecedented task for Northwest Construction in Angola. They had spent weeks preparing a bid for a construction contract funded by a major international development organization. By participating directly in the public procurement process, the company was bypassing general contractors like China Electrical or CIF, upon which it had previously relied for all of its major contracts in Angola. This was a test, and, though Li Jun doubted that the company would be able to win a public tender on its first try, he thought it was an important opportunity to learn about the bidding process. By contrast, Xiao Wang, a recent college graduate who had only been with the company for a few months, was anxious to demonstrate his capabilities. Having studied Portuguese for a mere month and a half before coming to Angola, he had been given the responsibility of drafting the technical side of the proposal, and according to company rumor he would soon replace the de facto translator for the Engineering Department, who was scheduled to return to China. This trip was a chance for him to prove his merit. Our driver, Old Chen, kept his opinions about this new endeavor to himself, chatting instead about cars, houses, and other things he planned to buy on his next trip home to China. A sarcastic, sometimes harshly critical man in his mid-40s, Chen had been in Angola for six years already. Officially, he was the personal driver of Director Zhang, the highest-level manager of Northwest Construction in Angola, but Zhang was in China so much of the time that Chen often had to occupy himself otherwise. "I do this for my family," he told me once, proudly, "I have been here all these years because of them, and I never, ever complain about it. The people I look down on the most are those who come here and work for only one or two years, and then go home. Who have they come here for? Themselves? If they can't do this for their families then I have no reason to respect them."

Nearly 300 kilometers north of Luanda, we reached the town of N'zeto, where the paved road we had been driving on for the past several hours abruptly ended. I called Carlos, the soft-spoken Angolan man who had previously worked as an inspector on one of Northwest Construction's major projects and, in his new role as an administrator for the provincial government, had introduced the Zaire project to the company. "On your left, you should see the ocean," he said, and we followed his instructions to turn onto a dirt road to the right. The road was in the process of being paved, and as we bumped along, we passed a Chinese man working. "*Chinês*," Old Chen deadpanned in Portuguese, and Li Jun laughed, mimicking a phrase frequently uttered by Fourth Brother, "*China pessoa!* [lit: China person, or *zhongguo ren*]."

The men seemed to read the landscape through that with which their work in Angola had allowed them to become most familiar: China and the construction industry. We drove past a clearly marked Sino-Hydro base on the left, and then another construction company on

the right. “This one must also be Chinese,” said Li Jun as he gazed out the window. But Chen refuted him, “No, it’s not. You can tell it’s not from the trucks—they’re all Volvos.” The presumption was that a company using exclusively Volvo brand trucks would be European, or at least not Chinese, and as a sign bearing the company’s name came into view, it appeared indeed to be Portuguese. “That’s right,” chuckled Li Jun, “If they were Chinese they’d all be Howo.”<sup>270</sup> As we moved onto a paved section of the road again and began to speed up, we paused to gawk at what appeared to be a large agricultural project. Several large white tents had been erected, and the area closest to us was occupied by a group of impressive *jangos*, Angolan thatched gazebos. A large sign in front provided publicity for a major Angolan government ministry. “What about this one?” Xiao Wang asked innocently, “Is it made by Chinese people?” Asserting his authority as an experienced elder, Old Chen responded curtly, “It’s the Blacks’ [*heizi de*].” Then he changed his mind, “It’s Portuguese people’s [*putaoyaren de*].”

In M’banza Congo, we were met by Carlos, who took us to a small hotel across the street from the government agency where the bid-opening ceremony would take place. As we checked in and made our way to our rooms, I found some subtle material traces of Chineseness in our new surroundings. Televisions installed in the restaurant and reception area had remote controls adorned with Chinese characters; a trash can in one of the courtyards was labeled in Chinese as well: 其他垃圾 (“other waste”—most likely part of a set with one bin for recyclables and one for compostables); even a machine for making *fino*, draft beer, stashed in the corner of the dining room, bore markings indicating it was made in China. While washing my hands, I noticed that the bathroom fixtures in the hotel room were identical to those in my room at the Northwest Construction compound. Like other hoteliers, whoever ran this establishment may have gone or sent someone on a shopping trip to China for supplies.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Howo (豪沃) designates a range of models for heavy-duty trucks made by state-owned manufacturer Sinotruk.

<sup>271</sup> At upwards of \$200 USD per night, hotels in Angola were too expensive for me to stay in regularly during my fieldwork. However, the few that I did experience on business trips with Northwest Construction tended to be similarly furnished with Chinese-made materials, usually recognizable through the presence of Chinese characters. I have explored the significance of Chinese material traces in another African context through a joint project with Mariane Ferme based on fieldwork in Sierra Leone (Ferme and Schmitz, “Writings on the Wall”). As suggested there, everyday materiality is an important arena for understanding the social changes produced through intercultural encounters. This is a point that Jean and John Comaroff made persuasively in their extended study of encounters between British missionaries and Tswana converts in nineteenth-century South Africa. Through exploration of such facets of daily life as clothing, domestic architecture, and medicine, the Comaroffs show how the “colonization of consciousness” took place just as much through the reformation of everyday habits as it did through theological teachings (see *Of Revelation and Revolution*, v. 1, xi; also *Of Revelation and Revolution*, v. 2, Chapters 5–7). I hesitate to draw a direct parallel between the material traces of nineteenth-century British colonialism and those of twenty-first century Chinese trade. However, I think the notable presence of objects marked as Chinese in a small town in the interior of Angola attests to the impact of global Chinese manufacturing and trade in everyday Angolan life.

The next day, Li Jun asked me to set up a lunch appointment with Carlos, and we met him at a small restaurant in town owned by a Portuguese construction company. The entrées cost \$30-40 USD each, slightly more expensive than the \$20 we might have paid at a comparable restaurant in Luanda. Xiao Wang was shocked—“It’s so expensive!”—but Old Chen, who had spent the morning smoking and eating potato chips in bed, remained arrogantly apathetic: “You think that’s expensive?! You’ve never been to Saurimo.”<sup>272</sup> Presumably indifferent to this banter in Chinese, Carlos asked to go over our proposal for the construction bid. Looking at me sternly, to be sure he was understood, he reminded us that, if Northwest Construction won the contract, “10% will have to go to the staff in Luanda.”<sup>273</sup> He flipped through the pages of the masterpiece Xiao Wang had created, with the help of Google Translate, nodding his head. Then suddenly he stopped and pointed to a line where Xiao Wang had written an estimate of how many local workers would be hired to perform manual labor on site. He had translated the word for “laborer” as *capataz*. “This word,” Carlos chuckled, “is one we no longer use anymore.” Xiao Wang said he would change it immediately. Carlos laughed more, “That was what they called us in colonial times, when they used to beat us!”

This minor translation faux pas illustrated the treacherous path Northwest Construction, and other Chinese companies, had taken in Angola—by pursuing business opportunities in the country that relied on exploitation of local labor, they risked easy comparison to colonial settlers. However, there may have been ways to avoid becoming a new empire in Africa, and Carlos offered one. Having studied on a government scholarship in Belarus through high school and university, he was familiar with ways in which educational exchange had been central to diplomacy between the Soviet Union and avowedly socialist regimes around the world. Now, he told us, one of the largest Chinese companies working in Zaire province had already provided 30 scholarships for Angolan students to study in China. “Do you think this is a good way for Chinese companies to cooperate with the Angolan government?” Li Jun asked. Carlos answered indirectly by explaining that the major Chinese companies with business in Zaire were all working on projects with “highly elevated financial values,” which the governor had specifically invited them to work on, “therefore, they do this to thank him.” Upon hearing the companies’ names, Li Jun remarked that they had all been very successful in Angola; some even had Portuguese and Brazilian engineers on staff.

The bid-opening ceremony would not take place until the following morning, and as Carlos had to return to his office for the afternoon, he suggested we take a look at “the oldest church in Africa,” located in the center of town. In books about the history of Angola, I had read that this church, the Cathedral of São Salvador, was built in 1491, specifically for the baptism of King Nzinga a Knuwu, who, along with several other prominent men of the Kongo kingdom, sought conversion to Christianity in order to fortify relations with

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<sup>272</sup> Saurimo is the capital of Lunda Sul, a province in the northeast of Angola known for diamond mining. Several years earlier, Northwest Construction’s Trade Department had tried, and failed, to set up a retail business there.

<sup>273</sup> Later, Xiao Wang would remark that this was a relatively large kickback, compared to what he had seen in China. From what I witnessed during my time with Northwest Construction, a 10% commission was not unusual.

Portuguese traders.<sup>274</sup> The church, known locally as Kulumbimbi, was elevated to the status of cathedral in 1596 by which time the population of the city numbered up to 50,000.<sup>275</sup> The small town where we were staying had once been the capital of what epic poet Luís de Camões called “the greatest of kingdoms discovered on the western shores of Africa.”<sup>276</sup> German ethnologist Leo Frobenius added some colorful details in his own description: “Further south, in the kingdom of the Congo, a seething mass of people dressed in ‘silk’ and ‘velvet,’ large States well organized down to the last detail, powerful sovereigns, wealthy industries. Civilized to the very marrow of their bones!”<sup>277</sup> But it was difficult for me to convey this sense of historical grandeur to my colleagues from Northwest Construction, as we stood behind a metal fence, gazing at the ruins of the church—four roofless walls, surrounded by a lawn of parched grass. “That’s it?” Li Jun scoffed, “This pile of stones?” The three commented on the comparative impressiveness of officially recognized historical sites in China. We took a few snapshots, and, walking quickly past an area marked, “Cemetery of the Kings of the Kingdom of Kongo,” got back in the car.

That evening, Li Jun and Old Chen decided that we would skip dinner and instead have some snacks and beer on the patio of the hotel. As we sat down in the “VIP bungalow,” a small shack of aluminum and plexiglass that had been plopped in the middle of the hotel’s garden, Li Jun joked that we should drink a bottle of imported champagne, priced at \$125 per bottle, to celebrate submitting the construction bid. When I suggested he pose for a picture with the hotel’s most expensive bottle of alcohol, however, he suddenly became very serious: “Don’t take a photo! It could end up on the Internet, and then who knows what would become of me! Now, in China, when people eat out at restaurants, they have expensive alcohol poured into the bottles of cheap alcohol to serve.” He was referring to Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. Old Chen chimed in to say investigations of state-owned enterprises had not yet begun, but that would be the next step, after government officials had been dealt with. “Then you and I will be done for!” He laughed, looking at Li Jun.

Xiao Wang turned to me and began to speak in a solemn tone. “Some people’s hearts are really black, Teacher Pan. I never thought my village would be ‘so black,’ but last year, someone was caught, also surnamed Wang. They discovered that, over the years, he had received more than 500,000 RMB in bribes.”<sup>278</sup> He went on explaining in a tone of earnest disbelief, but Li Jun cut him off and snorted dismissively, “Ha! That’s nothing! The deputy director of the Beijing Zoo was caught for embezzling 14 million RMB!”<sup>279</sup> If a *deputy director of a zoo* could embezzle that much, how much do think the real ‘tigers’ have taken?” Old Chen

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<sup>274</sup> Georges Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo: from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 45.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 147.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> Roughly \$83,000 USD. As I did not record the precise figure during our conversation, I have made a rough estimate based on media reports of similar cases in Gansu province in 2013.

<sup>279</sup> Over \$2 million USD. Compare this to the case of Ray Nagin, former mayor of New Orleans, who was convicted on corruption charges in February 2014 for taking around \$200,000 USD in bribes.

jumped in to share some juicy details about a corruption scandal he had read about, and Li Jun retorted with information about another graft case of impressive proportions. The two went on like this for some time, swapping stories, competing with each other to tell tales of increasingly rotten officials who had pocketed ever-greater sums of money. Then Li Jun addressed Xiao Wang in a pedagogical tone: “You must realize that everything is relative. You might think that one place is very ‘black’, but as soon as you go somewhere else, you realize it doesn’t really count as black at all. It’s just like how you think people in Angola are black, but maybe if you went to Kenya, you wouldn’t think Angolan people are black at all.” Chen chimed in with more authoritative knowledge: “Actually Angolans don’t really count as black, in Africa. They are not very black compared to other Africans.” While the first use of the term ‘black’ had been metaphorical, implying evil, as in Xiao Wang’s initial remark about “black hearts,” Li Jun had suddenly switched to a description of racial pigmentation. I was perplexed by this sudden transition, concerned about how rapidly it had occurred, and Li Jun must have noticed the expression on my face. As if to clue me in, he explained, “We are talking about skin color now.”

Li Jun, Old Chen, and Xiao Wang had already had a few rounds of beers, but the night had only just begun. Li Jun was accustomed to ordering beer in large quantities at Chinese restaurants, where to request only one bottle per guest would make a host seem stingy. He asked the Angolan waiter to bring twenty more bottles, and a few minutes later the young man returned, struggling with a heavy crate that he placed on the floor beside our table. This was probably not the way most guests in this hotel consumed their alcohol, I guessed, but the waiters seemed pleased by the large order, and continued to stand quietly to the side as the empty bottles piled up.

A television attached to the wall was tuned to a major Angolan station based at the Media Center where some of us lived. Gazing at the screen, on which several rows of young Angolan men and women swayed back and forth to *kizomba* music,<sup>280</sup> Li Jun joked dismissively, “Look at them shaking around! They look so silly! Can’t they do anything else?” Xiao Wang smiled and asked meekly, “Brother Li,”—he had switched to addressing Li Jun by this friendlier term rather than the more formal “Manager Li”—“have you become racist? I always hear the older workers at The Intelligence Center<sup>281</sup> saying that people who stay here for a long time end up becoming racist.” His comment was not stated in a tone of aggression or accusation; it sounded more like a neutral observation, with a tinge of lament. Just as calmly, Li Jun denied the suggestion, “I’m not racist. I just don’t understand this culture.” Like a good Boasian anthropologist, he replaced racial distinctions with cultural ones, racial prejudice with lack of intercultural understanding. He went on to illustrate his assertion of cultural difference with a colorful story: “When they (the Angolan television station) first opened their studios, some of the (Chinese) workers at The Media Center used to go watch

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<sup>280</sup> For a history of Angolan music in the twentieth century, see Marissa Moorman, *Intonations: a Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

<sup>281</sup> This was another project of Northwest Construction, referred to by employees as “*qingbao zhongxin*.” The administrative and logistical sections of the company were based there, and it was where Old Chen and Xiao Wang lived.

shows being filmed. They would sit in the audience in their white undershirts and rubber slippers, smoking cigarettes. Can you imagine? Sometimes the cameras would pan up to the audience and they'd find an old Chinese worker there in an undershirt smoking a cigarette!" We all laughed at this absurd scene. I was surprised that the Angolan media professionals would permit such behavior, and asked how the Chinese workers could have been allowed in. Li gave me a haughty response: "They let them sit in the audience *because we gave them everything*.<sup>282</sup> All of that was built by us, so they were very grateful, and let us watch for free. It was just that after a while, they thought it was a little inconvenient, so they asked the workers not to wear undershirts or smoke cigarettes inside." Looking back at the screen, he continued, "I remember one time, I was in there with one of the old workers, you know, the guy who carries all the keys for The Media Center, for maintenance. We were watching them film a show with a bunch of people dancing on stage, just like this. When it was over, the worker turned to me and asked, 'What did we just watch? It felt like an hour of pornography!'" The other two men laughed heartily at this punch line.

When the laughter subsided, Chen added, "But really, black people do have a good sense of rhythm." Li Jun was pensive for a moment, then said, "I think that they don't only have different habits, they are really a different kind of people (*renzhong*)." I had heard about just as much racial stereotyping as I could tolerate. The stereotypes that had been invoked—of "black people" as unintelligent yet sensual and rhythmic, for instance—were precisely those that had been used by Europeans as justification for colonialism and to elevate a supposedly superior, rational, European civilization. Moreover, I was disappointed that, even after his affirmation of culture over race, Li Jun now seemed to conflate the two in a concept that reeked of evolutionary racism. Sensing my unease,<sup>283</sup> he specifically addressed me, "Mei-ting, you haven't really had a chance to closely observe the way Angolan workers work on a construction site. You would be shocked." I asked why. But before he could answer, Xiao Wang chimed in, again in his tone of lament, "I noticed it too, when I was at The Training Center, during my first two months in Angola. The workers are extremely slow, and some don't seem to be able to learn. You tell them things, and they don't listen. Some might not understand, but others are simply lazy," he paused, "That's why, those who may be pitied can also be hated [*kelian de ren bi you kehen zhichu*]."<sup>284</sup> I went back to my room early, falling asleep to their loud, slurring voices. The next day when we met to attend the bid-opening ceremony, I learned they had consumed over 40 beers between the three of them.

The morning's bureaucratic proceedings were uneventful, and we quickly got back on the road to Luanda, knowing we would have to wait for a phone call from Carlos to find out if Northwest Construction had won any part of the tender. At one point, we drove by an

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<sup>282</sup> As explained in Chapter 2, The Media Center was funded by oil-backed credit lines from China Exim Bank.

<sup>283</sup> Perhaps based on previous instances where I had challenged him, or other members of the Trade Department, by trying to disprove their generalizations about "black people" and "their culture."

<sup>284</sup> This phrase, implying that men are led to misery by virtue of their own defects, was one that I had heard from other members of The Trade Department, often uttered as a warning against what they perceived as my excessive "sympathy" toward Angolan employees.

Angolan crew paving an asphalt road, to which Xiao Wang remarked softly, in earnest surprise, “Blacks are building the road!”

Sounding bored, Old Chen replied, “It’s their country; let them build their own roads.” There was a pause, then he added, “Oh, you thought that blacks don’t know how to do anything?” Chen laughed at his own cleverness, seeming not to notice how these comments contradicted much of what had been said over the past few days.

Signs of Chineseness appeared with increasing frequency as we approached the outskirts of Luanda. We passed at least four large Chinese block factories, some of which advertised restaurants with regional specialties—Old Chen was especially excited by a sign for Henan stewed noodles. As we drove past a sprawling residential complex, apparently recently built, he again displayed his skill for recognizing Chinese construction projects on sight: “This must have been built by China Jiangsu; it looks just like that project in Benfica.” Looking out the window at a hillside of concrete houses, I remembered, from reading academic articles that it had been built for people forcefully evicted from the city center, their houses demolished.<sup>285</sup> Unaware that he was talking about a topic of heated political and academic debates, Chen sighed, and said with hardly restrained pride, “This has all been done by Chinese people!”

I returned to Luanda feeling disturbed at the behavior of my “coworkers” during our business trip. I worried that the kind of racial thinking they seemed to be engaging in was even more dangerous than economic exploitation. Presumptions of racial inferiority could serve as a justification for inhuman treatment, and it frightened me that, after so many efforts had been made, even in Anthropology alone, to discount this erroneous way of thinking, the men of Northwest Construction seemed unashamed to express themselves in such terms. Perhaps the problem was not that a connection had been made between blackness as evil and blackness as African-ness, but that my three interlocutors could speak so unhesitatingly, so unabashedly, in racialized language. They seemed unaware of the world of discourse into which they had entered by speaking of black hearts and black skin in the space of a few sentences.

In his Introduction to *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe takes as his epigraph a quote from Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*:

“No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that

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<sup>285</sup> Chloe Buiré, “The Dream and the Ordinary: an Ethnographic Investigation of Suburbanization in Luanda,” *African Studies* 73.2 (2014): 290-312.

noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not?”<sup>286</sup>

In Conrad’s account, the European encounter with Africa is plagued by a fear of kinship with a group of people who had been marked “other.” It would have been frightening for Europeans to admit that Africans might be human, because this would present a challenge to the idea of Western supremacy in relation to the rest of the world. Mbembe claims that the recognition of other subjectivities, or in his phrasing, “the *problem of the ‘I’ of others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us* [italics in original],” has been one of the most difficult problems to haunt the European philosophical tradition. Western “consciousness,” he argues, has difficulty conceiving that the humanity of a stranger is the same humanity as one’s own. Moreover, the idea of Africa has, in the history of Western thought, been the site of the farthest elaboration of “absolute otherness.”<sup>287</sup> According to Mbembe, the continent of Africa has served as a mirror through which the West develops its own self-image, a self-image that departs dramatically from the hypocrisy of its charitable interventions and violent or exclusionary practices.<sup>288</sup>

Did the thinking of Chinese expatriates in Angola represent a repetition of this European form, albeit one with Chinese characteristics? Although the words that emerged from the mouths of Li Jun, Old Chen, and others would appear to assume an unquestioned Chinese supremacy in the face of African “otherness,” the problem that these men faced in Angola would seem to be quite different from that faced by Europeans in their earlier encounters with Africa. China had already been made to feel a commonality with Africa, since both had been subject to the brutalities of European imperialism. Thus, while Europeans like Marlow assumed a difference between themselves and Africans which was then challenged by the suspicion of a common humanity, Chinese men and women working in Angola may have assumed a common experience with Africans of poverty, development, and lack of culture or quality—all conceived in relation to the West. Instead of dimly recognizing the humanity of Africans, they tried to establish themselves as unquestionably different, and ironically, they used the language of European evolutionary racism to do so. This attempt in itself evidences the instability of China’s superior position in relation to Africa. Although the men of Northwest Construction may have sounded arrogant when talking about Angolans, they were also unsure. Therefore, they had to continuously prove themselves, drawing on supposedly “Chinese” virtues as a dedication to hard work or loyalty

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<sup>286</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1995 [1899]), 62-63. Mbembe’s selection ends at “passionate uproar.”

<sup>287</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe provides a detailed history of how knowledge about ‘Africa’ has been produced in Western scholarship since before the colonial period. See *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). In an essay also titled “The Invention of Africa,” Kwame Anthony Appiah has written critically of black American Pan-Africanists like Alexander Crummel who, through their racially motivated politics, perpetuated dubious notions of a homogenous “Africa” inherited from Euro-American racial thinking of the nineteenth century (*In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-27).

<sup>288</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

to the family. These they could claim as evidence, although they were also constantly being challenged.

### An American Idea of China

One evening as I returned to my room at The Media Center, I was walking past Manager Fu's office when someone shouted from inside: "Young lady!" I peered through the screen door through which the voice had come and saw, lounging on one of the leather sofas that adorned the otherwise simple room, Director Huang, one of Fu's friends and an object of admiration for many of my coworkers in the Trade Department. Huang was an independent businessman who had come to Angola just before the end of the civil war, after establishing import businesses first in Romania, then in Cameroon. Like other entrepreneurs from his home province of Fujian, he had started off importing shoes and clothing from China to sell at a large informal market in Luanda called São Paulo. Later on, he became involved in the construction industry, supplying materials, machinery, and labor. Most recently, he had set up a factory for manufacturing rubber sandals. Junior managers of the Trade Department described him as extremely capable and successful, despite his having been formally educated only up to middle school. They speculated that he had over 100 million RMB (roughly \$15 million USD) in assets, and yet, they always emphasized, he was incredibly humble and down-to-earth.

After I entered the office and greeted the two men, Fu informed me that Huang wanted to invite me to a dinner he would be hosting that night. He tried to flatter me by telling me that Huang had been asking for a while when I would be available to join one of his dinners, giving me little choice but to graciously accept the invitation. A few hours later, Fourth Brother drove Director Fu, Li Jun, and myself several hundred meters down the road to Latin Restaurant, a buffet-style mixed Portuguese and Chinese eatery owned by a couple from Harbin in Northeastern China. In the flowery wallpapered private room at the back of the restaurant, twelve guests sat around a table. They were all owners and employees of private Chinese businesses, known to my companions from The Angola Company through regular gatherings such as this one. Several of them were new to me. "This is our company's Chinese-American employee," announced Director Fu, using a term, *meiji huaren*, that described me as a Chinese person with American citizenship.

We sat down to eat, and several rounds of toasts ensued.<sup>289</sup> As the newest and most junior-level person at the table, I sat furthest from the host. Seated to my right, Fourth

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<sup>289</sup> Typically, at these informal banquets, no one would start eating until the host had first raised a glass and said a few words to mark the occasion. Everyone would take sips of their drinks simultaneously for this toast, then start eating. A few minutes later, the host or the guest of honor would initiate another group toast, and a few minutes after that, there would be a third collective toast. After these three initial toasts had been made, guests were expected to each toast everyone else at the table individually, usually starting with the host and moving in a circle around the table, saying a few celebratory or polite words to each person. Although everyone would be eating and talking while these toasts were being made, there would usually be one or two people making their rounds at any given time, meaning that no conversation could last very long without being interrupted. Joking was

Brother muttered a stream of tips for drinking etiquette into my ear, taking pleasure in the demonstration of his authoritative knowledge: “Don’t start toasting until the end. I’ll tell you when. It’s important to wait for the right opportunity, when they are already a little bit drunk.” On my left, a Director Cao, one of the shop-owners at ChinAngola, agreed, slurring his words, “Women always sneak up at the end!”

Just as Fourth Brother gave me my cue, and I nervously prepared to propose a drink to the host, Director Huang walked over to our end of the table and announced that he wanted to make a toast of his own: “I want to raise a glass to our international friend!” He looked at me, but had everyone’s attention, “To be honest, I don’t really like the United States. I am actually very much opposed to the United States. Therefore, I hope in the future you’ll tell Obama, we Chinese who have come to Angola—a place where no American would dare to come—our money has been earned through hard work and struggle!” He paused. “In the future you will have a chance to meet Obama, right?” I said probably not. “Anyway,” he went on, “You take us common people (*putong laobaixing*)—you know we are all just ordinary, common people, right? You take our daily lives in Angola and when you write them down I hope you can write a little more truthfully, to let Americans understand that we Chinese people are good people!”

The otherwise relaxed, drunken dinner, peppered with friendly jokes, had suddenly become overtly political and nationalistic. Even if he was exaggerating about my ability to communicate directly with the American president, Huang took me as a representative of an American gaze by which Chinese people were being evaluated. There was a tone of defensiveness in his comments. He implied that Chinese moneymaking in Angola could be justified, first, by the fact that Chinese were willing to live and work in conditions no American would be able to endure, and, second, because they earned their profits “honestly,” paying with their own sweat and tears. But behind this justification was an assumption that we already thought otherwise—he would not have had to tell me to tell Americans that Chinese are good if he did not already assume we thought they were evil. Similarly, by emphasizing the commonness of Chinese people in Angola, he assumed that American observers thought Chinese migrants or entrepreneurs in Angola were members of an elite.

I wanted to be clear, at least to my immediate hosts, that I was not a blind supporter of whatever Huang thought America was. At the same time, I felt some sense of responsibility for the country whose passport I held. After clinking glasses with Huang, therefore, I turned to Fourth Brother and admitted, somewhat shamefully, “There really is too little understanding of China in America.” To my amazement, Fourth Brother immediately

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welcome, but it would have been difficult to sustain a serious discussion. Each person would have usually selected to drink red wine, beer, or Chinese “white alcohol” (*baijiu*) at the beginning of the meal. During toasts, one was expected to watch one’s drinking partner, and match the amount that he drank (a few sips, half a glass, or an entire glass) out of respect, although as a young woman and an American I was not always held to such rules. The toasting would continue until everyone had toasted and been toasted by everyone else, so that by the end of the meal, each guest would have exchanged words directly with each of the others, and everyone would be quite drunk, except those who did not drink alcohol and had therefore been toasting with Coca-Cola, or those powerful enough to outsource their drinking to subordinates.

stood up and announced to the table, in a booming voice, “Mei-ting, you must make a toast to everyone! She just said that in America there is far too little understanding of China. Mei-ting, you speak to everyone now!” The others at the table followed Fourth Brother and stood up themselves, preparing for what felt like it was going to have to be a very formal toast. I did not understand what the cause for celebration was, and I felt embarrassed to have to speak publicly in Chinese, especially about something for which I was already ashamed. I thought it might have been embarrassing for some of them as well, to celebrate the misunderstanding of their country abroad, and as I repeated the words, “In America there is too little understanding of China,” I thought I saw Director Fu look at me from the other side of the table with an expression of concern.

What was this toast about? It may not have been possible to force “America” to recognize Chinese greatness, the way Angolans might, at least if they visited China. If however, it could be admitted that America was incapable of understanding China, then at least China had a chance of superseding America in complexity and depth. On the other hand, maybe the point was not to recognize Chinese superiority at all, but only to admit that the American image of China was a misrecognition, and the truth was something else—not even necessarily something better, but certainly not what Americans thought.

On the drive home, Fu and Fourth Brother talked about how they had visited Huang’s house in Fujian to attend his mother’s funeral the year before. They said his house was pretty big, but what was most impressive was a garage he had built to house an impressive collection of luxury vehicles. He had also purchased property in Hong Kong and had acquired Hong Kong identity cards for his wife and children, they said. He had a teenage son who was studying in Australia, and a six-year-old daughter, who was adopted. They explained that he had found her when he decided to donate 1 million RMB to survivors of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. “She is the only one that he took in as his own daughter, but there are other orphans who he supports financially,” Fu explained. In a solemn tone, Fourth Brother concluded: “He’s a good man.”<sup>290</sup>

Director Huang was a perfect example of someone who the young managers of the Trade Department might describe, jokingly, as *tubao*. Born the son of peasants, he had become a wealthy and powerful Chinese nouveau-riche. Although he barely had any formal education, he had taken risks and endured difficulties, both within China and abroad, which allowed him to feel entitled to the money he had earned. He had certain luxurious possessions, and he had made enough connections in government to access certain political privileges, but he carried with him a memory of growing up in poverty, and this may have contributed to his willingness to endure the austere conditions of life and work in Angola. This was partly what characterized the Chinese new rich in Angola at the beginning of the twenty-first century: they had money, and they may have learned to perform in the appropriate situations with a certain amount of class, but their habitus was not that of an entitled aristocracy; instead, they

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<sup>290</sup> In Chinese, he said, “他是善人.” The term *shanren* could be translated as “philanthropist,” but more broadly it could indicate a virtuous person.

negotiated the possibilities afforded by a newfound wealth with the experiences of hardship from which they continued to draw strength and significance.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “It is a particular sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>291</sup> Paul Gilroy has interpreted Du Bois’ “double consciousness” as an attempt to resolve a core problem of racial oppression for black people in diaspora. However, he argues, Du Bois intended for this concept not apply exclusively to black Americans, but to describe the condition of “post-slave populations in general.”<sup>292</sup> Indeed, Du Bois makes the claim himself in *Dusk of Dawn*: “...the badge of colour [is] relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas.”<sup>293</sup> Du Bois’ vision was historical and global; he urged black Americans to see their predicament, and their political task, as linked to that of other people, oppressed by racialized imperialism and colonialism.

Curiously, the double consciousness of which Du Bois wrote, inspired by the experience of African Americans in the nineteenth century, somehow seems applicable to Chinese expatriates in Angola today. As I have tried to show in this chapter, for Chinese working in Angola, notions of cultural difference, even those that emphasized African inferiority, were not merely justifications for racial segregation or a colonial division of labor. Nor did they give Chinese workers and managers stable assurance of the superiority of China. Such assurance was constantly challenged by the classifications of development or *suzhi*. Within these frameworks, China was not (yet) considered to be a developed country, nor had all of its citizens attained the level of *suzhi* of, say, Europeans.<sup>294</sup> Oscillating between claims of Chinese superiority and inferiority, and simultaneously adopting the language of race, development, and *suzhi*, the men of Northwest Construction seemed to be searching for a way to locate China’s place in the world—a task that seemed all the more obvious, and urgent, for men on the frontlines of the newest phase of Chinese globalization. Through the discourse of race, Company employees attempted to fit Angola and China into a neat hierarchy, but, when combined with unstable categories like *suzhi* and development, this hierarchy lost its fixity. It was unclear which order China should be placed in, and where its place might be in it. Thus Chinese expatriates felt simultaneously superior and inadequate, ahead and behind, and their mixed deployment of evolutionary racial tropes, the post-reform notion of *suzhi*, and the global discourse of development highlighted this “double consciousness.”

In late 2014, I made a visit to Lanzhou, where Northwest Construction’s parent company was based, to see some of my former coworkers from Angola and also to meet their

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<sup>291</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter 1.

<sup>292</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 126.

<sup>293</sup> Du Bois quoted in Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 126.

<sup>294</sup> One high-level manager, upon coming back from his first tour of the United States, told me of his impression, “Americans definitely have the highest *suzhi*.”

families, who had been waiting for them in China. Director Fu's wife, a Mrs. Wen, met me at the train station and graciously hosted me throughout the trip. After a gleeful reunion dinner with Ma Hui, Li Jun, and other faces both familiar and completely changed, now that they were in China, Mrs. Wen took me back to her family's apartment, where she prepared a basin of hot water for us to soak our tired feet. We had only met once before, and yet in certain ways she treated me with the intimacy of an older sister. We chatted about Ma Hui's wife's pregnancy, about the wedding plans of some of the other men, and other gossip related to the Northwest Construction crew. Then she began to talk about her husband's experience in Angola. "Director Fu says it's no place for a woman to live," she said. "He thinks it's no good. Even he wants to come back, but Chairman Guo [Chairman of the Board of Directors in China] won't let him. My friends all tease me. They say, 'Has he really not made enough money yet? That African sun has already blackened his skin, and you're letting him go back *again*?!' I spoke with Guo myself many times. He would always joke, 'So you're ready for him to come back. That must mean you've made enough money, huh?' But it's already been *ten years* since Du went over there! Where can I get ten years of my life back? Money isn't everything. When you have more of it, you spend a little more, and when you have less, you spend a little less, right? We can't become slaves to money. At one point, Guo even offered for me to go over there. But then who would take care of my father? He's already 80 years old. This just shows the negative side of the one-child policy. If I had a sibling at least I wouldn't have to worry about him. Anyway, I'm used to Fu not being here now. I have my freedom. I go to work and when I want to go out I can call the wives of some of the other men from the Angola Company. So we'll just continue this way for a while. Anyway there are only a couple of years left until he gets to retire. And Chairman Guo has said if a position opens up in the Company in China, Fu can come back, which is good, because you know a lot of people over there don't know how they'll ever be able to come back."

Mrs. Wen's tiny feet splashed in the warm water as she asked a delicate question, "In Angola, is there racism (*you zhongzu qishi ma*)?"

I was not sure how to interpret her use of the term 'racism' (*zhongzu qishi*). Was she referring to anti-Chinese sentiment, discrimination against African or African-descended people, or European supremacy more generally? It pained me to remember the racialized comments some of the men at Northwest Construction had made about black people or Angolans, and I did not think it appropriate to repeat them to her. Instead, I chose to answer by talking about perceptions of China. "There are a lot of misunderstandings about China and Chinese people," I told her.

This may have resonated with information she had received through her husband or other Company employees. She frowned: "They bully (*qifu*) Chinese people, don't they? They are not friendly to Chinese people because they look down on (*kanbuqi*) them."

I tried to be diplomatic: "I think some people assume that there is a lot of wealth in China, because of all the financial support the Chinese government has given to Angola. And sometimes this gives them a wrong impression about Chinese people."

The lines faded from between Mrs. Wen's eyebrows as her tone shifted to one of proud agreement. "That's right," she said, "They don't understand China."

## Conclusion

This dissertation has taken the reader through the sometimes fraught terrain of encounters among China, Angola, and Euro-American Anthropology. In this terrain, tentative friendships could be poisoned by exploitation—sometimes disintegrating into open hostility—and chauvinistic discourses of essential superiority could be accompanied by ongoing uncertainties about the order of the world. The experiences I have chosen to render in this text were selected and arranged to compose chapters that, taken together, tell a story about “China in Angola” that cannot be heard or read elsewhere.

Each chapter was written to complement the others, to provide answers to questions raised by others but unanswerable given the constraints of the topical focus allocated to each. The order in which the chapters develop is significant. I opened the dissertation in Chapter 1 with a historical narrative that also showed how Chinese activities in Angola had become a moral problem, for “Africa” and the world. The controversy and criticism surrounding China-Africa relations was both the starting point for my research and the prism through which most distanced observers (and critics) had come to view the phenomenon under discussion. As I have shown, the large majority of recently published treatments of Chinese expansion in Africa have presented a relationship between states or institutions, rather than one generated, sustained, and challenged through interpersonal interactions. Although my first chapter provided an analysis of political-economic relations between the Chinese and Angolan states, through examples grounded in everyday conversation it also outlined some of the questions that such analyses are unable to answer. Hence, this chapter demonstrated the need for the ethnographic account that begins in the second chapter. This chapter, although different from the others in that it was almost exclusively concerned with relations internal to the Company, and with daily life on the Chinese compound in Luanda, was necessary in that it provided a perspective that has been largely absent from academic treatments of foreign investment on the continent, and particularly Chinese investment. Rather than citing Chinese investment as simply another instance of a ‘global’ phenomenon like neoliberalism or resource-driven capital accumulation, it attempted to give a sense of the singularity of the transnational Chinese state firm, including some of the moral bases upon which it operates.

Between the first two chapters, therefore, lie two points of contrast. First, there is a contrast between state-level or political economic analyses of China-Angola relations, on the one hand, and on the other hand an ethnographic narrative built around interpersonal encounters and the rhythms of daily life. Second, there is a contrast between the accusation of vampirism, launched by Angolan and other critics against Chinese entities in Angola, and the perhaps cynical justifications of Chinese employees at Northwest Construction, trying to make a living, for themselves and their families, through their work abroad. The tension between these two chapters form a necessary background for the three chapters that make up the latter part of the dissertation, which deal directly with the texture of Chinese-Angolan relations in everyday life and work.

My aim in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters has been to outline three modes of Chinese-Angolan relation: translation, regulation, and evaluation. These three processes also correspond to expanding scales of interaction: translation takes place at the interpersonal level;

regulation occurs between corporate entities and agents of the Angolan state; and evaluation involves the conceptualization of collective selves and others within national, racial, or developmental hierarchies. In other words, the movement from Chapter 2 through Chapter 5 could be understood in terms of broadening: from the compound, to the interactions between compound residents and members of wider society, finally moving to the interactions between the Company and the Angolan state, to relationships between two national collectivities.

The five chapters are also connected to each other in another sense. Each chapter attempted to answer a significant question posed by the previous one. Although Chapter 1 was primarily concerned with accounting for China's emergence as a moral problem for postwar Angola, a summary of perceptions of Chinese business in Angola indicated a crucial, yet neglected aspect of China-Angola relations: the daily lives, experiences, and reflections of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese men and women working in contemporary Angola. Chapter 2 addressed this omission by focusing explicitly upon the everyday experiences of Chinese employees at a Chinese state firm in Luanda. In doing so, it explored how relationships with Company and kin, which are not always easily distinguishable, were important facets of the lives of those who had come to work abroad. Recognition of employees' broader social connections and constraints allows us to think of them as more than merely cynical or one-dimensional, despite their claims to be in Angola only to make money. This discussion of life internal to the compound or Company in Chapter 2 then prompted another question: how do Chinese workers in Angola relate to Angolan employees, partners, and competitors? In other words, if certain social norms could be said to govern relations within the Company, or within a Chinese community more broadly defined, what kind of social order, if any, may have been established in Chinese-Angolan interactions? In Chapter 3, by examining language use, and particularly the ways in which asymmetrical relationships were negotiated through joking, I showed how hostilities persisted through tentative friendships between monolingual Chinese- and Portuguese-speakers. This image of a fragile social order generated a question about how sustainable friendly relations could be, and how one might understand social relations between Chinese and Angolans if they are characterized by conflict rather than collaboration. Thus, in Chapter 4, I examined a case in which a Chinese-Angolan alliance appeared to have broken down. I suggested, however, that the deterioration of a transnational business partnership, and its reconfiguration by both state and non-state actors, could indicate that fission and fusion are inherent to ongoing negotiations between Chinese and Angolan partners. The impression given in Chapters 3 and 4 of Chinese-Angolan relations as precariously stable, persisting through a delicate combination of enmity and amity, provoked a critical question about equality and hierarchy. Do China and Angola as collectivities, loosely defined, relate to each other on equal terms? In Chapter 5, I showed how, on the contrary, hierarchical notions of human differentiation were a prominent feature of Chinese discourses about Angola and Angolans. However, evaluations couched in the language of race, development, or quality, must not be interpreted as repetition or mimicry of European racist colonial thinking. Rather, I suggested that China's own historical experience with Western imperial oppression, and with ideas of European superiority, continue to shape how it perceives itself in relation to Angola and the rest of the world.

This last chapter should therefore help to clarify why I have chosen not to take an approach that would emphasize exploitation in Chinese-Angolan labor relations, or processes of (colonial) class formation. Exploitation of both Chinese and Angolan labor is an undeniable fact of Chinese business in postwar Angola, and I would hope that by not discussing at length how it occurs, I do not leave myself susceptible to the accusation of condoning it. Indeed, by invoking the politics of the belly in the first chapter, I tried to show how dependence can also be understood as a strategic mode of action. Moreover, in the last three chapters especially, I tried to present Chinese-Angolan relations as sites of contestation, in which groups were not easily fixed into rigid hierarchical slots. Instead, individuals and organizations associated in different ways with collectivities called “China” and “Angola” were in a constant state of negotiation. I have called upon our anthropological ancestors, the structural-functionalists, among others, to help us understand how tension can be built into friendship, and how conflict can be a part of order. My aim in doing so has not been to suggest that China-Angola relations should be seen as a kind of vibrating equilibrium, but to emphasize the ambiguity with which the sets of relations constituting “China in Africa” must be treated. In taking approach focused on the granular level of everyday life, I have indicated some of the contradictions inherent in Chinese-Angolan relations, without attempting to pass judgment or predict their future development. Similarly, I hope to have shown how some important insights can be gleaned from classic ethnographies without necessarily reproducing the problematic assumptions on which they were based, to illuminate an emergent situation.

I began this dissertation by addressing the question that has dominated discussion of Chinese relations with Africa: is China a neo-colonial power in Africa? Those who have answered yes have described China as the new empire in Africa, whereas a negative stance in the matter posits Chinese-African relations as an anti-imperialist instance of South-South solidarity. Often implied in the choice between these two characterizations is also a supposed allegiance to one or another “side” or “perspective”: African or Chinese. According to this dualistic moralizing, taking a position alongside “Africa” would mean recognizing China as a neo-imperial power on the continent, while allying oneself with “China” would imply moral sanction of Chinese activities, whether or not one fully subscribes to the slogans of the Chinese state. Undertaking an ethnographic study of Chinese investment in postwar Angola has prevented me from making such a simplistic choice between sides. Although I certainly spent more time in the field with Chinese employees of Northwest Construction than I did with Angolan individuals, I hope to have made clear from the complex interactions I have described above that this dissertation does not constitute a “Chinese perspective” on China-Angola relations. My positioning in relation to various people associated in different ways with Chinese and Angolan collectivities was never fixed, nor is the configuration I have glossed as “China-Angola relations” reducible to two sides or perspectives.

While I maintain that the reductive moralism of typical answers to the question of Chinese “neo-colonialism” must be avoided, I have found it impossible to dismiss the question entirely. In my own response, I have suggested that Chinese involvement in Angolan postwar reconstruction is not a repetition of European colonialism, but it is not a revival of the Bandung moment either. Chinese workers in Angola are not there to help their African

brothers achieve global liberation. Their goals have become much more cynical—they are there to make money. However, does “making money” mean the same thing for Chinese employees at a provincial-level state-owned enterprise, as it would, perhaps, for an executive of a Texan oil company? As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, it cannot, because of the way Chinese employees relate to their corporation and kin. In Chapters 3 and 4, we learned that Chinese exceptionalism in the areas of language and law—the way Chinese businesses tried to remove themselves from the local context, to act as if it were not important, inapplicable to them, as if they were “above” adaptation to local conventions—was tentative, unstable, and often under threat of exploitation from Angolan regulatory authorities. Far from asserting and maintaining their dominance in social and political arenas, they cautiously negotiated a delicate situation that was always changing, and in which their place was insecure. This insecurity was further emphasized in Chapter 5, where I showed how—despite surface similarities—Chinese racial ideas were not the same as those heavily critiqued in Europe and North America. Indeed, these ideas were in some way borrowed from the West, which means presumptions of non-Western inferiority were built into them. However, Chinese racism in Angola presents us instead with a puzzling and politically difficult situation: of a former victim of European imperialism, still positioned as Other to the West, now deploying colonial tropes against another non-Western Other.

Chinese relations with Angola, or with Africa more broadly, present a particular challenge for anthropology, because of the complicated relationship that our discipline has had with colonial and imperial projects. In the 1980s, Clifford Geertz described a necessary transformation in ethnographic writing that had taken place alongside a change in the “political grammar of the world.” He noted that the people anthropologists previously tended to write about were no longer colonial subjects but sovereign citizens, and the “scattering of encapsulated peoples across the globe” had reduced the distance, moral and discursive, between the traditional subject and audience of anthropological writing. These transformations had shaken some of the major assumptions upon which the ethnographic mode of writing had been based: “that the first were to be described but not addressed, the second informed but not implicated.”<sup>295</sup> Instead, as authors and others associated with ‘the West’ began to recognize the subjectivity of previously colonized peoples, a problem of authority arose to confront anthropological writing. Critiques that have emerged since the 1960s make Malinowski’s proud exclamation when meeting ‘his’ Trobrianders—“Feeling of ownership: it is I who will describe them...”—seem both comical and shameful.<sup>296</sup> Anthropological writers have not only moved away from the tone of scientific objectivity that characterized early ethnographies, but they also have incorporated critiques of colonialism and a deep sensitivity to potentially exploitative relations into their ethnographic research and writing. Simultaneously distancing themselves from implication in the discipline’s colonial past and attempting to amend for the obfuscation of oppressive relations in earlier ethnographic writing, many anthropologists have placed relations of inequality or exploitation at the center of their fieldwork and analysis.

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<sup>295</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 132.

<sup>296</sup> Cited in Geertz, 133.

For anthropologists, the rise of China and its global expansion, especially through what is sometimes called the ‘Global South,’ only further problematizes this already complicated situation that emerged in the 1970s and ‘80s. One faces not only the danger of a colonial relation between an ethnographer and an Other, but also the Other’s possibly colonial encounter with an Other. How does one study a form of colonialism without condemning it, when we take as commonplace that any relationship that resembles colonialism must be condemned? And what if the alleged colonizers are not ‘Western’? Do we treat them as if this fact were irrelevant, and consider them to have taken the role that was previously occupied by ‘us’? Would this not be another “denial of coevalness,”<sup>297</sup> an assumption that they are simply moving through stages we have already gone through, engaging in manipulative relations with Africa that we already know must be denounced, adopting the paternalistic or racist attitudes that we have already been critiquing for decades?

In this ethnographic study of Chinese commerce in postwar Angola, I have offered a partial answer to the question of how to characterize “China in Africa” that does not force a choice between good or evil, and which instead attempts simultaneously to consider multiple contradictory possibilities. Contemporary Chinese–Angolan relations are based in commerce, exchange, and reciprocity, but the reciprocal exchanges that form the foundation of these relationships are haunted by specters of colonial and capitalist relations, as well as being intertwined with cultural values. Moreover, questions of commensurability underlie exchanges between Chinese and Angolans, both in terms of economic value and linguistic or cultural difference. People can joke with each other at the same time that they exploit each other, and misunderstandings can occur alongside implicit understandings. Appeals to the law as authority can be made at the same time as the law is being broken. And racist statements can be uttered freely even as racism is unquestionably condemned. If the task of anthropology today is not only to interpret material gathered through participation in a field of intersubjective relations, but also to engage in moral or political critique, a question remains about what kind of critique could take seriously the actions and words of a new group of transnational subjects—however unpalatable they might be to our politically correct sensibilities. This is what will be necessary if we are to move beyond colonial nostalgia for “the West and the rest.”

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<sup>297</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

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