

The Silent China: Toward an Anti-Essentialism Approach for South–South Encounters

WEIDI ZHENG¹

King's College London, UK

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has encountered much backlash locally and internationally and had different, conflicting versions of media reality. While China-led mass-mediated efforts overseas have gained much scholarly attention, this article examines the on-the-ground meaning-making process of China's presence in Africa by using the 2016–2017 Maasai attacks against a Chinese construction site in Kenya, part of a BRI project, as an ethnographic example. It is found that, although "China–Africa," "predator–partner," and "hegemon–subaltern" binaries appear dominant in academic and media representation, Maasai demonstrators articulated China's activities into Kenya's dominant discourses of ethnicity, indigenous rights, and the political-economic complex. Whether aware of these complicities or not, Chinese, Kenyan, and international media are each seeking the China–Africa "reality" within their own "regime of truth" uncritically, which fosters mutual skepticism. An anti-essentialism approach is proposed to capture the fluid, uncertain subjective positions, and power dynamics within South–South encounters.

Keywords: China–Africa, BRI, South–South communications, media, journalism, labor, ethnicity, Standard Gauge Railway

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), expected to connect more than 65 countries across Eurasia and Africa, is a story of global connectivity with five major goals: "policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds" (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015, para. 18). Given that the majority of those involved in the BRI are developing countries, the initiative is known as a new form of South–South collaboration. However, it has encountered disputes, fear, and skepticism whose complexity is often flattened by the macro-level "Sino-West"² geopolitics and discursive competition (He, 2019; S. C. Wang, 2016). In the China–Africa field, while media discourses have been divided into "neo-colonialism," "partnership," and "pragmatism" categories (Marsh, 2016; Mawdsley, 2008),

Weidi Zheng: weidi.zheng@kcl.ac.uk

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² The "West" is a heterogenous entity. The term, in this article, largely refers to Anglo-America.

China-led mass-mediated efforts, as a vehicle for soft power, dominate scholarly attention (e.g., Wasserman, 2013; Zhang, Wasserman, & Mano, 2016). The top-down, policy-oriented approach, as criticized in recent studies, sidelines the dynamic role of Africans and causes a theoretical blindness to South-South interactions, which seem to be neither hegemon nor minor (Jedlowski & Röschenhaler, 2017). This article, therefore, examines the on-the-ground meaning-making process of China's activities by taking the 2016–2017 Maasai attacks against a Chinese construction camp in Kenya's Narok County as an ethnographic example, further contributing an anti-essentialism approach to researching China–Africa communications.³

On May 31, 2017, in Mombasa port, Kenyan and Chinese leaders cheered for the launch of Phase I of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) with Swahili pop music. The SGR, the flagship project of the Jubilee government and Kenya's largest infrastructure project, was expected to be a socioeconomic game-changer for the country. Additionally, because of Kenya's strategic economic location in East Africa, the railway, both funded and built by China, was included as a node pushing the BRI toward Europe. Considering its political-economic implications, both Chinese and Kenyan governments endorsed the project as a "national achievement," a path to "prosperity and development," and an outcome of the "Sino-Kenya friendship" ("Kenya Launches Flagship," 2017, paras. 5 & 10). On May 15, 2017, the China–Kenya tie was upgraded to "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership," below only China–Pakistan, China–Russia, China–Germany, and China–Britain partnerships. Since the 2000s, Kenya–China relations have been boosted: As Kenya's largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade partner, China significantly invests in the neglected infrastructure sector while facing the charge of "neo-colonialism" (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2019). The SGR's construction process was also at the center of controversy about employment, work conditions, land compensation, corruption, economic viability, debt sustainability, and opaque contracting (Farooq, Yuan, Zhu, & Feroze, 2018; Githaiga & Bing, 2019). However, it is argued that many of these disputes are rooted in Kenya's domestic politics, whereas popular rhetoric blames China's assumed predatory behavior (Y. Wang & Wissenbach, 2019).

Just nine months before the SGR celebration, on August 2, 2016, around 200 sword-wielding Maasai demonstrators broke into the construction site of Phase II in Narok and left 14 Chinese workers injured. In February 2017, a group of Maasai youth broke into the camp again and made a public speech against the contractor. This physical violence against the SGR was soon covered by Kenyan, Chinese, and international media. In the Kenyan press, the attacks seemed to be mobilized as a result of the Chinese denying the demands of "local" or "Maasai" workers around job opportunities and fair treatment. For example, *Daily Nation* (Sayagie, 2016), the most cited article, reported that "more than 300 youth protested against a Chinese contractor at the Duka Moja trading centre demanding jobs but police dispersed them after they attempted to block the road" (para. 6). A video clip from TV station K24 (2016) explained that the protectors stormed the construction site for "allegedly leaving them out of the perceived attractive employment opportunities" (0:22). Protesting the alleged unfair allocation of jobs, a protestor argued that only 10% of the jobs were given to locals. The contractor was silent or quoted only in a single sentence; the quotations primarily came from the demonstrators, followed by the Kenyan

³ China–Africa communication is broader than macro-level mass-mediated communication. Instead of separating media from the wider social setting, this study considers China–Africa communication as a social arena that includes the mass-mediated dimension.

authority. Citing *Daily Nation*, two articles in the U.S. media—"Kenyan Rail Workers Are Protesting Against Their Chinese Employer for a Raise to \$5 a Day" (Kuo, 2016) and "Rise in Anti-Chinese Violence in Kenya Forces Halt of Major Rail Project" (Buchanan, 2016)—quoted a protesting youth: "Why bring cheap labor at the expense of the local community? We demand to be given the first priority" (para. 15). Both papers connected events to long-held controversies involving imported Chinese laborers and African workers' labor rights. Whereas the *BBC's* Chinese website ("Kenniya Tielu," 2016) reported that the "local youth" were accusing the Kenyan government of denying them jobs, in the U.S. media, the protestors were primarily identified as "Kenyan workers" and the conflict as "anti-Chinese." The attack seemed to be a "Kenyans/locals versus Chinese" antagonism.

Xinhuanet ("Kenya Beefs Up Security," 2016) and *China Daily* (Morangi, 2016)—both Chinese state-owned media aimed at foreign audiences—only emphasized the response of Kenyan authorities and the SGR's developmental benefits (i.e., employment and business opportunities). Yet, Chinese media targeting domestic audiences showed a more complicated story. While some copied the *BBC* report, *Global Times* (Q. Li, 2016) published an article, "Chinese Respond to the Attack by Kenyan Youth: We Didn't Deny Them Jobs." Dismissing the "biased" foreign reports, the contractor argued that the SGR had employed 39,000 local workers and that 90% of local workers at the construction site were Maasai. It was claimed that those who did not get hired felt resentment because of local tribal tensions. However, *The Paper* (Tao, 2016) challenged the charge of the biased foreign reports and argued that the allegations in the *BBC* report were targeting the Kenyan government instead of the contractor. Citing expats who dismissed the widespread myth of imported Chinese workers, it also pointed out the "failure" of Chinese actors in seeking discursive power overseas.

Overall, the Narok conflicts seem to reveal the China-Africa complexity that overflows classic "China-Africa," "predator-partner," and "hegemon-subaltern" binaries. First, the mediated reality appeared rather contested and showed the uncertainty of the subjective position—that is, "local," "Maasai," or "Kenyan"—of the demonstrators. It is unclear what the narratives of the demonstrators and the contractor looked like (RQ1). Second, the Chinese actors, including state-owned media, were almost silent outside of the domestic mediascape even though Africa has been identified as China's testing ground for soft power (Tang, 2011) and Kenya as the hub of China's media involvements in Africa (Wu, 2012; RQ2). To unpack the discursive contestation of "China-Africa," the fluid subjective positions, and the uncertain power dynamics, this study introduces an anti-essentialism approach, combined with ethnographic fieldwork, and proposes two questions:

RQ1: What does the meaning-making process of the demonstrators and the Chinese actors among the Narok conflicts look like?

RQ2: How would China's silence on the ground, which seems contradictory to its media expansions at the policy level, be understood?

From Top-Down Mass-Mediated Efforts to the Meaning-Making Process at the Ground Level

Along with its outward trade and diplomacy since the 1990s, China has been pursuing “soft power”⁴ as a national grand strategy to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics (Wu, 2012). Having a long history that dates to the 1955 Bandung Conference, China–Africa media engagements have been boosted and institutionalized under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation framework since 2004. Chinese state media—*Xinhua News Agency*, CGTN, CRI, and *China Daily*—all have offices in Kenya, making them the major component of China’s media engagements in Africa. In addition, China has formed collaborations with African media, including Kenya’s largest privately owned newspapers—*Daily Nation* and *The Standard*—as a measure of public diplomacy⁵ through eight forms: delegation visits, official exchange, dialogue mechanisms, training and exchange, scholarships, gift-giving and donations of equipment and infrastructure, technical support, content sharing, and capital investment (for details, see S. Li, 2017, pp. 88–95). Under the state’s grand strategy, China-led top-down mediated efforts have dominated scholarly attention as a potentially hegemonic force shaping African mediascapes and public discourses of “China–Africa” and have raised debate about cultural imperialism, pragmatism, and global contra-flow (S. Li, 2017).

Yet, showing a disjunction between China’s state media policy and its actual implication, Zhang (2013) finds that CGTN Africa only features condemnation of the West-led international systems, while alternative discourse is absent. Madrid-Morales (2018) demonstrates that, despite a contra-flow in the making, the goal of CGTN Africa—to “contribute to China’s foreign policy objective of discursive power maximization” (p. 305)—is undermined by the lack of a cohesively defined strategy and limited cooperation between Chinese media houses and policy makers. Studies of audience reception in Kenya and South Africa find that Chinese media and China’s narrative toward Africa have limited impact on the news agenda and public opinion toward China in the host societies, while the perspective of the Chinese media is often associated with “censorship,” “propaganda,” and other deeply rooted stereotypes about China in general (Guyo & Yu, 2019; Wasserman, 2016; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018). Whereas Kenyan leadership seems charmed by the Chinese narratives of partnership and development, journalists and audiences remain highly critical of China’s activities because of the assumed alliance of authoritarian China and Kenyan corrupted elite and the so-called Chinese positive reporting; Kenyans primarily interpret China’s influences through its economic investments, particularly in trade and infrastructure, not through its media presence (Maweu, 2016; Řehák, 2016). If China-led mass-mediated efforts have a modest influence on public perceptions in the host societies, it is worth investigating the wider discursive struggle over the meaning of “China–Africa.”

⁴ Soft power is the attractive and co-optive power that draws on one’s culture and values and the ability of agenda-setting; Chinese scholarship further categorizes it into four dimensions: cultural influence, ideological influence, impact on international rules, and norms and influence on international affairs (Tang, 2011).

⁵ In Africa, media presence is one of China’s assets for public diplomacy that also depends greatly on its economic instruments (i.e., China’s development model, infrastructure, investment, trade) and foreign policy, and includes educational and cultural exchanges (d’Hooghe, 2014).

Indeed, recent studies have encouraged a research shift from the state-led, policy-oriented dimensions of China–Africa (mediated) relations, privileged by a theoretical and methodological dependency on international relations, to the complex of grounded, everyday China–Africa interactions. Jedlowski and Röschenhaler (2017) argue that international-relations-like theories have been reproducing a dependency paradigm by neglecting the complicated role of the African people in the construction of Africa’s multiple engagements with foreign powers. Wasserman (2016) suggests conceptualizing Chinese media in Africa as part of the wider set of China–Africa engagements, including formal and informal, and political and economic strategies, as well as everyday interactions, rather than a one-dimensional form of soft power underpinning elite interests. In global communication studies, Kraidy and Murphy (2008) have challenged the conceptualization of the local as a taken-for-granted counterpoint to the global, because the local itself is “a dynamic site of experience, struggle and meaning” (p. 337). The “local” ought to be seen as the historical and dynamic subject of being, rather than as an object of global powers.

Although China’s efforts in shaping its “reality,” often in competition with the “West,” have formed an “partner–predator” information battlefield, “China–Africa” shows a discursive constellation embedded with soprano and whispers, multifaceted subjective positions, and networks of power. “China–Africa” alone is an element, or a floating signifier, which has no essential meaning or fixed identity. Adopting an anti-essentialism approach, determining who we are and how we understand the world, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggest that there is no longer any fundamental truth in the postmodern world; it is through the articulation⁶ of an element into a discourse that meaning can become fixed and social reality can be temporarily defined (DeLuca, 1999). Alden and Park (2013), for instance, have argued against a singular interpretation of South Africa–China relations, which contains both “upstairs” and “downstairs” dimensions—that is, formal diplomacy and unofficial and social relations. As they suggest,

the contradictions of personal warmth publicly expressed by the current government in Pretoria and Beijing, the fraught discourse of elements in South Africa business and labour reeling from the effects of Chinese competitiveness and the experiences of individuals entering representation of the two society in films and at the tuck shop, capture the diversity characteristic of maturing relationships. (Alden & Park, 2013, p. 627)

Moreover, neither “China” nor “Africa” could be essentialized as a unitary, stable whole. Dismissing the myth of “China Inc.,” studies have demonstrated the multiplicity of Chinese actors—from the key state-owned energy enterprises and independent professionals to medium-sized private businesses and construction workers—that have varied, and sometimes conflicting, interests in China–Africa relations (Taylor & Xiao, 2009). Chinese actors of multiple kinds have varied relationships with African societies depending on their own socioeconomic characteristics; the patterns of Chinese presence in Africa appear variegated and cannot be generalized into one single category because of China’s

⁶ Articulation here means “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified. . . . the practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 105, 113).

semiperipheral status (Yan, Sautman, & Lu, 2019). The “China–Africa” binary by which China–Africa (mediated) interactions are conceptualized obscures multifaceted identities and reflects an essentialist concept of social and human agency (Laclau, 1991).

Not only can “Africa” and “China” not be essentialized but also the power dynamics of “China–Africa” are not predetermined. Besides the discursive competitions between foreign forces, African actors of multiple kinds are actively, often strategically, interpreting and constructing the meanings of “China-in-Africa.” Examining the anti-Chinese populism in Africa, both Hess and Aidoo (2015) and Sautman and Hairong (2009) found local political discourses, not “social” factors, to be the main determinants of variation in African perspectives on “China–Africa.” In Zambia, political opportunists, under a transitional, noninstitutional and inchoate regime structure, could instrumentalize the general “China problem”—presumably a monolithic “China Inc.” colluding with the “evil” government to exploit local people—to bring ethnically and linguistically diverse local citizens together. Rumors of “Chinese prison labor,” for instance, generated at the grass roots level, are promoted locally and globally by economic, political, and media elites with particular agendas; these involve competition in obtaining contracts, seeking support for opposition parties, and geostrategic and ideological rivalry (Hairong & Sautman, 2012). African-Chinese individuals have also been creating “small narratives” to push back the top-down media endgames of “curse-cure,” manipulated by louder elites (Simbao, 2012).

To capture the uncertain and fluid subjective positions and power dynamics of multiple kinds of actors beyond the preconceived “China–Africa” and “hegemonic–subaltern” binaries, this article proposes Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) articulation theory, characterized by its anti-essentialism, as an alternative way of researching China–Africa communications; it enables an exploration of the discursive struggle to join meaning with concepts, the specific meanings privileged over others, and the morphology of discursive power. From that, it enables an examination of how actors of different kinds interpret and construct the meanings of the China–Africa complex and the dynamics behind certain interpretations and practices.

Methodology

Combined with the anti-essentialism approach, this research adopts the method of ethnography, which enables an examination of contextual meanings of communication through the “vantage point of people’s everyday lives” (Willems, 2014, p. 16), unexpected encounters beyond one’s theoretical presuppositions, and an understanding of a society through its own discourses.

This ethnographic research draws on my 2016–2017 fieldwork on everyday China–Kenya communications under China’s state-led media cooperation program, during which I conducted participant observation as an intern at *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. In addition, I constantly went beyond the newsrooms because, first, ethnography requires *holism*, that is, “the significance of understanding the total social context of the people we are trying to understand” (Shah, 2017, p. 52), and second, my biography—a Chinese female who spent most of her adulthood in Britain—enabled an embodied experience of vivid perceptions of Chineseness in Kenyan society. I discovered and constantly revised questions from Kenyan journalists’ agendas and everyday journalistic practices concerning China’s

presence, particularly in heated disputes about Chinese migrants, trade deficits, and the SGR. I conducted long-term participant observations and interviews with 15 Kenyan journalists, 9 Chinese journalists, 2 diplomats, and 12 staff members from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Ethnography does not fix one's subject position. Interlocutors were largely classified by their profession and nationality, but the process embraced fluid identities (e.g., ethnicity, race, and class), depending on interlocutors' self-positioning in specific settings.

Researchers have reported difficulty in accessing Chinese newsrooms (Madrid-Morales, 2018). Considering my affiliation with a British university, a news manager straightforwardly expressed his concern about my potentially "biased, West-washed" gaze. I adopted a "hang-out" approach (Bernard, 2006) to spend time with and build rapport with Chinese journalists who, just like us, would not automatically trust a stranger. I conducted semistructured interviews and primarily "kitchen table" dialogues with Chinese journalists and SOEs by using Mandarin, and I later translated the dialogue into English. The study only included those who understood the research objective and offered permission to use their insights. The consent form for Chinese interlocutors was the same as that for Kenyan interlocutors, given that they can read English. Considering the small size of Chinese newsrooms, the job position of journalists was generalized. All the interlocutors were anonymous in the ensuing research.

Based on the mentioned research context, soon after the Maasai demonstrators broke into the construction camp in early March 2017, I left the *Daily Nation* in Nairobi and went to Narok for one week of fieldwork. There, I observed the lived experiences and journalistic practices of John, a Maasai news correspondent who wrote several reports on the attacks. Because of my Chinese identity, an editor at *Nation* reminded me of the potential risk before my departure: "Wear a helmet, this can be an anti-Chinese moment." Because of security concerns, I went as a *Daily Nation* intern and always stayed with John. Thanks to John's introduction, I was able to conduct semistructured interviews and informal conversations with news correspondents, Maasai protestors, county government officials, and ordinary residents. Using my Chinese insider status, I contacted my interlocuter in the Chinese SOE to enter the camp and conducted interviews with the manager. Combined with informal dialogues during the participant observation, 11 formal interviews, lasting about one hour each, were conducted in Narok.

Finally, adopting ethnography instead of a positivist method, I might not claim representativeness because interlocutors are often accessed through a snowball approach and selected haphazardly. Moreover, I, as an ethnographer, admit situated knowledge and stay cautious in universality that risks overshadowing other historical subjectivities. The Narok conflict, therefore, is a *case test*, not a *microcosm*, for understanding the South-South complex; I expect a proliferation of grounded studies to form an open dialogue toward universal knowledge.

Maasai Narratives and Interpretations of Chinese Activities in Narok

The attacked construction site is near Duka Moja, a trading center in the vast drought-ridden moor along the Narok-Mai Mahiu highway. The road is well built, but it still takes half an hour to drive to it from Narok town where John and other correspondents lived. After John had arranged the

interview with Maasai demonstrators, a problem arose: How could we get to Duka Moja? Usually John would borrow a car from his friend or just take the *matatu* minibus. After one hour waiting on the street, John realized his friend's car was broken down, and the matatus were fully occupied. As a former editor in a hurry, I decided to take a taxi, which cost me US\$25. John told me he would never pay that unless it was breaking news.

After one hour, John and I arrived at Duka Moja. A small group of Maasai youth led by a schoolteacher came to meet us. Explaining their problems with the contractor, the teacher said, "We want 70% of jobs given to the local community. The constitution states 70% of the jobs should go to the local community, but the Chinese are bringing people from other communities, those Kamba and Kikuyu." Another Maasai added,

When I worked in the Chinese camp, I saw many new faces. They are from other places. If the Chinese come to build a road here, you should employ local people. Now, they employ only a few, maybe 10%. It is against the constitution.

He became emotional and asked me as a privileged outsider to see the poverty on the ground.

A few residents I met in Narok town shared the opinion that the Chinese denied local community jobs and gave them to other communities. Sam, a Maasai in his 30s who worked in the county government, told me, "The crowd said you only gave 10% of the jobs to the locals. If you want to build a railway on our land—the Maasai land, you should offer local people jobs, not Kikuyu, Kamba, or whatever." Sam spoke with fire. When I asked him who the "local community" was, he said,

I mean my parents, my brothers and sisters and of course my friends. They are people on the ground eating natural food [pointing to the *Nyama Choma* (grilled lamb) in front of him]. They are not the people in the town. You know, here is a cosmopolitan place. There are people from other communities, Kikuyu or Kamba. They eat fried food.

The sentiment of my Maasai interlocutors seemed to come from the idea that "the Chinese deny Maasai jobs" and also that "the Chinese give them to members of other tribes." As they argued, if the Chinese build something on what they call "our land," it is the right of "local people" to have the associated jobs. The "locals" they repeatedly mentioned referred to the Maasai instead of all residents in Narok. People like the Kikuyu, Kamba, and Luo were considered "outsiders" or "members of other communities" who had no right to take jobs on Maasailand.

However, the contractor had a different understanding. Dismissing the demonstrators' complaint about employment, Mr. Zhang, a Chinese PR manager in the construction camp, argued that the company offered 80% of jobs to Narok residents; most of the local workers came from Suswa forest because the railway went through that area. In his opinion, the local community should include all those residents in Narok. The local workers were Maasai and residents from other ethnic groups. Encountering Maasai's strong expectation of jobs, Zhang said,

I feel Maasai people have a strong desire to control everything, all the recruitment and outsourcing. They say we need to do everything through them and put Maasai in front of others. They don't trust Chinese or people from other ethnic groups. They have a strong sense of boundary inherently.

Feeling unhappy with "Maasai putting themselves in front of others," Zhang believed that the SGR was a Kenyan project that was supposed to benefit the whole of Kenyan society: All Kenyans should be welcome to work there. However, the Kenyan government required the contractor to employ workers from among local residents. The contractor had to dismiss those workers who were well-trained and spend effort training new workers when it moved to a new location. Mr. Wang, a Chinese news manager based in Nairobi, also felt that this requirement was unreasonable; he complained that the Kenyan government once offered a proposal suggesting that jobs created by the SGR be shared equally by 47 counties, with women taking half of them. He said, "It was ridiculous to give such a proposal without considering the capability of workers. The Kenyan side takes the project as a cake. All of them want a slice of it."

While the Maasai interlocutors emphasized their ethnic identity, which automatically legitimized their right to reserve the job opportunities, the contractor stuck to the national identity: Kenyans. To better understand the Maasai's narratives, it is necessary to contextualize what they said. This study identifies three overlapping discourses—"ethnicity and historic marginalization," "indigenous rights," and "poverty"—with which my Maasai interlocutors articulated the Chinese presence in Narok to make sense of the issue.

Ethnicity and the Historical Memory of Marginalization

The Maasai interlocutors understood "the local" based on the membership of an exclusive sense of ethnicity. The cultural identity and social-political action of people in contemporary Kenya were primarily based on ethnicity, although tribalism became politically incorrect during my fieldwork as a result of the 2007–2008 election violence. The notion of "tribal Africa" was an invention of European colonialism, but was later internalized and adopted by Africans in certain countries. The concept of "tribe" was central to the discursive repertoires through which the colonists conceptualized Africa as a "dark continent" in need of civilization (Lynch, 2013). Despite the fluid ethnic boundaries during the precolonial era, the settler government imposed a divide-and-rule policy comprising a notion of ethnic territoriality, which separated and locked each group into its own reserves to oppress the colonial subjects and weaken intermingling between communities (Lynch, 2013). This policy intensified an established ethnic consciousness, further promoting the sense of exclusiveness and autochthony, and planted "the seeds of ethnocentrism and the urge for ethnocracy" (Wanyonyi, 2010, p. 37).

Trying to explain his anger, Sam related the attacks on his historical memory of colonization and marginalization:

We Maasai are strong and smart. Before the independence, *Mzungu* [White foreigners] denied us education. They feared we would go beyond them if they gave education to Maasai. So, they offered education to Kikuyu. Then Kikuyu came to beat us and took our resources away. Those people discriminated us, and we needed to stand up and fight back to prove “we are men.” I think Chinese are good; they can bring the railway on the ground. We are not targeting on Chinese. We fight the Chinese because they bring other communities here.

The interethnic tensions between Maasai and Kikuyu were constructed during colonialization: The exclusive ethnic identity of Maasai was internalized by othering Kikuyu as unwanted, exploitative “aliens” (Waller, 1993). During the precolonial era, the social relationships between the two were symbolized as the Maasai notion of *Osotua* (reciprocal brotherhood); there was a high level of ethnic mixing between the two by intermarriage, household trade, and offering refuge. However, from 1904 to 1911, the colonial government and Maasai leaders signed two treaties that offered the British a 100-year lease on Maasai ancestral lands—about 60% of their grazing lands. The increased Kikuyu infiltration under the precolonial linkage and the ineffective colonial exclusion worsened this land shortage. While Maasai claimed that the obligation of *Osotua* had reached its end and that the “guests” should leave, Kikuyu clients argued that it was immoral to chase out those who had the “acceptees” status. It soon raised debates about what constitutes “Maasainess.”

To implement its ethnic policy, the colonial administration promoted the image of Kikuyu aliens as a threat against Maasainess, while in practice painting Kikuyu agriculture as the “advanced” model above the “backward” Maasai, whose pastoralism should give way to agriculture. This “backward–advanced” division deepened the sense of ethnic differences (Lynch, 2013). Because the land shortage and alien infiltration were easily joined together and packaged under a call for community solidarity and ethnic particularism, the Maasai offered general assent to the administration’s policy of exclusion and expulsion, and adopted the colonial phobia against alien settlements. The ethnic other became “the mirror in the forest” (Waller, 1993, p. 243), the opposite of being Maasai.

Additionally, the divide-and-rule policy fostered a strong association between people and land and a sense of local ethnic consciousness and autochthony. Comprising a notion of ethnic territoriality, the colonial administration encouraged each ethnic group to associate with a specific area, “as geographic spaces become intertwined with a sense of legitimated control and rightful occupancy by particular ethnic communities” (Lynch, 2013, p. 98). It further generated “a two-tier concept of citizenship that distinguished between national and local citizenship, wherein understanding who is really ‘local’ tied the relevant demos with a spatially fixed ethnos” (Lynch, 2013, p. 98). In this case study, Maasailand is seen as the territory of the Maasai who reserved the ownership of land and resources in that area. Therefore, my Maasai interlocutors believed it should have been Maasai rather, than other tribes, who had the right to take employment opportunities if the Chinese wanted to build a road on Maasailand. Because of the memory of colonialization and the fear of marginalization, the appearance of ethnic outsiders in the camp seemed to raise suspicion that the “exploitative other” would take Maasai resources away again.

Indigenous Rights, Poverty, and Politics

Above interethnic tensions, the historic memory of marginalization and the land rights of the Maasai community have been further woven into contemporary politics. It is worth noting that 2017 was an election year and a rather sensitive time. In March, campaign posters and billboards with the images of election candidates had been set up in Narok town. While the national debates on SGR were politically charged (Y. Wang & Wissenbach, 2019), it was also on the political agenda in Narok. John said in a private meeting, "It is politicians who are making interests from this. There is politics behind. It is an election time. They need to make a presentation in front of the public." Another correspondent laughed, "In Kenya, if there is no politics, that's not a day."

In reference to the clashes, Zhang claimed that the conflicts were politically motivated, and the second clash looked like a political campaign: "After the speech, the politicians asked Chinese staff to leave the conference hall and told their supporters which candidate to vote for." Zhang was surprised that politicians in Narok could impose so much pressure on the project; when working on Phase I, he only communicated with the central government, who dealt with local politicians. At that time, Kenyan leaders were struggling in the election, and much attention was paid to Phase I, a symbol of the ruling party's development record, with little effort put into Phase II. Zhang complained that the central government did not offer them constructive advice on communication with the local community. As a newcomer in Narok, Zhang felt that it was difficult to deal with the locals without the government's assistance. Whereas Zhang, who "just wanted to get the project done," found the sudden outbreak of protests shocking, John believed there was nothing unusual about them: "It is how people get their voices heard."

The politics in the Rift Valley was particularly active because of the past injustices and land grievances that the people had suffered. The narrative of politicians, in agreement with the protestors and residents, reflected the discourse of "the rights of indigenous people" (Klopp, 2001, p. 491), which have been used to mobilize political campaigns and win elections in the Maasai community for many years. During the 1993 ethnic clashes between the Maasai and the Kikuyu in Narok North, Klopp found that the winning MP secured votes by arguing that Maasai land pressure was a result of Kikuyu "alien" despoiling the land ownership of indigenous Maasai and suggesting that all Maasai land would be grabbed if the Kikuyu came to power. Akech (2015) analyzed political violence from 1991 to 2010 in Kenya and identified two types of political consciousness behind the political contestation of the violence: rights consciousness and ethnic consciousness. The rallying call of the citizenry is often *haki yetu* (our rights). In turn, the struggle for state resources and power has fostered a citizenry and politicians, mobilized by the ideology of ethnicity, who make political statements about real or imagined claims of marginalization, past injustice, and indigeneity: "This politics is driven by the fear of losing privileged access to state resources, use of state power to keep advantages, and the fear of losing out to other elites in political competition" (Akech, 2015, p. 8). The ethnic identity and indigeneity are not only cultural but also have been politicalized for "ethnic right."

More than just narratives, harsh economic reality mobilized the protests because employment was at the center of Maasai allegations. About 53% of Narok residents live below the poverty line (County Government of Narok, 2013). The livelihood of Maasai in Narok depends on traditional pastoralism and

agropastoralism, which are endangered by land pressure and an undeveloped livestock market (Musimba & Nyariki, 2003). Climate change and a lack of reliable water supply threaten the productivity of grazing and agriculture and cause food crises, forcing people to look to other types of livelihood: waged employment. However, as the County Government of Narok (2013) shows, the lack of job opportunities is another critical challenge faced by the youth—accounting for 27% of the county population—leaving them susceptible to interethnic and interclan conflicts in the name of defending community interests.

Overall, popular media representations primarily identify the conflict as “China versus local/Kenya,” while Maasai protesters seemed to relate this issue to Kenya’s dominant discourses, the politics of ethnicity, and economic reality. Neither news reporters nor contractors directly addressed the complexity of the locality and its historical context in Kenyan and international media spheres.

Media Role and Distinct “Regimes of Truth”

When I arrived at Narok, John drove me to the construction site and tried to get me an interview. After half an hour waiting in the rain, a guard came to us and said the manager had to think about it; we better go back and wait. “The managers probably need a meeting to discuss about our visit,” said John, shaking his head. Although he had written several articles on the labor controversies, John only entered the camp once during the attack because of the difficulty of reaching the contractor. After three days waiting with no response, I contacted Fang, a Chinese PR manager at the SOE’s Nairobi office, who helped me to enter the camp without John. Some gasoline barrels were being used as roadblocks in front of the heavy iron gate. The construction site was empty and quiet because the workers had been sent back home. Zhang took me to his office in a temporary house.

Feeling that Maasai protestors and politicians would be too aggressive to communicate with, Zhang also kept quiet around Kenyan media, although he could clearly explain the situation and offer a defense of the news articles. While the demonstrators’ narratives were dominant in Kenyan media, Zhang said, “Our attitude to local media is ‘keeping a distance with respect’ (*jingeryuanzhi*). We rarely get in touch with them. In recent days, we must be more cautious. We don’t publish articles actively. Our PR work is mostly defensive.” About John’s reports on the attacks, Zhang commented,

I don’t like the way in which John reported on those issues. The politician he has quoted in the article is a jobless person who is not reliable. John just quoted this kind of guy. The other interviewee called Lewagian is not a worker here but a resident in the town. He might hear this issue somewhere, but he is not representative. John just quotes those sayings that interpret the issue out of the context (*duanzhangquyi*).

To explain this defensive attitude further, Zhang said that he knew that reporters were under time pressure, so they could not carry out an investigation; Kenyan journalists had to frame a story in a sensationalist way and were less likely to present the total truth. Ideal journalism, in Zhang’s opinion, should carry the responsibility of encouraging development, report more “positive energy” (*zhengnengliang*) stories, and facilitate the construction of the project. Sharing this perspective on Kenyan journalism and “ideal journalism,” Mr. Wang, the senior news manager, believed that the Kenyan media

always focused on negative stories to attract audiences and failed to carry the social responsibility of encouraging social development. However, he decided not to respond to this issue, saying, "The election is coming; and the project will be launched soon. We don't want things to be out of control." Keeping a low profile seemed to be a strategic silence to avoid unwanted controversy, given that getting the project done before the election was the main diplomatic task of Chinese state actors.

John also found that his reports were unbalanced, but he complained that it was hard to reach the contractor, while local people were willing to speak. Narok correspondents did not reference the political and interethnic tensions, although they knew about such complexities. Believing that the politicians just catered to political concerns instead of telling people the truth, John still quoted them: "That is just my opinion. It was impossible to ignore local politicians because they still represent public concerns." Encountering Zhang's complaints about the quoting of a town resident, John argued,

Yes, he is a resident in the town, but it is what he said. You know it is hard to justify this issue. I put down people's allegations, or I would say, claims, and the Chinese declines these claims. Then, that's it. Reaching the truth is hard. What I can do is to quote different sides—politicians, residents, and Chinese contractors. The truth will come out. But we can't reach the Chinese. If I can, I could make a complete theme. Then you let audiences interpret.

The top journalistic role for Kenyan journalists is "reporting things as they are" (Obonyo & Owilla, 2017, p. 3), that is, straight reporting, referring to the professional value of objectivity. A senior reporter at *The Standard* explained to me, "Reporters just put down what they have seen and what people are saying. Things would not appear in reports if people do not complain." This journalistic approach is also enhanced by some realistic challenges. In John's case, he was only paid US\$10 for a published story, so he needed to write at least two stories a day. The lack of convenient transport means, as mentioned earlier, makes investigative reporting difficult. Therefore, correspondents rely on news materials they have immediate access to.

Back in the Nairobi office, Kenyan reporters frequently complained about the difficulty in accessing the Chinese contractor. This silence—considered a lack of transparency and part of the practice of hiding unethical behavior—allows reporters to provide interpretations in ways that the Chinese might not appreciate. In another report—"Exposing Neo-colonialism, Racism and Blatant Discrimination Behind the SGR Walls" (Wafula, 2018)—the reporter relied on interviews with two former employees, emphasizing that his two-week-long attempts to obtain a response from the contractor were futile; the alleged discrimination against Kenyan workers was further articulated with the "neocolonialism" discourse.

Despite different perspectives on the journalistic role and journalists' approach toward truth, both Chinese and Kenyan interlocutors appeared to agree that news stories should tell the truth. News production relies on its own regimes of truth; the truth of news is "the end product of a mixture of fact, fiction, fabrication and faking whose chief characteristic is that the audience—with much encouragement—continues to believe in it despite the odds" (Hartley, 1987, p. 41). Latham (2000) explains that

news works “as if” it refers, truthfully, to an external reality, whereas in effect any such reality is rather a product of the specific conditions, methods, systems, and governing assumptions of news production, that is of its “regime of truth.” (p. 636)

Negotiating with globalization and commercialization, the Chinese media still serve as the party’s mouthpiece (Zhang, 2011). The media’s role in the Chinese context is to “support and promote government policy and to assist as required in the project of national modernization and development through their propaganda role” (Latham, 2009, p. 192); this has its legitimacy in the ability of Chinese Communist Party to deliver on its promises of modernization. This mouthpiece function does not mean that Chinese media have no journalistic ethics; Chinese journalism adopts a socialist notion of truth and objectivity—“seek truth from the fact” (*shishi qiushi*)—which contains two levels of meaning. First, news should offer the whole picture, which means that it needs to tell people not only what happened but also how, why, and what to do with this information. Second, the news is supposed to give “the totality of facts,” a broader view of truth, that would educate people to “recognise the basic nature of society and its era” (Latham, 2000, p. 639). Therefore, in addition to their diplomatic obligations, Zhang and the Chinese editor believed that “good journalism” ought to be educational and encourage social development, but Kenyan media fail to take this responsibility and always produce “negative,” “eye-catching” stories.

The preceding perspective on the journalistic role is at odds with the Kenyan private media context. Moreover, the ethics of objectivity—“a platform to show what different sides are saying”—seems subordinate to antigraft activism resulting from a combination of the watchdog ideal and the harsh social reality of power abuse and state failure (Jarso, 2010). Being aware of people who are often treated with injustice by the powerful, Kenyan journalists feel obligated to stay suspicious about the state, defend public interests, and enforce accountability of and transparency from corrupted elites (Ogongo-Ongong’a & White, 2008). This activism applies to China because of the Sino-Africa power asymmetry and the assumed “China-African elites versus African people” antagonism, although China has less control over construction management than is often imagined (Y. Wang & Wissenbach, 2019). In addition, Schmitz (2018) finds that, in the Western framing of China-Africa encounters, some journalists who take transparency as a given value feel morally obliged to expose the “truths” hidden by China, but ironically endorse “Western savior-Chinese predator” narratives. Feeling the ideological prejudice and moral supremacy in the reporting, Chinese actors tend to exhibit a semiaggressive attitude toward Western media. Despite the on-the-ground complexities, stakeholders carry their own agenda and given values and are seeking a “China-in-Africa” reality within their own “regime of truth”; I suggest this only deepens mistrust and barriers to communication.

Conclusion

The global mobility, driven by projects like the BRI, fosters a social-economic phenomenon of South-South encounters that deserves epistemological autonomy from existing globalization theories. The meaning-making of “China-Africa” contains, but outgrows, the macro-level, top-down media endgame (Simbao, 2012), which is entangled with the geopolitics of “Sino-West,” the grand narratives of “partner-predator,” the methodological nationalism of “China-Africa,” and the preassumed dynamic of “hegemon-subaltern.” This article proposes an anti-essentialism approach as an alternative way of conceptualizing

China–Africa communications; it enables us to identify contested narratives, fluid subjective positions, networks of power, and multifaced levels of struggle. Examining the media representations, the grounded meaning-making process, and the reporting process of the Narok conflicts, this study shows that Maasai demonstrators have been articulating China’s presence in the dominant discourses of ethnicity, indigenous rights, and the political-economic complex in the host society. This complex was flattened by different “regimes of truth” through which stakeholders of each side uncritically interpret and construct the “reality” of “China–Africa” and end up with mutual skepticism. For a long period, China’s “reality” has been a battleground for those seeking to shape present and future understandings of the country (Latham, 2009); debates on “China–Africa” seem to be another. To Chinese actors specifically, the silence, strategic or not, only facilitates one-sided interpretation; to be articulate, China shall think beyond the Sino–Western geopolitics and engage with the host societies’ social realities.

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