

Sino-African Migration And The Impact On Women: Anthropological And Sociological Research Between Ethiopia And Djibouti

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Abstract

This article was made starting from the PhD research “The last roads of the Horn of Africa. The Chinese presence before and after Covid”. The goal of this project is to understand women's impressions in relationships between Chinese and Africans and to compare their responses. Women are indirectly involved in the relational dynamics between China and Africa. The analysis presented aims to have a different point of view than that of men, which appears to be more related to economics and politics. In addition, the women interviewed belong to different social sitemes: Danacalian, Tigrine, European and Chinese; schooled and unschooled; working women or housewives. Their opinion analyzed through interviews and a narrative diary, opens up a view of Sino-African relations that is simpler and not tied to male impressions. The methodology used is qualitative: interviews and field research with the methodology of cultural anthropology. Data analysis and typical interpretation of labor solciology. The anthropology investigates the relationships between Chinese and Ethiopians to help the researcher understand how much the two cultures will integrate in the future. Specifically, the female figures are analysed, in order to have documentation of their condition, of relations with the Chinese. The basic question is therefore: in the near future will China and Africa be a single reality, or will the discrepancies between the two cultures make the Chinese project of the BRI difficult to implement? The sociology of work aims to analyze data and understand how much Chinese infrastructures cost China and what real benefits they bring to Africa, specifically in the Horn of Africa. Theoretical and fieldwork will also assist researchers in other fields, such as urban planning or engineering. The research is therefore useful for analyzing the new Chinese expansion phenomenon in Africa, the development of infrastructures and, in this analysis, the figure of women and their impressions. Is a fragment of in situ research carried out in January 2020 and a diary created with online interviews in 2023. Between 2022 and 2023 the survivors to the Ethiopian Civil War were traced thanks to social networks. The project is multidisciplinary: cultural anthropology, work sociology and mobile journalism.

Keywords: China, Horn Africa, Woman studies, Work sociology, Sino-African migration

Introduction

During January 2020 I traveled to Ethiopia following a salt caravan, to document the Chinese presence and the Belt Road Initiative project.¹

The project envisages the construction of roads and infrastructures which it intends to finance with over 1,000 billion dollars various infrastructural investments in almost every corner of the planet: from Africa to Europe, passing through India and South America. The name by which the African project is commonly called is African Silk Road (Garadelli 2009, PP 39-49). The initiative, strongly desired by Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, was launched in 2013 (RICCARDI & RICCARDI 2021, PP. 68-72). Is the project therefore a new form of colonization? Or are Chinese companies and the Beijing government less impactful than in old Europe? Traveling around the Horn of Africa before the Covid, I realized that the Africans, Ethiopians and Djiboutians lived completely separate from the Chinese and vice versa. Inspecting Chinese construction sites, I noticed that there were very few African workers compared to Chinese ones (ratio 1:20). This aspect deeply intrigued me and pushed me to use my anthropological skills to understand how Chinese and Africans can live together. How much Chinese investments are appreciated by Africans and how the Chinese live in these territories. Thus began my field research. After a few weeks, I met some African women and noticed very few Chinese women. The research project addressed them: how do African women experience the Chinese presence? What do African women know about the Chinese? How do Chinese women live in Africa? In the future, will the two cultures integrate, or will China and Africa share the same territory, however living "separate at home"?

¹ The Belt and Road Initiative is a set of projects paid for by the Beijing government and aimed at building or upgrading commercial infrastructure - roads, ports, bridges, railways, airports - and plants for the production and distribution of energy and communication systems. All to facilitate and give further impetus to exchanges and commercial relations between Chinese companies and the rest of the world: a global plan of trade and alliances.



Image 1. Tigray celebrating Timkat, in Belt Road Initiative territory.
 Ethiopia, Tigray, Erika Mattio

During the process of collecting qualitative and quantitative data, Ethiopians and Chinese women were thus interviewed. We add also the opinion of the husbands. The research was carried out with the use of interview cards, which contained the same questions and highlighted key words, for comparative analyses. This was followed by the drafting of a narrative diary, in some cases documented with mobile journalism techniques, in others only with written sources.

In 2020 the Civil War ravaged the Tigray and Danakil regions of Ethiopia. This made it impossible to continue the in situ research. The sources interviewed have disappeared. With the use of social networks, some of the interviewees were traced in 2022. The project continued in a new formula: the online narrative diary. This made it possible to have new data, as well as direct information on what the country was undergoing. Some interviewees have moved to Djibuti, where the work of the Belt Road Initiative continues.

The aim of this article (and of a part of the PhD project) was to document women's perception of the Chinese presence in Africa and vice-versa. Three women of different ages, social classes and cultures were interviewed. Their husbands were interviewed, who

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answered questions about the status of women. The data were processed in a comparative context to obtain results on the pre and post Covid period.

Materials and Methods

The interviews and narrative diary were prepared in Italy before the fieldwork. They are sheets accompanied by a description about the place and the interviewee. They were completed by hand and accompanied by photos or video (where possible). The narrative diary is structured with meticulous descriptions of the places, people and events experienced on the specific day. It is supplemented with photographic documentation, videos and recordings.

The tables that have been offered here, summarize the key words and results of the interviews. The project is still ongoing and these are the first results obtained in Ethiopia and with Social Networks.



Image 2. The long trip of the caravan. Ethiopia, Dallol, Erika Mattio

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The protagonists on the project

The project was born following one of the last salt caravans, in Dancalia. For three weeks I walked with 10 dromedaries, between Dancalia and Tigray accompanied by a translator. Interviewees were selected based on location and nationality.

In Dancalia, Mohammed and his wife Ala were interviewed: Ala during the acceptance process and Mohammed during the journey. Reached Tigray was interviewed Kirtos and his wife Mati. Kirtos was a Tigrayan guide who was in charge of welcoming me finished the journey with the caravan: the goal was the documentation of Coptic celebrations in Lalibela. On return to the capital Addis Ababa I met a couple of Chinese workers: Paul and his wife Dora. They run a Chinese restaurant in the capital, frequented by Chinese workers, wealthy Ethiopians, foreign workers and tourists. Finally, in Addis Ababa was interviewed Anna: a member of an NGO that allowed me to conduct interviews with workers from Chinese Belt Road Initiative companies.

The groups were then divided into a table showing name, place of interview, place of birth, age, social role and schooling.

Table 1

Name	Interview location	Place of birth	Husband	Age	Religion	Occupation	Study
Ala	Assio Bole	Dancalia	Mohammed	40	Muslim	Housewife	Illiterate
Mati	Mekallè	Tigray	Kirtos	22	Coptic	Help tour guide	Graduate
Dora	Addis Abeba	China	Paul	43	Atheist	Restaurateur	Schooled
Anna	Addis Abeba	Germany	Unmarried	32	Atheist	NGO	Post Graduate

In these Table the four women interviewed in situ in 2020.

Table 2

Name	Interview location	Place of birth	Husband	Age	Religion	Occupation	Study
Mati	Addis Abeba	Dancalia	Mohammed	24	Muslim	Housewife	Illiterate
Dora	Djibuti	Tigray	Kirtos	46	Coptic	Restaurateur	Graduate
Anna	Berlin	Germany	Unmarried	34	Atheist	NGO	Post Graduate

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After Covid and the civil war, three of the respondents were traced in 2022. Roles have changed for Mati, who is in Addis Ababa. Dora has maintained her role as a restaurant owner, but has moved with her husband to Djibouti. Anna changed cities and returned to Europe. There is no trace of Ala.

Table 3

Name	Interview location	Place of birth	Wife	Age	Religion	Occupation	Study
Mohammed	Dallol	Dancalia	Ala	43	Muslim	caravan driver	Illiterate
Kirtos	Mekallè	Tigray	Mati	26	Coptic	Tour guide	Graduate
Paul	Addis Abeba	China	Dora	46	Atheist	Restaurateur	Schooled

In the Table the husbands of the three women were interviewed in situ in 2020.

Table 4

Name	Interview location	Place of birth	Wife	Age	Religion	Occupation	Study
Kirtos	Addis Abeba	Tigray	Mati	28	Coptic	Teacher	Graduate
Paul	Djibuti	China	Dora	48	Atheist	Restaurateur	Schooled

After Covid were traced are Kirtos and Paul. Kirtos no longer works with tourists because there are still no safe conditions for tourism. He teaches English in an elementary school. Paul moved with his wife Dora to Djibouti and has a restaurant. There is no trace of Mohammed.

The interviews of the project

The interview questions were asked in the same order after an initial acquaintance phase. Qualitative and comparative analysis resulted in looking for a key word that linked or did not link the women interviewed. The questions for the women's group were different from those for the men.

For men, there were only two questions related to women (other questions were related to work and politics). Again, key words that did or did not approximate the collective thinking were analyzed.

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Table 5

Question	Keywords
How do you live in Ethiopia?	Work Home
How do you relate to other women?	Home Friends
How do the Chinese relate to Ethiopians?	Integration Talk
How do Ethiopians relate to Chinese?	Distance Road

The questions in the Table. Added to this was the narrative diary, to which each of them spoke freely about their condition and other issues.

Table 6

Question	Keywords
How do women live in Ethiopia?	Home Work Marriage
How do Chinese women live in Ethiopia?	Integration Migration
How do Chinese women and Ethiopian women relate?	Friends Distance

With the advent of the November 2020 Civil War and its continuation, it has been impossible to return to Ethiopia. With the use of Social Networks, only 4 out of 7 respondents could be traced between November 2022 and January 2023. In this case the questions were aimed at learning about the progress of the war and their current condition.

Narrative diary example

A narrative diary was produced based on the interview. Three reduced examples of the diary of Ala, Mati, Dora and Mohammed are proposed in the period pre Covid. The narrative diary of the online interview was chosen for Anna and Kirtos in 2023.

Ala. The women of Danakil live as nomads due to the climate. The Danakil have summers that reach 70 degrees Celsius and this makes their life limited from October to May. The houses are made of leather and wood, and when the population migrates, they move to Tigray.



Image 3. Ala and the family home. Ethiopia, Dancalia, Erika Mattio

The company is therefore focused on women's work. When the men aren't there (even if they often leave staggered so as to always have a man who speaks in the village) it is up to the women to manage everything and also defend the territory. Women don't choose their husbands, families choose for them. Being the wife of a caravan driver was an esteemed task. I have no contact with Chinese men or women. My husband often works with them, but he says they don't speak our language and don't interact.

Mati. In Tigray the female situation is different from Danakil. People experience a stability also determined by a very stable climate and agriculture. Marriages are born out of love and not out of family obligation. Girls often study at university and can help their husbands with tourist or administrative jobs.

The houses are often built of brick. The women who live in these houses may also have a kitchen with electricity and running water. Compared to nomadic women, the house is our dowry.

Wealthier families may have maids to handle the cleaning of the house while the women and their husbands are busy at work. Again, children are often taught by their mothers, but many children can study at school. I often have contact with Chinese men, because I accompany my husband to work. We take care of cooking and bringing them to some areas of Tigray. Chinese lifeguards are 90% work. We also worked with Chinese tour groups who came to visit. We took them to Lalibela. I have no contact with Chinese women.

They don't go out much and don't talk to Ethiopians. I met two Chinese women at the market and they were carrying produce to the restaurant they work at. There is no integration.

Dora. Few Chinese women live in Ethiopia. Chinese workers do not have their wives with them, but remain in China to support their families. Chinese women in Ethiopia live in the capital, Addis Ababa and often have shops or restaurants. There are no friendships with Ethiopian women.

The life of Chinese female workers is very lonely. The Chinese community tends to become a ghetto and Chinese women don't interact with Ethiopians. Like Chinese men, women can return to China after three years of work, generally around the Chinese New Year, for about a month.

Anna. With the advent of the Civil War it was very difficult to get Internet. I come back in Germany I am involved through ngos with Ethiopian feminist groups and psychological support. The situation for women has changed. Many women have been raped, humiliated and killed. Some managed to escape. On social networks the woman have created a group called “Woman of Tigray”, where they tell what is happening.

Feminist movements are emerging in Ethiopia and abroad. The few Chinese women have left the country together with their husbands. It was impossible for them to go back to China because of the Pandemic, they were sent to other Belt Road Initiative African countries. Many have been relocated to nearby Djibouti. Here it is easier to learn the French language and there is more interaction between Chinese women and Djiboutian women. This is because the country is smaller, used to tourism and has more movement of people and products.

There is a reversal in cases of depression. Ethiopian women are lonely and have experienced a lot of violence, which leads them to need support. because of the civil war many are no longer working and are alone at home. Chinese women have relocated and this may have benefited the psychological perception of relocation.

Mohammed - My work takes me away for almost two months. With my dromedaries I travel to get salt in Danakil and sell it in Tigray. My wife is waiting for me. The women live together: they look after the house and educate the children. I know that when I'm not there, the village is safe.

Danakil women don't know the Chinese population, because they have no way to meet them. In my travels I have met Chinese women only in Mekallè, in Tigray, who ran shops with their husbands. There are no female workers or site managers.

Kitos - With the arrival of the war, the Danakil and the Tigray that you have known have changed. Villages have been bombed, we have lost friends and relatives, our home has been destroyed.

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Nobody works with tourism now. I found a job at school, I teach English. My wife is at home. Everyone has suffered trauma. It will be years before things get back to normal. I will work with tourism again and with me Mati.

The Chinese are coming back, but they don't work in war zones. They have not returned to China due to the Panademia, but many have been relocated to other African countries.

In Ethiopia there is a humanitarian crisis, there is a lack of medicines and people. The caravanners have died out, many having retreated to some remote area of the Danakil. In this situation almost all the women have stopped working and look after the house, because there is no work.

Results

Start project - pre Covid. The role of Ethiopian and Djibouti women is often related to domestic life. Cultural and educational level make a difference. Schooled women are more likely to work with tourism. They also work with the Chinese population (as cooks, guides), but have little to do with Chinese women.

Chinese women present in Ethiopia and Djibouti always move with their husbands. None are single. The work they do is related to their husbands' work in the service sector: however, there are no Chinese women engineers in the Horn of Africa or laborers. Husbands and wives manage the same work in stores or restaurants. The work brings Chinese women into contact with Ethiopian men and women, but the condition is always one of ghettoization. The Amharic language is a stronger language barrier in Ethiopia than the French spoken in Djibouti.



Image 4. Mary and some friends for Gennà festival. Ethiopia, Lalibela, Erika Mattio

Anna, who works in an NGO and has contact with both Ethiopian, Djiboutian, and Chinese women says that Chinese women often suffer from depression problems, related to their condition.

Current project - post Covid and civil war. In the post-Covid period, the situation has maintained a similar dynamic in Djibouti, while it has caused changes in Ethiopia. Tigray and Dancalia were made insecure by the civil war: many towns were bombed and many families moved to neighboring countries (Kenya, Sudan, Djibouti) or Addis Ababa.

The civil war caused Chinese workers to move to other African countries. Dora and Paul, went to Djibouti, where they found a similar reality to Addis Ababa. Djibouti, however, offers more tourism (including Chinese) and trade; this may ease women's psychological condition.

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Mati and Kirtos, besides having suffered many family losses and the destruction of their home in Tigray, moved to Addis Ababa. Mati no longer works with tourism because there is no access to tourists now, but she will resume as soon as the emergency passes. Kirtos has also changed jobs, thanks to his degree in languages.

Anna has returned to Berlin. She is following from a distance the feminist movements that have sprung up online and is working on the rights of women who are victims of violence and with psychological damage. She explained that many people have disappeared and the salt caravans no longer exist. The war stopped the economy of salt transported by caravan.



Image 5 . Chinese territories in Dancalia. Ethiopia, Erta Ale, Erika Mattio

While the post-Covid period marks a good recovery for Djibouti and also good employment opportunities for women in the tourism sector, in Ethiopia this condition is not yet possible. It will take several months for Tigray and Dancalia to recover. Tourism will take years to return. This will cause a lot of damage on women's employment, psychological conditions and empowerment possibilities.

Discussion

In the African area between Ethiopia and Djibouti, the African presence is intertwined with the Chinese presence. Although contact with China has been documented since the medieval period (Papa C. 2006) it is since the 1990s that the Chinese presence has been stable. The research led to the understanding that China has different expectations than Old Europe. The Chinese are very distant from the African peoples, in this specific case Ethiopia and Djibouti. There is a lot of mutual ghettoization. It is as if the Chinese have chosen Africa only for territorial investments, with the aim of interfacing as little as possible with the local population. The same for Africans. In the specific case, the Horn of Africa sees its inhabitants very distant and wary of the Chinese. There may be some opportunities only for the tourism sector. This aspect is also found in women's opinions. Women are less in contact with the Chinese public (only those working in the tourism sector) and opinions are the same as men.

The male world is linked to labor. Ethiopians and Djiboutians have daily contact with Chinese men: some Africans are laborers, some cooks, some translators. Chinese workers are always above African workers, both in terms of salary and role. Women in Ethiopia and Djibouti have almost no contact with Chinese men. In case they work as cooks or in the tourism branch (as is the case in Mati) they are always accompanied by their husbands (regardless of religious beliefs). Women in poorer, unschooled areas have no contact at all. The study creates a macrodifference in the perception of reality and the possibility of encounters with the Chinese population. Chinese women (Dora's case) have more contact with the Ethiopian population. In this case everything is related to work.

Social dynamics create a relationship determined by the purchase of household goods (supermarket, stores) or stores (market for poultry, meat and vegetables). In Ethiopia, language is a barrier: communication consists of basic words with less attention to syntactic processing. This aspect has a greater influence on Sino-African relations which appear more distant. In Djibouti, the French language is simpler and the relationships are enriched by a wider form of dialogue. Despite this, the dynamics are the same.



Image 6. Details of salt blocks and camel. Rthiopia, Dallol, Erika Mattio

With the civil war the couples interviewed moved. Mati and Kirtos moved to the capital Addis Ababa, changing their status. They no longer work with tourism (because tours are not possible due to the war) and live with their families for economic and safety reasons. Dora and Paul have moved to Djibouti. Politically stable country in which, thanks to the network of Chinese contacts, they were able to open another restaurant. So did many Chinese workers who were sent to other countries. When the war ends Mati and Kirtos will return to work with tourism, remaining in Addis Ababa. Dora and Paul will stay with their restaurant in Djibouti. The war has lost track of Mohammed and Ala in Dancalia. This is because they have no means to communicate. The other interviewees were traced through Anna's contacts. Her figure was important to have a neutral voice. The presence of women will once again be fundamental in Ethiopia. Feminist groups are paying great attention to women left alone and to the need to restart. With the end of the civil war, new Chinese women will also return.

The interviews conducted with women resulted in the acquisition of a less political and economic view than that of men. Women's presence is crucial processing of data related to Sino-African relations. The female voice seems more naïve than the male voice, which is more aware of economic and political impact; at the opposite end of the spectrum, it appears more real, because it is less bound by the sell-and-buy lens that men have and therefore more judgmental. Comparing data between interviews conducted with Ethiopian, Chinese, and

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European women and Ethiopian and Chinese men creates the acquisition of data from all social classes inhabiting the Horn of Africa.

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