

## Chapter 5

How *Not* to Build a Road: An Analysis of the Socio-economic Effects of a Chinese Infrastructure Project in MozambiqueMorten Nielsen<sup>1</sup>

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What do infrastructure projects amount to beyond the physical concreteness of construction materials? Is it possible that the mixing of sand, gravel and cement does *not* result in the construction of a road despite the apparent material existence of the latter? By examining the socio-economic effects of a particular Chinese infrastructure project in the southern part of Mozambique, this chapter will be guided by these seemingly paradoxical questions. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork among local road workers employed by CHICO,<sup>2</sup> a Chinese construction consortium, to upgrade and rehabilitate the EN1 highway between the towns of Xai-Xai and Chissibuca, I focus on the everyday encounters between these young Mozambicans and their Chinese superiors. As we shall see, according to the Mozambican workers, given the unacceptable working conditions, the poor salaries and the assumed unintelligibility and hostile behaviour of their Chinese counterparts, their labour cannot be considered as proper work and so, consequently, the mixing of sand, gravel and cement does not result in the building of a road.

During the last decade, the Chinese expansion in sub-Saharan Africa in general and in Mozambique in particular has increased its pace at a staggering rate. Currently, Chinese companies (both private and public) are involved not only in natural resource extraction but, equally, in infrastructure projects, the development of IT technologies and agricultural farming. According to a high-level Mozambican official at (ANE – the National Road Administration) Administração Nacional de Estradas,<sup>3</sup> nearly all public tenders are currently won by Chinese companies and not least so because of their highly competitive prices. 'Despite the often poor quality, we need to accept the Chinese companies,'

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out as part of the collective research project 'Imperial Potentialities'. Besides the author, the project team is composed of Morten A Pedersen and Mikkel Bunkenborg, University of Copenhagen. The research project is fully funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research, Social Sciences (Forskningsrådet for Samfund og Erhverv).

<sup>2</sup> CHICO is an acronym for China Henan International Cooperation Group Co Ltd.

he told me. 'They are always the cheapest and we don't have a lot of money'. As we shall see below, this comment succinctly sums up one of the primary factors in explaining the ease with which Chinese companies operate and expand in Mozambique while also implicitly suggesting possible tensions in the relationship. As such, this chapter might be taken as an attempt at unfolding some of the unexpected effects from an increased Chinese presence in a fragile nation-state in sub-Saharan Africa.

### The material traces of an emerging empire

With the Mozambican peace agreement in 1992, the destructive civil war between the ruling Frelimo party and the Renamo movement that had lasted since shortly after independence in 1975 was finally brought to an end. Faced with the overwhelming challenge of reviving a paralysed state administration and rebuilding an infrastructural system in ruins, the Frelimo government turned to international lending institutions and political allies for support (Abrahamsson & Nilsson 1995; Hanlon 1991, 1996). During the protracted struggle against the Portuguese colonisers, Frelimo established a collaborative relationship with China that involved military support and guerrilla training (Dinerman 2006:21). Although the friendship cooled down somewhat in the mid-1980s when Mozambique made its 'turn toward the West' by adopting a series of International Monetary Fund-sponsored economic adjustment programmes, China remained a potential political ally (Roque 2009; cf. Hanlon 1996:16). From the early 1990s onwards, the relationship has been massively reinvigorated through a series of inter-governmental agreements and memoranda preparing the way for China's intensified presence in Mozambique. And judging from recent statements by the political elite in Mozambique, their Chinese counterparts will be confronted by few hindrances (if any at all) on the road towards further economic involvement in the country. In a response to the increased Chinese presence in sub-Saharan Africa, Armando Guebuza, Mozambique's president, stated that '*China é muito bem vinda em Mozambique*' (China is very welcome in Mozambique) (*Revistamacau* 2006). The cordial openness towards China might be read from the seemingly unlimited economic room for manoeuvre allocated to the latter. From an insignificant position in 2003 as the 260<sup>th</sup> 'biggest' investor, China is now among the ten biggest investors in Mozambique alongside countries such as Portugal, Italy and France (Macahub 2009). The same gigantic leap can be read from the bilateral trade between the two countries which reached US\$284.11 million in 2007, eight times more than in 2001 (Chichava 2008:9). If we narrow in on the most recent period, China's increasing economic presence is even more pronounced.

According to the CPI,<sup>4</sup> in the third quarter of 2011 China was the second largest foreign investor in Mozambique only surpassed by the USA (Club of Mozambique Lda 2012).<sup>5</sup> Hence, although relatively modest in comparison with other African states, such as Angola and Sudan, Mozambique's economic collaboration with its Asian counterpart is worth noticing simply because of the current pace which has one of the fastest growing rates for any single nation trading with China (Horta 2007).

According to the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Chinese government is currently financing 12 major infrastructure projects in Mozambique totalling nearly US\$1 billion,<sup>6</sup> the most visible being perhaps the high-profile construction of a new national stadium on the outskirts of Maputo inaugurated in April 2011. Not all construction projects are realised through inter-government agreements, however, and the more than 30 Chinese companies active in Mozambique also work for municipalities, international donor organisations and private enterprises (Jansson & Kiala 2009). Of particular importance is CHICO, which has proven to be a remarkably competitive actor during tenders for infrastructural projects, not least when pertaining to the rebuilding of national roads. Since 2007, CHICO has constructed a 154-km road between Muxungwe and Inchope, 200-kilometre tarred road between Chitima and Mágoé in the Tete province and concluded a 300-metre bridge over the Incomati river in the Maputo province (Macahub 2007; 2008a; 2008b).

In December 2008, CHICO was awarded the contract of rehabilitating and upgrading 96 kilometres of the EN1 highway between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca. Funded by the International Development Association (IDA), the project is undertaken as part of the Government of Mozambique's Integrated Road Sector Programme with an agreed contract sum of MZM1 269 447 739 (US\$40 557 400). In January 2009, work began on the highway between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca and with only minor setbacks the construction project was completed in March 2011 with a final delivery to ANE the following month (Club of Mozambique Lda 2011). In its final phase, the construction team was composed of 56 Chinese on site and 261 local Mozambicans hired directly by CHICO (Scott Wilson Ltd 2010). As an important third party, ANE assigned Scott Wilson Ltd, an international construction consultancy, to supervise the project and, throughout the process, 21 full-time staff members

<sup>4</sup> The Centre for Investment Promotion.

<sup>5</sup> Apparently, this rise followed the approval of four investment projects worth a total of US\$45.1 million.

<sup>6</sup> '*Projectos submetidos para o financiamento externo do Exim Bank da China do Governo da China*', 6 August 2009 (Projects submitted for external financing through the China Exim Bank, Government of China). Document from the Ministry of Planning and Development.

headed by Samuel Nhemachena have accompanied the construction team while working on the road.<sup>7</sup> Since the beginning of the construction process, a group of 'checkers' have monitored all work activities and written daily reports to Samuel Nhemachena.<sup>8</sup> In those many instances when a checker estimated that immediate action was required, say, when the milling machine had cut too deep, an engineer was called from Scott Wilson to decide whether or not to make the layers of sand, gravel and cement anew.

### Everyday bewilderment

Towards the end of the construction process, lines had to be painted on the new asphalt road. According to Samuel Nhemachena, in January 2011, Mr Wu Jinhou Sheng, the CHICO site agent, declared that the Chinese work crew was ready to commence with the road-marking process and that a spraying machine had been imported from China in September 2010. Somewhat surprised to learn that a spraying machine had been at the construction site for several months, Nhemachena requested an inspection of the machinery and an initial test to be carried out on a small country road near the EN1 highway before allowing the Chinese work team to proceed with the actual marking. As he was soon to realise, the Chinese technicians were not at all equipped to handle the spraying machine and they were therefore ordered to continue honing their painting skills on the country road until they could make at least 200 metres of perfect road marking (see Figure 5.1). Each month, Scott Wilson has drawn up a 'Works Progress Report' to be distributed to all stakeholders and in the report from February 2011, it is stated that,

The trials [with the spraying machine] were not successful as there were a number of problems with the machine and personnel... The Contractor [i.e. CHICO] however maintained that he could do the work using the same machine and he tried and rectified most [but not all] of the problems... The Engineer [i.e. Scott Wilson] was of the opinion that the Contractor's machine was not good enough to carry out work of such magnitude. The Contractor's personnel also looked like they were not experienced enough to carry out the work. The Engineer therefore advised the Contractor to replace his machine or hire another machine or better still sub contract the entire road marking activity. Up to the end of February 2011, the activity of road marking

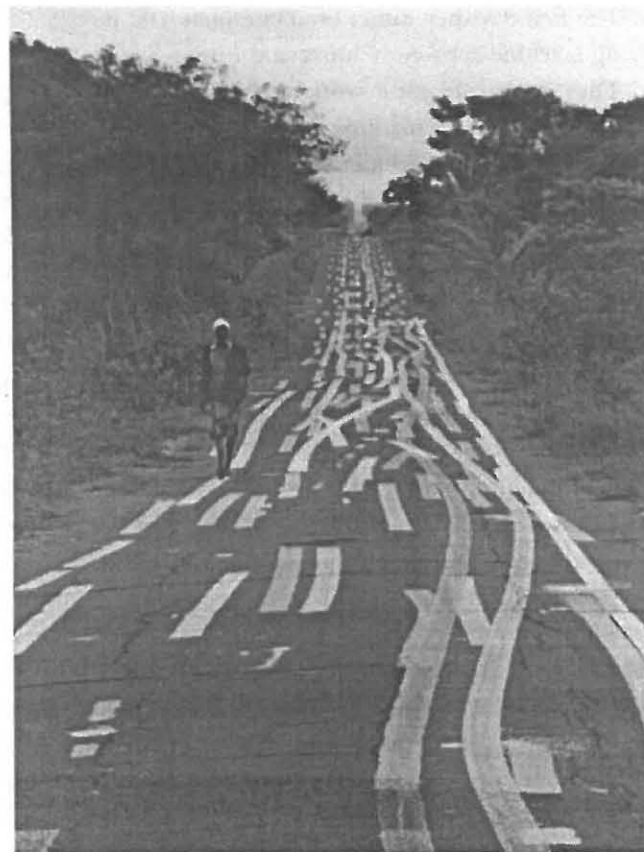


Figure 5.1 The 'trial section' where Chinese personnel were honing their painting skills

had not yet commenced and the Contractor had not clearly informed the Engineer what plans he was making to be able to achieve good and acceptable quality of work on this activity (Scott Wilson Ltd 2011:19).

As Samuel Nhemachena later told me, he allowed the Chinese crew to experiment with the spraying machine during the first weeks of January only to realise that they were incapable of making the road markings by themselves. In order to complete the construction process, CHICO therefore sent for a technician from the Chinese company that initially sold them the spraying machine and, finally, in late February 2011 the first tests were made on the EN1 highway. While sitting at a roadside café near the Chissibuca construction site in April 2011, Samuel described the difficulties associated with the painting process. 'When they were finally ready, I told them that I'd give them 200 metres

<sup>7</sup> The Scott Wilson team was composed of four engineers, two technicians and 15 'checkers'.

<sup>8</sup> In accordance with the initial contract, although operating as part of the Scott Wilson team, salaries for the checkers were paid by CHICO.



on the road. The first day they didn't even complete 100 metres... Something on the spraying machine apparently broke and I immediately told them to get off the road. They eventually got it working. Not the first day though! It was only in March that the actual marking could begin. But it's not the CHICO crew painting the lines. The technician is doing all the work... Apparently, he hangs around until the process is completed'. I asked Samuel whether the technician had been able to actually carry out the road marking. 'Well, only a few days ago I got a call from one of my checkers telling me that the line was not straight. He had told them [the Chinese team] to stop but they refused. It was only when I called their guy and ordered them to stop that they actually did that... They really don't have a clue of what they are doing!' Samuel shook his head and roared with laughter.

Still, it was not only the lack of technical skills that caused the marking process to be continuously postponed. In the 'Works Progress Report' from February 2011, it is stated that '(o)n the trials for the road marking carried out, the reflective beads are not holding onto the paint. It is necessary to check on the quality of the paint. This should have been tested previously, to avoid delays now waiting for results to enable decisions to be made' (Scott Wilson Ltd 2011:14). According to Samuel, the checkers soon discovered that the quality of the paint was below the acceptable standard and he therefore instructed the CHICO foreman to make sure that proper materials were, in fact, being used. Not long after, Samuel was contacted by a Mozambican worker complaining about the poor work conditions while reorganising stored road paint at the CHICO compound. Wondering about why the materials engineer at CHICO had not informed him that they had a stored quantity of road paint while also being puzzled about the 'reorganisation' carried out by the road workers, Samuel and Taurai Mutanguro, the senior inspector of works, made an unannounced visit to the CHICO compound and demanded to inspect the storage room. The Chinese materials inspector took them to a small wooden shed at the back of the compound that was apparently locked and only 30 minutes later did he manage to locate the key so Samuel and Taurai could be let inside the storage room. 'When we finally got in there, some people (Mozambican workers) were still busy cleaning up'. Samuel took a sip of his beer before continuing, 'They had been working all day behind a locked door without the Chinese letting them outside. All the tins were neatly closed but there was still fresh paint on the ground'. From subsequent conversations with the Mozambican workers doing the reorganisation in the wooden shed and the materials inspector from CHICO, Samuel learnt that the paint had been stored outside for more than two months, exposed to the intense midday heat. Not only had many of the containers dried out; it was nearly impossible to use the remaining paint (as was

documented in the 'Works Progress Report'). 'That's why it took so long for them to open the door'. Samuel thumped on the table with his index finger to emphasise his point. 'They didn't want us to find out that they were using the dried-out paint. So the workers were ordered to open all the tins and if the paint was dry, they removed the crust and poured what was at the bottom into a new container... But what I simply don't understand is why they didn't tell us about the paint in the first place. Why did they want to conceal that they had acquired the paint and the spraying machine? I really don't get that...'

The day after my conversation with Samuel Nhemachena, I had planned to meet some of the young Mozambicans who were still working on the road. At the time of my visit, road marking was the only major project to be completed and with only one spraying machine, the need for local personnel was minimal. I found the remaining road crew approximately 25 kilometres from the Chissibuca camp moving forward at a slow but stable pace (see Figure 5.2). Besides the technician who was operating the spraying machine, two CHICO engineers were constantly adjusting spraying speed and pressure. Three Mozambican workers were responsible for redirecting the traffic and two others were cleaning the asphalt on each side of the newly painted lines. I knew two of the Mozambican workers from my previous visits to the construction site and every time the spraying machine had to be adjusted, we had a few moments to catch up. Whereas Nelson had been working with CHICO since the beginning of the project period, Sérgio was hired during the most intense phase when several construction teams were operating simultaneously on various different sites. While sitting under a shady *nkanhú* tree, I asked them about the incident with the dried-up paint at the CHICO storage and, surprisingly, Nelson had been in the small wooden shed pouring paint from one container to another when Samuel and Taurai made their unannounced visit. 'Yeah... it was pretty hot in there.' Nelson looked past me and smiled. 'The entire day we were working without masks and without gloves pouring old paint into a huge container. It was almost like clay. And you know, they never told us anything... They just pointed towards the containers and locked the door'. Having been silently listening to Nelson's account, Sérgio slowly got up and put on his cap while casting a quick glance at the Chinese foreman coordinating the work on the spraying machine. 'Ah! The Chinese... they are not really human...'

### How *not* to build a road

Similar to other infrastructure projects carried out by Chinese companies, a fenced compound has been built to accommodate the Chinese workers from CHICO during the construction phase. Every morning, the Mozambican workers arrived outside the compound in Chidenguele and, depending on the



Figure 5.2 The remaining road crew and the spraying machine

planned activities for the day, were transported to different sites where they worked in teams headed by Chinese foremen. At the outset, the stretch of the EN1 highway to be rehabilitated was divided into smaller segments with each work team operating from the outer end-points towards the centre. Broadly speaking, the construction process was constituted of three consecutive phases: (i) preparation; (ii) milling; and (iii) surfacing. The process began by preparing the roadbed and securing the pavement layers (the three layers of sand, cement and gravel underneath the surfacing asphalt). After a meticulous milling process where the top layer (the 'stabilised base') was mixed with cement, water was poured on for hardening the mixture and sprayed with tack coat before asphalt was put on as the final surface. Although some Mozambicans were assigned to particular tasks, for example, truck drivers or guards, the majority worked on all three phases of the project with the two first (preparation and milling) being the most time-consuming.

In the 'Works Monthly Progress Report' from September 2010, it is stated that the contractor's (CHICO) ability to complete the work within the contracted period depends on '[p]roper execution of the work to required standards. If work is not properly executed, the Contractor has been advised to re-work. This is a waste of time and resources on the part of the Contractor

and should be avoided' (2010:7). According to Samuel Nhemachena, this small quotation aptly sums up a predominant difficulty regarding the collaboration with CHICO. After having accompanied the Chinese engineers for more than two years, Samuel was completely convinced that his Asian counterparts had little or no knowledge about actually building roads and this was the primary cause for the innumerable difficulties and frequent re-workings of the highway. Surprisingly, even among senior staff at ANE, I heard similar accounts. During a prolonged conversation with Clóvis Wate, a road engineer, I asked him about his collaboration with CHICO.

Wate: The group of (Chinese) workers involved in this project really don't know how to do their job; the inspector (*fiscal*) has to teach them. Basically, the Chinese are still learning to do their job.

Morten: So the Chinese don't have sufficient technical skills required to execute this project?

Wate: No, they don't.

Morten: How is it then possible for the Chinese to be working here?

Wate: Well, that's because of the inspectors... even though it's not really their responsibility. They teach the Chinese how to do their job.

During the milling process, checkers from Scott Wilson walked a few metres behind the imposing milling machine and continuously tested the thickness of pavement layers. As was frequently the case, the blade cut too deep so that the cement from the stabilised base was mixed with the two bottom layers. If the blade was immediately adjusted, the milling continued without further delays. Numerous times, however, the attempted corrections did not have the desired effect and after inspection from the materials engineer at Scott Wilson, the stretch of road under construction had to be remade. According to Samuel, problems like these occurred almost on a daily basis. When making the stabilised base, the proportion between sand and cement would be incorrect or the density and compaction of the pavement layers unsatisfactory. Not surprisingly, Samuel was quite puzzled by the whole set-up. Even when instructed about proper construction techniques, the young engineers did not seem to be particularly interested in improving the quality. Still, as Samuel and his team tried to remain adamant regarding the quality of the construction work, CHICO was forced to spend huge amounts of money remaking their own previous work. 'I don't think that they generate any money here at all!' We were having dinner after a long day at the construction site when Samuel voiced his overt bewilderment about the Chinese and their peculiar comportment. 'The way I see it,' Samuel continued, 'they must be getting capital injections from the company in China'.

I asked why CHICO would possibly want to keep funding a project carried out by seemingly inexperienced and incapable engineers and thereby enduring continuous financial losses. 'That's also what I don't understand,' Samuel said before bursting into roaring laughter. 'The road might be there but it's already crumbling. Only a few years down the line, there won't be any road.'

To be sure, the Mozambican workers were as puzzled about their Chinese superiors as were Samuel and his colleagues from Scott Wilson. I was sitting by the roadside with a group of workers waiting for the materials engineer to decide whether the improper mixture of sand and cement recently detected by the checkers was sufficient cause for a reworking of the road. Inácio nodded towards the young Chinese foreman engaged in an intense discussion with the engineer. 'They have to use more cement.' He looked the other way while shaking his head. 'Ah! I don't know why they work like this. There are already cracks (*rachas*) in the road.' Throughout the course of the project, many local workers had, indeed, considerable difficulties deciphering the peculiar actions of the Chinese. The particular tasks to be executed during the day were indicated by the foremen through the use of physical signs and monosyllabic exclamations as most of the Chinese spoke little or no Portuguese. According to the Mozambicans, the minimal degree of verbal communication often gave rise to unmanageable problems and particularly so when working with short-tempered superiors. While describing the quotidian and violent assaults, Inácio introduced me to a colleague a bit further down the road. The right side of his face was visibly swollen with several scratches running from the hairline towards the chin. As Inácio told me, the young Mozambican worker had been severely beaten by his Chinese foreman who was apparently upset by the former's inability to decipher how to carry out a particular task.

### The mysteries of Chinese payment policies

Although the frequent attacks were considered both completely unacceptable and extremely stressful, their significance waned when compared to the complete lack of dialogue regarding the incomprehensible wage policies and the still missing contracts for most of the workers. According to the 'Work Progress Report' from February 2011:

The Contractor [CHICO] has, from the beginning of the works, been encouraged to make sure that all of his workers have signed contracts before they start to work and that they were being paid salaries in line with the Government gazetted ranges of wages. In June, the Contractor submitted some copies of employment contracts for about 100 workers. Despite further requests, the Contractor has not submitted to the

Engineer any more signed employment contracts for his workers.' (Scott Wilson Ltd 2011)

During the final phase of the project, out of a total of 261 Mozambicans working for CHICO, only 103 (39.5%) had signed contracts and very few of these were formulated according to Mozambican labour laws. Hence, without contractual agreements, demands for improved rights were accompanied by uncertainty and fear of losing jobs. At the construction site, the only outside agent was the Scott Wilson unit and being contracted by ANE purely to carry out the overall audit of the project, Samuel and his colleagues were essentially incapable of anything other than reporting to their Mozambican counterparts the untenable labour situation. The overt risks notwithstanding, three times during the project period a group of workers did initiate a walkout to protest against the unfair wage policies and, particularly, against the refusal of the Chinese to pay holiday allowances and overtime. Although the initiatives did seem to have positive effects, as the Chinese agreed to pay one holiday per month, it was still quite difficult to decipher how and if the days were in fact registered. I asked Alex, a skinny Mozambican worker from Chidenguele, whether he thought the strikes had been successful. 'The result of the strike was that we made demands for holiday allowances and they accepted that... only... it's very little money. And I don't know whether I am actually getting the correct salary. You see, it's impossible to tell whether I get my holiday allowance or not.' As Alex and his colleagues explained to me, the main problem was the incomprehensible manner in which their wages were paid out. Monthly salaries were handed out as wads of money to the Mozambicans, who were required to stand in line and wait to be called forth one after the other. Besides the general discomfort about exposing to one's peers the amount of money earned (Pedersen & Nielsen 2013), this procedure made it virtually impossible to verify whether the received amount was correct or not. If pay slips accompanied salaries at all, they were written in Chinese, which made it somewhat difficult to figure out how the money had been calculated (see Figure 5.3). When the Mozambicans questioned their salaries, Chinese superiors monitoring the process immediately pushed them forward. Inácio, the young worker mentioned earlier, expressed his frustrations about the situation while sitting at the roadside with a group of colleagues. 'They don't even put the money in an envelope. They just count the money and hand it to us as if they were offering it to us... it doesn't even seem like they are paying us at all' (*nem parece que estão a pagar*). One of Inácio's colleagues intervened. 'He is right, you know. The Chinese is no good (*O chinês não é bom*). The money he is giving us is money without value'.





Figure 3 Example of a pay slip received by a Mozambican worker. As can be seen from the picture, all text is written in Chinese.

#### 'If there are no memories, there are no dreams'

It is of course no startling realisation that salaries were of primary importance to the local workers. Even when employed by national companies the large majority of the young Mozambicans received meagre salaries that rarely reached the nationally agreed minimum wage.<sup>9</sup> Still, from my conversations with the road workers it seemed that working for the Chinese construction company was unlike conventional employment situations and particularly so regarding its long-term effects. As I was told numerous times, the work carried out at the construction site did not create proper memories (*lembrança*). Towards the end of my stay in Chidenguele in November 2010, I had a long conversation with Alex about the long-term effects of having worked for CHICO.

The work doesn't make us remember anything at all [*não fica lembrança de nada*]. The pay is really bad and it doesn't allow us to start our own construction projects. If the money sufficed for buying construction materials for building our own houses, then it would come to constitute a proper memory. If we actually did receive proper salaries that allowed us to build houses and buy furniture [*mobília*], buy a bed and that kind of stuff... Then, after having completed the construction project, I would

<sup>9</sup> The minimum wage for construction work in Mozambique is currently MZM2 435 (US\$79) per month.

be thinking that "I worked for this company and I managed to buy these things".

As Alex poignantly describes, an important temporal relationship has been established between the hardships endured at the construction site and its future effects where the meaning of the former seems to be predicated on the productive realisation of the latter (see also Nielsen 2013). In other words, only when salaries received from his Chinese employers sufficed for buying something of lasting value, such as furniture or construction materials for a cement house, did the work carried out at the road between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca convey meaningful value. 'As workers, we have to continue imagining that we are going to buy things... a bed, a bike...' Nelson explained. 'But if the pay is really bad, then it's not even possible to buy five sacks of rice.' I asked Nelson if it was possible to imagine buying stuff when the pay was bad. 'No! Not when the pay is as bad as this. We have this mentality that we do what we have to do and then build houses for our families. But when the salary is really bad then we don't even have enough money to buy food (*alimentação*)... If there are no memories, there are no dreams.'

Although the amount of money received from the Chinese superiors was undoubtedly of primary importance, other factors affected the memories of having worked at the construction site. As I gradually found out, it was of crucial importance that the relationship between employer and employee was acknowledged by both as being of significant value. Through the exchange of labour and salaries, each party ideally gives something of themselves. At an interactional, everyday level, we might define this 'something' as the recognition of the other as a social person with whom interaction is not only possible but also desirable. Acts of mutual recognition might consequently occur in numerous ways, such as when employers allow employees a day off due to family bereavement or, equally likely, by advancing a smaller amount of the monthly pay and, conversely, when employees accept difficult working conditions and poor salaries based on oral agreements (rather than written contracts) with their employer. According to the young Mozambican, the situation was somewhat different at the road construction site, however, as their Chinese superiors were apparently incapable of engaging in meaningful social relationships. Even minor mistakes ignited the short-tempered Chinese and more than once it resulted in serious beatings. Indeed, as Samuel Nhemachena later told us, three 'checkers' had been physically assaulted by Chinese foremen when trying to interrupt their work.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in contrast to standard, albeit

<sup>10</sup> On one occasion, the assailant was taken to the local police station but no charges were pressed.

informal, work ethics in Mozambique, CHICO did not make advances on salaries. Those fortunate workers who had signed contracts with CHICO received monthly payments of roughly MZM3 000 (US\$92). For the large majority without a contractual agreement, however, salaries varied and rarely exceeded MZM2 000 (US\$61). Hence, halfway through the month, many Mozambican workers were short of money and thus in need of immediate advances of their salaries. Without this opportunity, a widespread tendency was to take a few (unpaid) days off while searching for other possible income-generating activities. 'This job deprives us of a lot of things,' Alex sighed. 'It doesn't provide any kind of security. They don't allow us to do anything else even when we have stuff to do at home. And if I have been away for only one day, they will probably fire me when I get back the next day.'

These various aspects of the social relationship between employer and employee were crystallised by the contested salaries. In a sense, the money *as such* seemed to manifest the problematic character of the Chinese superiors. 'It's not sufficient for buying construction materials,' Sérgio told me. 'In fact, you can't even buy proper meals (*ranchos*) for 30 days. Ah! The Chinese salary is complicated (*o salário dos chineses é complicado*).' Without any physical proof to document that they had, in fact, worked at the construction site, it was almost like the road in itself lost its significance. 'This money doesn't give me any memories of having built a road,' Alex sneered. 'The work that we did doesn't deserve this salary. This is a project of great magnitude (*envergadura*). It covers a lot of kilometres... From where we are right now, there is at least 95 kilometres to Chissibuca. This project has lasted more for than 18 month and even so we don't manage to commence building our own houses from the salaries we receive... This is not a proper road, you know.' Hence, in a peculiar reversal of conventional causality, the road seemed to acquire its particular qualities (its 'roadness', as it were) based on the subsequent conversion of salaries into something durable, such as construction materials for a cement house. Due to the problematic character of the Chinese counterparts, it was clearly not possible to make such conversions and so the sand, gravel and cement which the road workers meticulously mixed together did not constitute a road but merely an aggravation of what was already a problematic situation.

## Conclusion

As I was about to return home after my last fieldwork in Mozambique, I arrived at the new airport built by a Chinese construction consortium.<sup>11</sup> Before entering the car park, all cars stop at an automatic bar where the driver pushes

a button to receive a slip of paper with the time of arrival. Although the airport had been inaugurated only a few days earlier, the machine did not function. Instead, a young Mozambican airport official was sitting on a plastic chair next to the defunct bar writing out small notes with the approximate time of arrival. I rolled down the car window and although I did not say anything, I must have looked quite puzzled. The official nodded towards the impressive new airport behind him, shook his head and with an almost overbearing smile he said, 'China!'

In order to outline some of the unexpected socio-economic effects of Chinese interventions in Mozambique, I have focused on the everyday encounters between young Mozambican workers and their Chinese superiors. Hence, as is hopefully clear by now, rather than presenting a general account of China's presence in Mozambique, this ethnographic analysis serves primarily to indicate particular sites of contestation and tension arising with (but not entirely caused by) the increased activities of the former. In doing so, my reading of the socio-economic situation has emerged through the perspectives of the Mozambican workers precisely in order to flesh out the confusion and bewilderment of interacting with a counterpart that is radically different. Although this could lead to the conclusion that Chinese engineers are *ipso facto* unintelligible 'others', this is of course a far too easy and reductionist conclusion. Rather, from this narrowly focused ethnographic account, the challenge is to examine the broader political and socio-economic factors that give rise to such seemingly untenable situations. According to the anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005), we need to understand in greater detail processes of 'global friction' where different actors are brought together in 'productive moments of misunderstanding'. Whereas an initial analysis of the 'moment of misunderstanding' at the road construction site might suggest that we read backwards, as it were, from the situation in order to decipher individual strategies of all interacting agents and thereby examine the origin of these conflicts, Tsing guides our attention towards the socio-cultural 'stuff' that is actually being produced through these encounters, such as the reconfiguration of social relationships and the flexible imageries of particular future scenarios far away from the hardships endured while mixing cement, sand and gravel. Since I first started exploring different local socio-economic effects of Chinese interventions in Mozambique in 2009, the situation has changed dramatically, with increased economic investments, large-scale infrastructure projects and, equally important, transfer of personnel. The massive presence of Chinese companies has undoubtedly had numerous productive outcomes and made thousands of jobs available for Mozambican citizens. Still, as I have described above, in fragile situations, such as that which currently characterises Mozambique, the 'global friction' between interacting

11 The airport is being built by the Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Corporation (AFECC).



agents might, over time, create massive crises. Currently, there seems to be an increasing awareness among many Mozambicans, such as the young airport official writing out paper-slips for visitors at the new airport in Maputo, that massive foreign investments is a double-edged sword that needs to be critically examined. The next couple of years will show whether this increased awareness will also lead to improvements for the Mozambican population.

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