

WORKING PAPER No 1

AFRASO
AFRICA'S ASIAN OPTIONS

Ruling Parties as Communities of Practice and Collective Identity in China-Ethiopia Relations

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AFRASO WORKING PAPERS

Africa's Asian Options – an interdisciplinary and transregional collaborative research project at Goethe University Frankfurt of ZIAF (Center for Interdisciplinary African Studies) and IZO (Interdisciplinary Centre for East Asian Studies)

General Editors: Prof. Uta Ruppert and Prof. Frank Schulze-Engler

How to cite this paper: Lejeune, Johannes (2015): Ruling Parties as Communities of Practice and Collective Identity in China-Ethiopia Relations. In: AFRASO Working Papers, No 1



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Imprint:

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ABSTRACT

While it helps to put the overemphasis on Chinese agency in the literature into perspective, the recent debate on the role played by African agency in Sino-African relations generally adopts the same rationalist perspective on international politics, and thus stands to miss important aspects of the relations studied. This paper takes the example of Ethiopia, which is often used to highlight African elites' strategic use of the new options presented by China's rise, and analyses it from a constructivist perspective. Such a perspective proposes that we need to take the role played by ideas, discourses and emotions seriously, and that Ethiopian policy makers do not exist outside a dense web of personal relations, common knowledge, and shared practices that inadvertently structure their relations with China. More specifically, it is argued here that the ruling parties of China and Ethiopia are linked together in an international community of practice, that exchanges within this community have strengthened the perception of like-mindedness, and that Sino-Ethiopian relations therefore rest on a different basis than is acknowledged by purely rationalist accounts.

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"[...] China and Africa have always been a community of shared destinies. Similar historical experiences, common development tasks and shared strategic interests have bound us together. [...] We are bonded not only by the profound traditional friendship and closely linked interests, but also by the dream we all hold on to."

Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, at a speech given in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 25 March 2013.

"Despite lack of mineral manufacturing or production in Ethiopia today, how come China and Ethiopia are so close? [...] We share many world outlooks as far as international politics is concerned. We share many values as far as humanity is concerned. That is why we have an excellent relationship; relationship between government-to-government, people-to-people, and above all party-to-party relations."

Mulatu Teshome, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, at a press conference given to Chinese journalists in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 30 March 2014.

China's impressive rise within the context of a globalized economy has created links with many African countries far surpassing those of the past – a past that nevertheless is very present in official representations of China-Africa relations, which are framed as contemporary embodiments of traditional friendship and South-South cooperation, and said to rest on a very different foundation than Africa's relations with the developed world.¹ However, the perceived closeness between political elites in China and numerous African countries has also led many Western and a considerable number of African politicians, journalists and academics to warn against the dangers presented by China's seemingly neo-colonial strategy. These critical voices urge African governments not to be fooled by propaganda, but to follow their own national interest – which in this view means to keep a healthy distance from a self-interested and ruthless China that is only using the empty rhetoric of friendship, shared destinies and common dreams to conceal its true goal of getting access to African resources.

Ethiopian officials, well aware of this discourse, in interviews time and again stress that they know of the challenges presented by the People's Republic of China (PRC), and that they approach the Asian country with the same goal of utility-maximization as every other potential partner.² However, far from resulting in a turn away from China, such considerations are actually seen as the very reason for close cooperation with Beijing, since the PRC arguably fits

1 Chris Alden and Ana Cristina Alves: "History & Identity in the Construction of China's Africa Policy" in: *Review of African Political Economy*, 115, 2008, pp. 43-58; Julia C. Strauss: "The Past in the Present: Historical and Rhetorical Lineages in China's Relations with Africa" in: *The China Quarterly*, 199, 2009, pp. 777-795.

2 These observations are based on two months of research in Ethiopia in 2013 and 2014, during which interviews with officials from the civil service, government and party institutions were conducted.

nicely into the Ethiopian government's developmental strategy. Cooperating with a non-interventionist China that treats its African partners as equals and is mainly interested in economic relations that are mutually beneficial should thus neither be interpreted as foolish, nor as a turn away from Ethiopia's partners in the West.

Recent academic work, interested in making good for the long neglect of African agency in the study of Sino-African relations, has largely followed this line of reasoning, presenting China-Ethiopia relations as the logical outcome of overlapping interests of rational actors. Seifudein Adem has described the rationale behind the relation as "infrastructure for diplomatic support", as contrasted with the "infrastructure for natural resources" rationale more commonly found in Sino-African relations.³ Others have equally emphasized Ethiopia's "strategic approach",⁴ and its "ownership" of foreign aid.⁵ In fact, the emergence of China and other non-traditional partners is often seen as empowering the Ethiopian government vis-à-vis its partners, providing more options and thus strengthening its "ability [...] to implement its development strategy and to do this more independently from European and other donor's preferences."⁶ Annalisa Prizzon and Andrew Rogerson accordingly dub Ethiopia's current situation an "age of choice", stressing the agency and autonomy of the country's leadership.⁷ Because economic pragmatism is regarded as the basis for the Sino-Ethiopian strategic partnership, Monika Thakur argues that Ethiopia's "relations with China do not necessarily focus on a common vision of politics and ideology as a means to cement the relationship [...]."

I agree with the general picture presented in these accounts, but argue that they tend to underestimate the role of ideas, perceptions, and discourses in international politics. There is more to Sino-Ethiopian relations than a simple cost-benefit calculation. Instead, the rhetoric of friendship, shared destinies and common dreams both expresses and strengthens a sense of trust and closeness that does not exist between Addis Ababa and its traditional partners, and which exercises a structuring influence on Ethio-Chinese relations. We should not ignore this influence, and how it helps to cement a relationship that not necessarily or always has to focus on a common vision of politics, but in reality often does. The central claim of this paper thus is that the ruling parties of China and Ethiopia constitute a community of practice, and that on this basis the bilateral relationship is constructed as an international friendship based on a shared identity. The theoretical framework for this argument is to be found in the constructivist International Relations (IR) literature on collective identities and international practices, which will be introduced below. This working paper is strictly work in progress, though; what I am aiming at is mainly to propose a new way of thinking about relations between political elites in China and Africa that takes ideas seriously, and thus goes "beyond any simple, misleading and binary material/discursive opposition ('reality'/'rhetoric', 'practice'/'discourse')."⁸

3 Seifudein Adem: "China in Ethiopia: Diplomacy and Economics of Sino-optimism" in: *African Studies Review*, 55 (1), 2012, pp. 143 - 160.

4 Dawit Alemu and Ian Scoones: "Negotiating New Relationships: How the Ethiopian State is Involving China and Brazil in Agriculture and Rural Development" in: *IDS Bulletin*, 44 (4), July 2013, pp. 91-100, p. 99

5 Xavier Furtado and W. James Smith: *Ethiopia: Aid, Ownership, and Sovereignty*, GEG Working Paper, 28, 2007.

6 Christine Hackenesch: "Aid Donor Meets Strategic Partner? The European Union's and China's Relations with Ethiopia" in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 42 (1), 2013, pp. 7-36, p. 27.

7 Annalisa Prizzon and Andrew Rogerson: *The age of choice: Ethiopia in the new aid landscape*, Research Report, Overseas Development Institute, January 2013.

8 Chris Alden and Daniel Large: "China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Delivering Difference in Africa" in: *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20 (68), 2011, pp. 21-38, p. 25.

The Social Construction of Collective Identities in Communities of Practice

When constructivists set out to challenge realist-rationalist vocabulary of international relations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, identity became one of their central conceptual tools for highlighting the socially constructed nature of the state and its interests.⁹ Collective identities were theorized as intersubjective social structures, i.e. structures created by knowledge shared between the subjects within a group, community or society. Because this intersubjectively shared knowledge shapes the group's understanding of "who we are", "who we are not", "what we want" and "how we see the world", it creates a sense of belonging for the group members.¹⁰ Similar to psychological or other approaches based on methodological individualism, a constructivist perspective thus stresses that the answer to the question "who am I" to a large part depends on the groups I belong to; in addition, however, constructivism also asserts that groups are more than individuals acting in aggregates.¹¹ As such, identity is often used to explain why treating collective actors such as states as if they were intentional agents makes both theoretical and empirical sense, and why there appears to be a certain sense of agency at the group level.¹²

Collective identity not only provides cohesion, but is also strongly related to the interests of the group and its members, since (simply put) "an actor cannot know what it wants unless it knows what it is."¹³ For example, Germany's and Japan's hesitancy to follow a more independent defense policy and behave like other states with comparable levels of power has been explained with how their war-time experiences were inscribed into their collective identities, resulting in an emphasis on economic interests over military ones.¹⁴ It is here where dominant rational choice assumptions about interests in IR are being challenged: Socially constructed identities are not objective reality, and neither are interests. The assumption that all states are primarily or even exclusively motivated by an endless struggle for power or security, as proposed by realist theories, is thus seen as both simplistic and misleading. Status, respect, ontological security – the potential scope of interests becomes much broader, and these interests should not be seen as irrational deviation from a state's true Realpolitik goals.¹⁵

Following from these considerations about identities and their relevance for interest formation, one major argument found in the identity literature is that collective identities among states can lead to peaceful and cooperative international relations. Instead of theorizing states as atomistic units that interact with each other like billiard balls on a pool table, it is argued that their identities and interests are affected by the diffusion of understandings across borders, and

9 For a general overview see Emanuel Adler: "Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates" in: Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (eds.): *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd edition, London: Sage, 2013, pp. 112-145.

10 This paper is partly based on two months of research in Ethiopia in 2013 and 2014, during which interviews with officials from the civil service, government and party institutions were conducted.

11 Vaughn P. Shannon and Paul A. Kowert (eds.): *Psychology and Constructivism in International Relations: An Ideational Alliance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012

12 Erik Ringmar: "On the Ontological Status of the State" in: *European Journal of International Relations*, 2 (3), 1996, pp. 439-466; Alexander Wendt: "The State as Person in International Theory" in: *Review of International Studies*, 30 (2), 2004, pp 289-316.

13 Alexander Wendt: *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 231.

14 Thomas U. Berger: "Norms, Identity, and National Security in Germany and Japan" in: Peter J Katzenstein (ed.): *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 317-356.

15 Yong Deng: *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Reinhard Wolf: "Respect and Disrespect in International Politics: The significance of status recognition" in: *International Theory*, 3 (1), 2011; Brent J. Steele: *Ontological Security in International Relations. Self-identity and the IR state*, London et al.: Routledge, 2008.

that their identities and interests thus have the potential to converge. The result is an imagined community of likeminded states that is bound together both by intersubjective knowledge and common interests.¹⁶

In contrast to essentialist approaches, constructivism emphasizes the changeability of identities, simply because the intersubjectively shared knowledge forming the content of an identity is open to change. Although this can at times happen rapidly, in most cases change is a slow and evolutionary process, and identities can be stable over a long time, making them seem natural.¹⁷ Whether slow or quick, however, change does not just happen, but is accomplished by human agency. While collective identities affect behavior by defining the normative and cognitive framework in which actors exist, actors at the same time can try to change identities by contesting their socially shared meaning. In fact, because being able to define who “we” are and what we should do is an important source of power, we should always expect actors to strategize within this context, and try to use symbolic or discursive means to influence meaning in a way that best fits their needs.¹⁸ Identities therefore are constructed in complex processes of the production of meaning, and “much of identity discourse is the working out of the meaning of a particular collective identity through the contestation of its members. Individuals are continuously proposing and shaping the meanings of the groups to which they belong.”¹⁹ This so-called co-constitution of structures and agents is a central element of the constructivist approach: Collective identities need actors who not only can share knowledge, but also continuously engage in their construction.

While most constructivist research focuses on structures such as collective identities to explain how they influence the behavior of actors, in this paper I follow an actor-centered approach, focusing on the political elites in Ethiopia and China as defined by their positions within the respective party-states, and how they are constructing a common identity. These political elites are analyzed here as a community of practice (CoP), understood as a group of people who are informally and contextually linked through their shared interest in learning and applying a common practice.²⁰ Examples for CoPs in international relations include diplomats interested in the practice of diplomacy, the humanitarian community interested in the practice of humanitarian aid, or lawyers interested in the practice of international law.²¹ As such, many of the transnational communities that are analyzed in international relations, including epistemic communities, security communities, or policy networks, can actually be understood as CoPs.²² What all of these CoPs have in common are three elements:²³

16 Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.): *Security Communities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 48ff; Alexander Wendt: “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics” in: *International Organization*, 46, 1992, pp. 391-425; and Alexander Wendt: *Social Theory of International Politics*.

17 Patricia M. Goff and Kevin C. Dunn (eds.): *Identity and Global Politics: Empirical and Theoretical Elaborations*, New York et al: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 3-4.

18 Michael Barnett: “Culture, Strategy and Foreign Policy Change: Israel’s Road to Oslo” in: *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(1), 1999, pp. 5-36, p. 9.

19 Abdelal et al., p. 27.

20 Emanuel Adler: *Communitarian International Relations: The epistemic foundations of International Relations*, Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 15.

21 Mathew Davies: “A community of practice: Explaining change and continuity in ASEAN’s diplomatic environment” in: *The Pacific Review*, forthcoming; Janice Gross Stein: “Background knowledge in the foreground: Conversations about competent practice in “sacred space”” in: Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (eds.): *International Practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 87-107; Jutta Brunnée and Stephen J. Toope: “Interactional international law and the practice of legality” in: Adler and Pouliot (2011), pp. 108-135.

22 Adler (2005), p. 16.

23 Etienne Wenger: *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 72-73.

- Firstly, through participation in the community, members build collaborative relationships; this is termed mutual engagement.
- Secondly, through their interactions, members create a shared understanding of what binds them together; this is termed the joint enterprise.
- Finally, the community produces a set of communal resources such as routines, sensibilities and discourse; this is termed the shared repertoire.

If these three elements are present, they provide a group with intersubjectively shared knowledge about what the group is, what it is not, and what this means. Learning in this context refers to the participation in and engagement with the meanings, identities, and language of the community.²⁴ Importantly, this not only results in an in-group, but also an out-group: learning “creates boundaries, not because participants are trying to exclude others (though this can be the case) but because sharing a history of learning ends up distinguishing those who were involved from those who were not. They share an enterprise, an understanding of what matters, relationships, as well as the resources that their history has produced.”²⁵ Below, I will show how mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire not only bind together international lawyers, diplomats, or aid workers, but also the ruling elites of Ethiopia and China.

Mutual Engagement in China-Ethiopia Relations

For a CoP to come into existence, there need to be collaborative relations that serve as a venue for mutual exchanges and bind the members of the community together. For a long time, however, this mutual engagement was virtually absent from China-Ethiopia relations. Although both countries participated in the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955 and Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai visited Ethiopia in 1964, official relations were established only in 1970 during the last years of Emperor Haile Selassie’s reign. Since for historical and ideological reasons China was seen as the “Other”, these relations remained rather stagnant.²⁶ Haile Selassie’s regime was Western-oriented and friendly with the USA, the emperor feared the spread of Communism, and the fact that Beijing was supporting revolutionary groups in parts of the country only supported such fears.²⁷ When a military junta known as the Derg toppled the old imperial order in 1974 and in 1976 endorsed Communism as its official ideology, the new regime at first appeared to be a more natural ally for China. But in 1977 the Derg pledged allegiance to Moscow, thereby effectively ending its relations with Beijing. The same year the leadership in Beijing diplomatically supported the irredentist invasion of eastern Ethiopia by China’s anti-Soviet ally Somalia. Ethiopia was only able to repel the invasion with massive military aid from the Soviet Union and Cuba, and it was only after China’s relations with the Soviet Union had begun to improve that the possibility for cooperation re-emerged. In 1988 the leader of the Derg, Mengistu Haile Mariam, visited Beijing and signed the Sino-Ethiopian

24 Wenger (1998), p. 55.

25 Etienne Wenger: “Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems: The Career of a Concept” in: Chris Blackmore (ed.): *Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice*, London: Springer, 2010, pp. 179-198, pp. 182f.

26 Seifudein Adem: “China in Ethiopia: Diplomacy and Economics of Sino-optimism” in: *African Studies Review*, 55, 2012, pp. 143-160, p. 144.

27 M. Venkataraman and Gedion Gamora Jalata: “An Analysis of China-Ethiopia Relations during the Cold War” in: *China Report*, 45 (7), 2009, pp. 7-22, p. 16.

Agreement for Economic and Technological Cooperation.²⁸ But the Derg had never been able to suppress the regional guerilla movements that opposed its rule, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union it lost its most important international ally. In 1991 it was overthrown by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of rebel groups.

The dominant force within the EPRDF was – and remained – the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). During the long years of its armed struggle against the Derg the TPLF had heralded a combination of ethno-nationalist and leftist ideas, although with some changes over time. While in the beginning its leading intellectuals regarded their own ideology of revolutionary democracy as being in line with ideas propagated by the Soviet Union, the reality of waging a guerilla war in the countryside and the alliance between the Derg and Moscow soon led to an increased emphasis on Maoist thinking. Nevertheless, the internationally largely isolated TPLF during its revolutionary times did not have direct contacts with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and in the 1980s the TPLF ideologues rejected China's "revisionist" reforms and instead praised the Albanian model of self-reliance.²⁹ When the party was finally able to gain control of the country in the early 1990s, however, all of these models suddenly appeared to be outdated.

While the TPLF/EPRDF leadership arguably did not believe in the final triumph of liberal democracy as many did in the West, it nevertheless had to at least formally set out on a path of political and economic liberalization. Ethiopia, which had suffered more than 16 years of mismanagement, instability and brutal civil war, was largely dependent on external help, and the only viable source for this help at that time was the West and the international financial institutions it controlled. The price for help was to accept the reforms they demanded.³⁰ Addis Alem Balema, longstanding member of the TPLF leadership and ambassador to China from 1996 to 2004, described the Ethiopian experience after 1991 as "a struggle to balance between the country's perceived requirements and policy choices and the heavy-handed policy prescriptions of powerful multinational financial organizations", and as "a formidable challenge for a poor country with very limited alternatives."³¹ Thus, in 1995, the EPRDF leadership reportedly had reached a consensus that "there was a need to counterbalance this pressure by approaching countries whose rhetoric and policies were not always in lockstep with the preferences of leading Western powers. [...] China was then singled out as the best candidate by virtue of its strong anti-Western ideological stance and other considerations. Senior members of Ethiopia's ruling party were subsequently sent to China to initiate a new relationship and tell Beijing about Ethiopia's desire to 'learn' from China's practice of market-led socialism and agricultural development."³²

This coincided with China's growing interest in Africa, after Beijing had greatly reduced its involvement in the continent during the 1980s. The visit of Meles Zenawi, leader of the EPRDF and Prime Minister of Ethiopia, to China in late 1995 thus marked the beginning of a new phase

28 Seifudein (2012), p. 144f.

29 Jean-Nicolas Bach: „Abyotawi Democracy: Neither revolutionary nor democratic, a critical review of EPRDF's conception of revolutionary democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia" in: *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4), 2011, pp. 641-663, p. 642.

30 Getahun Tafesse: *External Influence in the Making of Development Policy in Ethiopia*, study undertaken for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, November 2004, online: <http://www.fes-ethiopia.org/media/documents/peace-security/EXTERNAL%20INFLUENCE%20IN%20THE%20MAKING%20OF%20DEVELOPMENT%20POLICY%20IN.pdf> (accessed 28.05.2014).

31 Addis Alem Balema: *Economic Development and Democracy in Ethiopia*, Dissertation, Erasmus University Rotterdam, defended April 24th 2003.

32 Seifudein (2012), p. 145. Seifudein's source for this information is a former EPRDF member he interviewed in 2009.

in the bilateral relations. One year later Jiang Zemin, China's President and General Secretary of the CCP, reciprocated the visit. Several agreements were signed, and in 1998 a Joint Ethiopia-China Commission (JECC) was tasked with reviewing and assessing the bilateral relations every two years. Numerous high-level exchanges have since helped to strengthen bilateral relations, and after 2000 these relations have been accompanied by the multilateral Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).³³ In 2003 the two states started a Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership, and already in 2005 the Chinese embassy hosted more high-level visits than any other foreign mission in Addis Ababa.³⁴

2005 was also the year the most open and competitive national elections Ethiopia had ever seen took place. Although there is little to suggest that the EPRDF wanted these elections to be anything but the usual plebiscite, opposition parties were for the first time able to disseminate their programs through government-owned media and public rallies. To everyone's surprise, the opposition bloc won almost one-third of the parliamentary seats, with an especially strong showing in major cities. After initial hesitancy, the EPRDF finally clamped down on the opposition, arresting opposition leaders, civil society activists and journalists, and killing at least 193 civilians in a violent suppression of street protests.³⁵ In the following years the EPRDF closed the political space further, severely limiting freedom of speech and organization, and avoided any serious political competition in the elections that followed.

Western governments and NGOs at first reacted with public outrage to the suppression of the opposition. The Development Assistance Group (DAG), an organization founded in 2001 to coordinate Western donors' and international financial institutions' work in Ethiopia, decided to suspend all direct budget support to the government. This time, however, the Ethiopian government refused to give in to foreign pressure. Meles Zenawi reportedly told the DAG representatives to pack up and go home if they were not interested in helping the country to develop – and a few weeks later the international donors gave in and resumed their aid.³⁶ As such, the Ethiopian bargaining position vis-à-vis the developed world apparently has markedly improved since the early 1990s, although it is difficult to tell what role the Chinese option has played in this process – there are good reasons to assume that Western governments would not have risked losing Ethiopia as an important anchor of stability in this strategically important region anyway. In any case, the EPRDF regime had diversified its dependencies since the time it had come to power, and the Chinese side unwaveringly continued its symbolic and material support under the principle of non-interference.

Next to official government-to-government relations, party-to-party relations add an important but highly opaque element to Sino-Ethiopian mutual engagement. In 2000, Dai Bingguo, then director of the CCP International Department, visited Ethiopia, and in 2010 CCP International Department Vice Minister Ai Ping signed a memorandum of understanding on exchange and cooperation between the CCP and EPRDF. China sent delegations to the EPRDF's Organizational Conferences in 2008, 2010 and 2013. In 2011, EPRDF Secretariat Head and Executive Committee Member Redwan Hussein visited China with the aim of identifying areas of cooperation in

33 For a concise overview over bilateral agreements between China and Ethiopia see Venkataraman and Gedion (2009), p. 25.

34 David H. Shinn: "Ethiopia and China: How Two Former Empires Connected" in: *International Policy Digest*, online: <http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2014/06/11/ethiopia-china-former-empires-connected-20th-century/> (accessed 08.06.2015).

35 Lovise Aalen and Kjetil Tronvoll: "The End of Democracy? Curtailing Political and Civil Rights in Ethiopia" in: *Review of African Political Economy*, 36 (120), 2009, pp. 193-207, pp. 195-197.

36 Aalen, Tronvoll (2009), p. 204.

party building, public mobilization and party leadership, and in 2012 received a follow-up visit by a delegation from the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong (CELAP). This delegation also met with the Director of the EPRDF Cadre Training Center, Addisu Leggesse, who stressed how useful the Chinese experience in cadre education had already been. In June the same year, the two parties organized a joint workshop dealing with issues such as mass media capacity building, mass media institution management, and internet management. In September, an EPRDF delegation led by Bereket Simon, Head of the Government Communications Affairs Office, met with Liu Yunshan, head of the CCP Propaganda Department, to discuss cooperation in areas such as press and culture. In September 2013, a delegation led by Zhao Hongzhu, Deputy Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and Secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee, met with high-ranking EPRDF members, promising to extend the CCP's support in party capacity building, leadership skill training, and experience sharing in various areas. In July 2014, the parties signed a memorandum of understanding to further strengthen their strategic partnership, and to work closely in the area of capacity building.³⁷

Given the availability of information, the list above cannot claim to be exhaustive or very reliable, but nevertheless provides a glimpse at what may actually constitute the very heart of current Sino-Ethiopian relations. Given the blurring of boundaries between the state and the party in both countries, to strictly differentiate between government-to-government and party-to-party relations would be misleading anyway, and it is safe to say that today official relations between China and Ethiopia are characterized by frequent engagement that enables members of the political elite to build good collaborative relationships.

The Joint Enterprise in China-Ethiopia Relations

A second element that constitutes like-mindedness in a CoP is the joint enterprise. When talking to outsiders, Ethiopian officials tend to downplay similarities with China or the CCP, instead highlighting the differences – a unitary socialist state run by a single party on the one hand, and a federal parliamentary republic with multi-party elections on the other. But although the Ethiopian constitution and other laws are fully consistent with a Western-style liberal democracy, this contrasts with the de facto ability of the EPRDF to control the bureaucracy, the media, the provinces and the different branches of government. The EPRDF's cardinal principles, despite some modifications after coming to power, are still anchored in its Marxist-Leninist background, including the vanguard role of the party and the adherence to democratic centralism.³⁸ This in effect has turned Ethiopia into an electoral authoritarian system, with a dominant position of the ruling party.³⁹ The EPRDF has been in power since 1991, won all parliamentary seats in the most recent national elections in 2015, and just as in China important decisions are mostly made within the party, not the government. While we should thus not ignore the differences that do exist between the political systems of China and Ethiopia, for example regarding the federal structure of Ethiopia, the similarities are striking.

37 This list is based on information obtained through interviews, press statements, news articles, and internal reports.

38 Kassahun Berhanu: *Ethiopia: Beleaguered Opposition under a Dominant Party System*, unpublished paper, Addis Ababa University, 2009, p. 9, online: <http://www.cmi.no/file/?1315> (accessed 18.06.2015)

39 Terrence Lyons: "Closing the Transition: The May 1995 Elections in Ethiopia", in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34 (1), pp. 121-142.

On an ideological level, another striking similarity can be found in both regimes' emphasis on state-led development, and how this is seen as a necessary condition for lasting regime stability. In Ethiopia, this idea is epitomized in the creation of a developmental state, which in time is hoped to bring about the so-called Ethiopian Renaissance.⁴⁰ In China, the construction of a socialist market economy, in which a strong state-owned sector and an open-market economy coexist, similarly aims at achieving National Rejuvenation.⁴¹ While these two modernization projects diverge on their stated long-term goals, namely achieving a functioning democracy with a capitalist economy in Ethiopia and a communist political and economic system in China, they agree that for the moment the best way to achieve these goals is to postpone political reforms until economic development is achieved, to give the state a strong position vis-à-vis society and economy, to secure a strong role for the ruling party within the state, and to adopt measures that are in line with the specific conditions of each country. In light of these similarities, the EPRDF and the CCP seem to agree that the respective other can play a part in achieving the shared goal of developing their countries according to their own visions and without following the prescriptions of foreign powers. This is a common practice that may be labeled authoritarian developmentalism.

China indeed has become central for Ethiopia's developmental project. It is Ethiopia's biggest trading partner, although with a trade imbalance that continues to strongly favor China.⁴² It is also Ethiopia's most important source of foreign direct investment – the shoe factory the Huajian Group opened in early 2012 near Addis Ababa has become emblematic for this development.⁴³ In addition, Chinese development aid has become an important source for the financing of especially infrastructure projects, although the distinction between aid, trade and investment is often difficult. China's "win-win" approach to development cooperation, in which market access considerations for Chinese companies play a central role, is often seen negatively, and many criticisms of China's economic impact that have been voiced elsewhere in Africa have also been heard in Ethiopia.⁴⁴ The result of Chinese aid and investment in Ethiopia is nevertheless impressive. From energy generation to roads to telecommunications – in all of these areas Chinese companies have markedly improved the status quo, and the amount of loans and grants has steadily kept rising in recent years.⁴⁵

Apart from this material support, the exchange of ideas has played an important role. China provides Ethiopia with many experiences on how to be a successful developmental state,

40 Meles Zenawi: *African Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings*, unpublished paper, online: http://www.meleszenawi.org.uk/pdf/zenawi_dead_ends_and_new_beginnings.pdf (accessed 25.07.14).

41 Xinhua: *Xi pledges "great renewal of Chinese nation"*, 29.11.2012, online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-11/29/c_132008231.htm (accessed 22.07.14).

42 WTO Statistics database, Ethiopia trade profile, online: <http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBCountryPFView.aspx?Language=E&Country=ET> (accessed 30.05.2014).

43 There is no consensus on the amount of Chinese FDI invested in Ethiopia. By using data from the Ethiopian Investment Agency, Alemayehu and Atenafu come to the result that China has invested nearly US\$950 Million in Ethiopia between 1992 and 2010 (although many of the projects have not been implemented yet). According to official Chinese statistics, by 2010 the stock of Chinese FDI in Ethiopia was US\$368 million, whereas economists from the World Bank put it at US\$403 million the same year. See Alemayehu Geda and Atenafu G. Meskel: *Impact of China-Africa Investment Cooperation: Case Study of Ethiopia*, paper prepared for the AERC Collaborative Research on the Impact of China on Africa, Mobasa, Kenya, 2010; and World Bank: *Chinese FDI in Ethiopia*, November 2012, online: http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2012/12/14/000386194_20121214024800/Rendered/PDF/NonAsciiFileName0.pdf (accessed 30.05.2014).

44 AFRODAD: *Mapping Chinese Development Assistance in Africa: An analysis of the experiences of Ethiopia*, Harare, 2011, p. 27, online: <http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/1695/AFRODAD-%20322481.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed 21.07.2014).

45 Gedion Gamora Jalata: *Development Assistance from the South: Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Indian to Ethiopia*, online: <http://www.scirp.org/journal/PaperInformation.aspx?paperID=43319#.U9ZEb7FRbyU> (accessed 23.04.14), pp. 25f.

although Ethiopian officials are careful not to create the impression that they are being influenced by China. As Ethiopia's current Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn put it in an interview with Voice of America: "Our party has very close ties with the Communist Party of China because we have areas where we can learn from the work the Chinese Communist Party is doing, simply because we are people centered, where Chinese Communist Party has experience with working with people at the grass roots, so we learn with China, this kind of approach, it doesn't mean our ideology is similar to China."⁴⁶ However, learning is taking place – indeed, as mentioned above, the EPRDF's desire to learn from China's practice of market-led socialism and agricultural development was one of the main reasons to strengthen bilateral relations in the mid-90s. Since these are politically sensitive issues, and neither the Chinese nor the Ethiopian side is interested in transparency, the following account of learning processes has to remain somewhat superficial and anecdotal, but is nevertheless instructive.

Party-building appears to be a central theme here. In his study of the CCP's organizational rebuilding since 2002, David Shambaugh highlights several areas of reform, including increasing the number of party members from roughly 66 million to 80 million eight years later, rebuilding of the local party apparatus, and improving cadres' competence and political consciousness via campaigns and the increasingly important party school system.⁴⁷ When the EPRDF leadership in the aftermath of the contested 2005 national election came to the conclusion that the party as an institution was in serious need of strengthening, these were exactly the areas that received attention. The number of local councils was dramatically increased, and mass associations, now labeled civil society organizations, re-emerged throughout the country.⁴⁸ Membership rose from 760,000 in 2005 to more than five million in 2010, and special emphasis was put on recruiting intellectuals and higher education students.⁴⁹ The years following the election also witnessed an increased concern for political consciousness and leadership skills. In late 2005, the party started to publish its theoretically oriented newspaper *Addis raye* (New Vision), which resembles the CCP's theoretical periodical *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth). In the following years, efforts to establish a central leadership academy of the EPRDF became known. This academy, after the death of Meles in 2012 called Meles Zenawi Leadership Academy, has yet to find a permanent physical address – for the last years it has been housed at the Ethiopian Civil Service University in Addis Ababa. Academy President Addisu Legesse claimed that between 2011 and 2015, over 2,500 senior, more than 30,000 medium level and 12,800 junior leaders had received training from the academy.⁵⁰ The academy has established working relations with several Chinese institutions, including CELAP and the Beijing Administrative College, in order to learn more about curriculum development and teaching methodology. In interviews, Ethiopian officials agree that the Chinese party school system indeed provides important insights for the EPRDF.

Next to party building, public opinion management is another area in which the EPRDF is learning from the CCP – mass media capacity building, mass media institution management,

46 Voice of America: *Ethiopia's New PM Says Policies Will Remain Constant*, 27.09.2012, online: <http://www.voanews.com/content/ethiopia-new-pm-says-policies-will-remain-unchanged/1516396.html> (accessed 23.07.14).

47 David Shambaugh: *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, pp. 129-160.

48 Sarah Vaughan: "Revolutionary democratic state-building: Party, state and people in the EPRDF's Ethiopia" in: *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4), 2011, pp. 619-640, p. 632.

49 Vaughan (2011), p. 633.

50 Ethiopian News Agency: *Meles Zenawi Leadership Academy to Build Campus with 800 Million Birr*, 13.03.2015, online: <http://www.ena.gov.et/en/index.php/politics/item/502-meles-zenawi-leadership-academy-to-build-campus-with-800-million-birr> (accessed 18.06.2015).

or Internet management are typical terms used to refer to the issues debated with delegations from China. After the 2005 election, most critical newspapers were closed, and independent journalists either had to engage in self-censorship or go into exile. Radio and TV stations remain under even stricter party control.⁵¹ The actual role Chinese experiences have played in these areas is difficult to assess, but high-ranking EPRDF officials in informal talks have been quite open about their admiration for China's "communications strategy" and suggested that Ethiopia "needs the China model [of state-controlled information dissemination] to inform the Ethiopian people."⁵² After all, according to Meles Zenawi, a central element of the EPRDF's strategy for autochthonous development is to make its development project hegemonic, and controlling the channels of communication is central in this regard.⁵³

In the case of Internet surveillance and censorship there is some more evidence for direct Chinese involvement. Two Chinese telecom equipment companies, ZTE and Huawei, haven't been building and upgrading Ethiopia's infrastructure since at least 2003, and in 2006 were joined by China International Telecom Corporation (CITCC).⁵⁴ The same year, state-owned ZTE became Ethiopia's sole equipment vendor for nine equipment packages, and its local chief executive officer in 2009 proudly stated that "[t]his is the world's only project in which a national telecom network is built by a sole equipment supplier."⁵⁵ In recent years, it has become clear that the EPRDF, which through the state-owned Ethio Telecom has a monopoly over the telecom system, has not only massively increased its ability to monitor phone calls and internet traffic, but is also making extensive use of these possibilities in order to control critical journalists and opposition figures, and to block unwelcome websites. According to Human Rights Watch, technical parallels as well as interviews with former Ethiopian officials suggest that the latter is mostly done by using ZTE's ZMXT centralized monitoring system, which is not only used in China, but at least in some other countries such as Libya and Iran.⁵⁶ With the help of Chinese best practices and equipment, since 2005 Ethiopia has thus apparently established one of the most pervasive systems for filtering online content in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁷

Other areas in which China is sharing knowledge with Ethiopia include agricultural development, transportation, land administration, waste management, and the establishment of special economic zones. While it would be wrong to accuse the EPRDF of blindly following any foreign models, the perceived similarities with China and the CCP, as well as familiarity with and exposure to their experiences, has led Ethiopian elites to focus very much on China when looking for inspiration from abroad.⁵⁸ Although the CCP is not pushing others to follow in its footsteps, it is happy to help when it is asked – and it appears that in the EPRDF it has found a kindred spirit.

51 Nicole Stremmler: "The press and the political restructuring of Ethiopia" in: *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4), 2011, pp. 716-732, p. 721.

52 US Embassy in Addis Ababa: *Ethiopia: TPLF Stalwart Seebhat Nega on Amcham, China and Revolutionary Democracy*, Cable #09ADDISABABA149_a, 20.01.2009, online: https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ADDISABABA149_a.html (accessed 19.06.2015).

53 Meles (2006), p. 39.

54 Human Rights Watch: "They Know Everything We Do": *Telecom and Internet Surveillance in Ethiopia*, March 2014, p. 24, online: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/03/25/they-know-everything-we-do>, (accessed 19.06.2015).

55 Zhao Lili: *Contributing to the Development of Ethiopia with Wisdom and Strength*, 12.06.2009, online: http://www.zte.com.cn/endata/magazine/ztechnologies/2009year/no6/articles/200906/t20090612_172517.html (accessed: 19.06.2015).

56 Human Rights Watch (2014), pp. 62-64.

57 Iginio Gagliardone: "New Media and the Developmental State in Ethiopia" in: *African Affairs*, 113 (451), 2014, pp. 279-299, p. 280.

58 Elsje Fourie: *New Maps for Africa? Contextualising the 'Chinese Model' within Ethiopian and Kenyan Paradigms of Development*, Dissertation, University of Trento, September 2012, p. 158.

The Shared Repertoire in China-Ethiopia Relations

The third constituent element of a CoP is a shared repertoire of communal resources such as routines, sensibilities and discourses. To be able to use the literal and symbolic elements that the community has accumulated in turn is a central criterion for being recognized as a member of the community. While it thus is not necessary that individuals actually believe in what they are saying or doing, their knowledge and use of the communal resources nevertheless differentiates them from those who do not belong to this in-group.

The most important communal resource appears to be the discourse on the similarities of China and Ethiopia, and how their relation differs from relations with the developed world; indeed, this is the representational foundation of the bilateral relation. Thus, when Ethiopian officials visit the PRC they routinely stress that China challenges the belief in “neoliberal market fundamentalism” and “one-size-fits-all solutions” by providing an “alternative modernity”⁵⁹, and that China, by taking a “place in Africa’s newfound growth narrative”, has brought about “change in the mindset that for a long time treated Africa as a terminal aid recipient and beneficiary”.⁶⁰ Similarly, the Chinese side inescapably emphasizes that “the two countries [...] have a similar governing philosophy”, and that “the international community should fully respect African countries’ development path and forge a partnership with the continent based on equality, mutual benefit, cooperation and win-win” – which of course is just how the Chinese government would like to be treated as well.⁶¹

That elites in Ethiopia and China speak the same language can be illustrated with a statement jointly authored by the two countries’ foreign ministers – which is remarkable in itself.⁶² The statement, published in December 2014, provides a concise summary of the main discursive elements that can be found in Ethiopia-China relations. It starts with highlighting the long history of two ancient civilizations, and how the achievements during the last fifty years of China-Ethiopia relations have given both people something to be proud of. The text goes on to call China and Ethiopia natural partners who have suffered from foreign invasion and thus share the same feelings towards invaders, follow an independent foreign policy, and regard development as the top priority for their national renaissance. Furthermore, the two sides are said to have provided mutual support on major issues concerning each other’s core interests, to have shared ideas, to have learnt from each other’s experiences of governance, and to have explored the paths of development suitable for their respective national conditions. The result is a multi-dimensional relation based on the principles of equality, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation. Even on the international level, the two sides are seen as working closely together in not only addressing global issues, but also in safeguarding the interests of the developing

59 Embassy of the FDRE in the PRC: *Ambassador Seyoum Mesfin delivered a speech at an International Conference on Governance and Development Experience of China and African countries*, 24.09.2013, online: http://www.ethiopiaemb.org.cn/pdf/Ambassador_Seyoum_Mesfin_delivered_a_speech_at_an_International_Conference_on_Governance_and_Development_Experience_of_China.pdf, (accessed 24.07.14).

60 Hailemariam Desalegn: *Statement By H.E. Hailemariam Desalegn Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia at Beijing Foreign Studies University*, 14.06.2013, online: http://www.ethiopiaemb.org.cn/pdf/H.E._Hailemariam_Dessalegn_s_speech_at_BFSU.pdf (accessed 25.07.14).

61 Xinhua: *Chinese President meets Ethiopian PM on bilateral cooperation*, 14.06.2013, online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-06/14/c_132456252.htm, accessed 14.06.14).

62 Wang Yi and Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus: *China-Ethiopia relations: an excellent model for South-South cooperation*, online: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1215597.shtml (accessed 08.06.2015).

countries more generally. For all these reasons, Ethiopia and China “are sincere friends, reliable partners and good brothers, sharing both happiness and adversity, rejoicing in successes that the other has achieved”, and Sino-Ethiopian relations therefore provide an “excellent model for South-South cooperation.”⁶³

This statement exemplifies a continuous stream of symbolic affirmations of the qualities of the relationship, including regular goodwill visits of high-ranking officials, the red carpet treatment African officials have come to expect from China, or the letters of congratulation both parties send each other whenever there is something to celebrate. In light of the outsider status both regimes still have in an international society dominated by liberal ideas, this recognition and positive evaluation of the respective other becomes a valuable good, and in combination with strong mutual engagement and a joint enterprise goes beyond empty friendship-rhetoric.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to introduce some new ways of thinking about relations between African and Chinese elites, and many aspects that I have only touched upon deserve more attention in future research. Nevertheless, in the case of China and Ethiopia, the findings so far support President Mulatu’s statement that shared world views and strong organizational links can explain why the two states are so close today, as well as President Xi’s assessment that there is more to these relations than a maybe passing coincidence of interests, but instead a historically grown community structured around shared understandings and practices. These communalities provide a stronger basis for the relation than would otherwise be the case. As such, China-Ethiopia relations are not only about an exchange of infrastructure for diplomatic support, although this is important. They are also about more than material and ideational support for a joint enterprise of authoritarian developmentalism, although in the eyes of the involved individuals this may seem to be the most important aspect. In the final conclusion, they touch upon the very issue of identity, telling each side who they are. It appears that the regimes of China and Ethiopia have become Significant Others to each other, i.e. positive Others they develop their identity in relation with, and it has been argued that this is the very meaning of the concept “international friendship.”⁶⁴

Before I finish on this somewhat celebratory tone, two important caveats are necessary. Firstly, the collective identity described here only pertains to the elite level – while ordinary Chinese may not be aware of Ethiopia at all, many Ethiopians are quite wary of their leaders’ friendly relations with Beijing. That the two regimes are friendly with each other indeed does not automatically result in positive outcomes for the majority of Ethiopians or Chinese – advantages may very well be restricted to those at the elite level. Relatedly, due to the lack of transnational links, projects or discourses, China-Ethiopia relations are contingent on few elite actors, and thus miss an important element that could stabilize the relations if competing interests were to develop in the future.

63 Same.

64 Felix Berenskoetter: “Friends, There are no Friends? An Intimate Reframing of the International” in: *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, 35 (3), pp. 647-676.

Secondly, despite the formal equality of the relation, the underlying conditions are highly asymmetrical, which leads to rather one-sided processes. For example, although the Chinese side speaks about mutual learning, there is little to suggest that the relation is not primarily structured as one between an experienced teacher on the one hand and a willing student on the other. Similarly, while there may be a joint developmental enterprise, China could easily continue to follow its path without Ethiopia – which arguably is not true the other way round. Because of such asymmetries, there is a real danger that the relation may become a patron-client relation in the future, in which the Ethiopian side's options for following an independent policy are severely limited – and because their perceptions of Ethiopia's national interests may already be heavily influenced by Chinese ideas, Ethiopian policy makers may actually not even realize that structural power is at play.