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Chinese Employers and Their Ugandan Workers: Tensions, Frictions and Cooperation in an African City

Codrin ARSENE

Abstract: This paper analyses the context in which a group of African workers interact with their Chinese employers within a specific ethnographic space: Chinese-owned shops in Kampala, Uganda. By exploring *enjawulo*, the locally embedded cultural, social and economic notion of work and labour, I reveal how relations between Chinese employers and Ugandan employees are shaped by the former's knowledge and acceptance of this practice. This analytical lens contextualises the two groups' divergent goals, opinions and aspirations, examines the interpersonal dimensions of their social relations, and also analyses employers' and employees' opinions on labour conflicts, cooperation and understanding. The goal of the paper is to explore and deconstruct the context in which Chinese store owners and their local employees interact, cohabit, and sometimes even find common ground, despite markedly different economic, social, cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds.

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Keywords: Uganda, labour relations, China shops in Africa, Chinese migrants in Africa, African perceptions of Chinese migrants, Chinese employment relations in Africa

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Introduction

Anthropologist Jane Guyer (2004: 21) wrote, “The dynamics of multiplicity in Africa [...] arise out of specific and identifiable historical tensions and ambitions”. Some of the literature on Sino-African affairs, polarised as it often is by support for conflicting theories, seems to neglect this critical insight. Discussions usually devolve into whether China is the new colonial power (Ferguson 2011; Lemos and Ribeiro 2007), or whether Western powers make this claim in a desperate attempt to safeguard their own local and regional interests (Sautman and Yan 2006). Other dichotomous approaches focus on China as a viable alternative to the West (Chan-Fishel and Lawson 2007) or, conversely, on similarities between Chinese investors in Africa and their Western counterparts (Sautman and Yan 2006; Strauss and Saavedra 2009: 560).

In this paper,¹ I analyse attitudes held by a distinct subgroup of African social actors interacting with their Chinese counterparts: Ugandan wage labourers who live in Kampala (Uganda) and work for Chinese merchants. Based on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2009, 2010 and 2011, I examine employees’ perceptions of and reactions to their daily interactions with their foreign employers in light of their own interests, identities and economic aspirations (for a similar line of inquiry in Ghana, see Giese 2013 and Giese and Thiel 2012). In short, this is an exploration of the everyday interactions local wage labourers share with a specific group of Chinese migrants within the context of the Ugandan retail industry. Like Giese (2013), I focus on the two groups’ divergent goals, opinions and aspirations

1 This paper emerged from a tremendously productive discussion with John Comaroff (Harvard) and David Bunn in Cape Town in March of 2009. I’m profoundly grateful to both of them for their valuable contributions as well as their methodological and theoretical recommendations. Johanna Schoss and Stephan Palmie (University of Chicago) have served as personal mentors for my numerous research trips to Uganda as well as patient readers of this manuscript. Ralph Austen (University of Chicago) and George Paul Meiu (Concordia University) have kindly reviewed and provided much-needed input to improve the current paper, on multiple occasions. I’m also grateful to Cathryn Bearov for her diligent work editing this paper. Lastly, I’m grateful to Hassan Ssebunn-ya, my research assistant in Uganda, for his patient and careful translations as well as the assistance he provided to me over the years. Needless to say, all inconsistencies and errors remain my sole responsibility.

and look at their social relations in an attempt to analyse labour conflicts, as well as areas of cooperation and understanding.

This line of inquiry takes its inspiration from the theoretical framework put forth by Paul Gilroy (2005), who coined the phrases “convivial culture” and “conviviality”. In brief, convivial culture speaks to “the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multi-culture an ordinary feature of social life” (Gilroy 2005: xv). Although Gilroy writes primarily about Great Britain’s urban centres, I find that African cities provide similar contexts and opportunities for expressing and analysing conviviality. The interactions between Ugandan workers and Chinese store owners provides, to quote Gilroy once again,

a fragmented and stratified location in which cultures, histories, and structures of feeling previously separated by enormous distances could be found in the same place (Gilroy 2005: 70).

How people from such divergent cultures – in this case, Chinese employers and Ugandan workers – interact despite multiple, deep-seated differences is what this paper seeks to unravel.

Data for this project was collected from a group of 30 shop sellers (15 women and 15 men) in Kampala, Uganda. The even gender division was not a goal of this survey, but a matter of chance. Forty-eight employees were originally approached when conducting this study, but 18 declined to participate for fear of repercussions from their current employers. With very few exceptions, the workers were in their twenties with limited educational backgrounds (only one subject had a post-high-school diploma), which is in line with Niikondo and Coetzee’s finding (2009) that Chinese retailers in Africa tend to hire less-educated and younger workers than some of their local counterparts (Ugandan business owners typically ask for a minimum of a high-school diploma, as is shown in my previous research; see Arsene 2012). Twenty-two out of 30 respondents had a good command of the English language, and the remaining eight were interviewed with the assistance of a local shop seller who became my research assistant for this project. The paper proceeds as follows:

The next section reviews the literature on Chinese migrants in Africa, focusing on the so-called “Chinese entrepreneurial migrants” as a sociological category. I will also use this body of literature to introduce some general characteristics – social backgrounds, aspirations and rationales for opening a business in Africa – that I found

applicable to the Chinese employers with whom I interacted as part of this project.

Subsequently, I will introduce *enjawulo*, a Kiganda conception of work and labour without which, I contend, one cannot accurately investigate the nature of interactions between Chinese employers and Ugandan employees. *Enjawulo* can be translated into English as “the difference”. At base, it refers to the margin of profit a seller can negotiate in order to accrue a payment for him-/ herself over the price determined by a shop owner for a certain product. Within the Ugandan labour cosmology, *enjawulo* has always been the practical expression of workers’ attempts to work for themselves while working for others, regardless of the employer’s skin colour (for my analysis of this practice in a different setting, see Arsene 2012).

From an employee standpoint, even though the base salary paid by the average Chinese employer is 10 to 20 per cent more than a Ugandan employer typically pays (similar to other parts of Africa; for more details, see Giese 2013), it only covers basic necessities: rent, food and, if applicable, school fees. However, the practice of acquiring *enjawulo* often leads to a worker generating the capital required for social reproduction – namely, the fulfilment of obligations towards the seller’s own family and community. Fulfilling these social obligations often involves spending money and serves to create additional value (status) and cultural capital for the Ugandan worker. But in an economic environment saturated with competition (for example, other Chinese, Indians and local retailers), Chinese employers are purely interested in sales volume. The practice of *enjawulo* therefore encapsulates the dichotomous interests of the Chinese employer and the Ugandan employee – the former is interested in maximising sales (and thus his own profit), while the latter seeks to maximise personal profit since the Ugandan worker’s monthly salary is rarely supplemented with any additional bonuses based on his or her monthly sales.

Considered in a different light, *enjawulo* encompasses certain notions of value and labour not entirely limited to the informal Ugandan view on the retail service. In stores where most products do not have a price tag, the value of an item is the result of an intense financial and discursive negotiation. In other words, while Ugandan sellers often label *enjawulo* as “free money over the expected sale price” (Thomas, 14 October 2011; Wesesa, 3 October 2011), the same

sellers quickly point out that certain products would not sell without their salesmanship. Here the two lines of reasoning collide: The Chinese business owners believe the quality, aesthetics (regarding shoes, apparel, furniture, etc.) and technical specifications of a product are sufficient to make an item sellable. However, the local shop attendants truly believe products cannot sell on their own, but only as a result of the social practice of selling (Aiman, 4 September 2010; Jackson, 6 September 2010; Okelo, 12 September 2010). Put differently, the seller believes that his/ her interaction with the potential customer is the real driver for the business owner's profit. As such, *enjawulo* is not free money but the compensation that sellers believe they deserve for their successful salesmanship. This line of reasoning can be traced to other contentious employer–employee relations in East Africa. In 1995, Johanna Schoss wrote about informal and formal work opportunities in the tourism sector in Malindi, Kenya, noting, “foreign hoteliers and restaurateurs generally hire local wage-laborers with a far more limited vision of the ‘job description’ than that held by employees” (Schoss 1995: 188). Just like Ugandan employees who believe *enjawulo* is something they deserve, Schoss' informants stressed that using their mediating ability to convince tourists to buy an item is “a vendible good” (Schoss 1995: 201), one without which profits could not be generated – a conceptual thread that is prevalent throughout this paper.

The body of this paper explores *enjawulo* as a capital-driven, mediated set of practices experienced through the divergent views of the two sets of actors. I will show how Ugandan sellers find ways to integrate *enjawulo* into their selling practices – with or without their employer's consent and support – thereby making their jobs tolerable. By deconstructing how *enjawulo* benefits the locals, I will reveal how relations between Chinese employers and their Ugandan employees are shaped by the former's knowledge and acceptance of this local practice.

On Chinese Entrepreneurial Migration to Africa

Perhaps the most systematic and comprehensive effort to demystify the hegemonic notion of “China in Africa” comes from migration theorists. By examining the historical and positional demographics of migrants moving to Africa – the migrants' relation to the Chinese

state, their families left behind, and the strategic partnerships between Chinese migrants living in the same African country – these sociologists have truly advanced our understanding of the complexity of “China in Africa”.

Elizabeth Hsu, who has conducted extensive research on the Chinese communities in Zanzibar, has noted three types of Chinese migrants on the Tanzanian island: *huaqiao* (华侨), who have called Zanzibar home since the 1930s and have “become an integral part of the local population” (Hsu 2007: 123); teams of technical experts dispatched by the Chinese state (part of official bilateral Sino-Tanzanian agreements) who stay for one to two years; and the new wave of business-oriented migrants settling locally since the 1990s who are “generally less expert, extremely mobile and well connected to their home lands” (Hsu 2007: 123). Similarly, Park (2006, 2009, 2010, 2013) has examined characteristics of Chinese migrants in South Africa, showing not only that there are different migrant groups in the country, but also that, as the author puts it, “As long as there have been Chinese in South Africa, there have been tensions between groups of Chinese” (Park 2010: 464). Ma Mung (2008) distinguished between three overall types of Chinese migrants in Africa: temporary migrants working on government projects, independent entrepreneurs with no connections to the Chinese state, and Chinese migrants using Africa as a transit point before relocating to Europe or North America.

Divisions, distinctions, mistrust and lack of communication exist not only between various different groups of Chinese migrants in Africa; often, those who could be classified as part of the same migrant wave tend to keep their mutual distance. In an excellent set of ethnographic accounts, Gregor Dobler (2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009) expertly refined the common notion of Chinese entrepreneurial migrants in the Namibian–Angolan border town of Oshikango as “a homogenous, close-knit community” (Dobler 2008a: 247). Dobler showed that, despite most Chinese who work and live in Oshikango being recent migrants (post-1990s), some are more financially successful than others. This is a result of both their existing local business ties and investment history and their established connections with government officials (Dobler 2009). The more experienced Chinese migrants in Namibia, especially those possessing a good command of the English language, have a comparative advantage over the

recent wave of Chinese entrepreneurs. Similarly, in an excellent ethnography of Chinese communities in Ghana, Ho (2008) showed how even migrants circulating in similar social spheres keep valuable information from each other and refuse to help each other because they operate in the same market and thus compete for the same customers.

Of all these different types of migrants, the so-called “entrepreneurial migrants” from China (Alden 2007; Carling and Haugen 2004; Gadzala 2011; Park 2009; etc.) have proven the most problematic to analyse and contextualise. Scholars have argued whether these migrants operate independently of their home country’s political interests (Ho 2008; Gadzala 2011; Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009, among others) or, as Yu wrote, whether they could

be considered a foreign policy “tool”, subject to the direction and/ or influence of the state, given the nature of China’s political system and society (Yu 2010: 138).

Most independent Chinese migrants are themselves highly critical of the Chinese state and have rarely had any contact with local embassies (for an excellent qualitative study on the matter, see McNamee 2012). That being said, their native social links, as well as their dependency on Chinese imports for economic survival, put them in a conflicted state of in-betweenness (Park 2010) which, at times, has made it difficult to distinguish between state and non-state actions.

The problematic nature of the increasingly independent Chinese migrant presence in Africa has been the subject of various academic debates. Indeed, since these migrants are in direct contact with the African populace (Alden 2007; Dittgen 2010; Niikondo and Coetzee 2009), they are often the only tangible representation of China’s African presence (Alden 2007; Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009; Park 2009). This, in turn, leads to complex, often contradictory perceptions that differing African constituents develop toward these migrants. At the same time, most consumers welcome local Chinese retail stores (Carling and Haugen 2004; Goldstein, Pinaud, and Reisen 2008; Wrobel 2008) because they enable consumption patterns often deemed part and parcel of African modernity: For a long time, Africans believed they were denied access to these commodities, and by extension, to modernity itself (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Ferguson 2006; Hahn 2004; Rowlands 1996); therefore, the presence of the Chinese retailers and their accompanying products is a refreshing turn of

events for these locals who welcome the affordable opportunities and resources Chinese retail establishments provide. However, some critics have expressed concern over the detrimental effect the influx of Chinese commodities has on African markets (Broadman 2009; Goldstein, Pinaud, and Reisen 2008).

Through these examinations, migration theorists have debunked the notion that Chinese migrants to Africa are a unified demographic category. They have instead shown the complexity of the varying power configurations between different migrant groups when these configurations are analysed either historically or contextually. In so doing, these authors have also set the ground work for studies, such as the current one, that argue that Africans' reactions to Chinese migrants in their cities are equally heterogeneous (for similar lines of inquiry, see Esteban 2009; Gadzala and Hanusch 2010; Giese 2013; Sautman and Yan 2009; Pew Research Center 2007; among others).

The focus of this paper, however, is on a different set of questions that has mostly been neglected due to the fragmented and informal nature of Chinese business in Africa (for a notable exception to this, see Giese 2013; Giese and Thiel 2012): the manner in which wage employment is experienced by local African workers and the role Chinese employers play in this situational labour relations context.

I suggest that, since employees come to work armed with pre-existing expectations, what matters in the Ugandan assessment of their Chinese employers is the extent to which the employees can manoeuvre economically and integrate local labour and value categories in their day-to-day activities. By showing how employees relate to their bosses, I describe the role Chinese store owners play within the local labour power cosmologies. This is a context in which *enjawulo* fulfils local categories of meaning, while capitalism provides (part of) the historical context. The Chinese migrants are perceived as either obstructing or facilitating the fulfilment of these desires and expectations.

Chinese Employers, Ugandan Employees and the Politics of *Enjawulo*

Look at me. I have worked for these Chinese for three years now. And I have simply nothing to show [for it] (Jackson, 1 August 2009).

[This job] has helped me and my family survive in Kampala. As you know, sometimes I get *enjawulo* from what I sell. It helps me solve my problems at home (Thomas, 9 August 2009).

The statements above were made by a shop attendant at a home appliance store and a cashier at a wholesale boutique selling travel supplies, respectively. They both work within a two-mile radius of the Garden City Complex Shopping Mall located in downtown Kampala. Their bosses are Chinese migrants who invested in local private retail businesses after 2007 (for more data on the other employees, see Appendix). Jackson (all names are fictitious) makes 170,000 UGX per month (65 USD at the time of writing, 10 February 2014), Thomas 100,000 UGX (39 USD). Jackson, despite having a higher salary than Thomas, is more critical of his employer. That criticism is often presented in cultural terms. He says his boss is “abusive”, “rude”, that he “has no manners”, or “respect for my culture”, and that he “treats me like an animal” (Jackson, 6 September 2010). Considering these condemnations solely at face value would obscure the significant underlying economic factors underpinning Jackson’s discontent since his having “nothing to show” is not a consequence of the social actions undertaken by the Chinese boss towards him.

Instead, Jackson’s precarious economic condition is connected to the managing style (that is, economic actions) of the owner of the store where he works. Mr. Wang is a 38-year-old from Xiamen, a city in Fujian Province. He is profoundly distrustful of his Ugandan employees because in the summer of 2010, a worker stole all the cash in the shop and left the city. Since then, Mr. Wang has been carefully managing all aspects of his business, especially cash handling. Furthermore, even when his employees deal with locals who do not speak English (a language in which he is only moderately proficient), Mr. Wang has a very strict policy: No purchase is to be completed without a written invoice being given to the buyer, on the spot. Failure to follow this policy will result (and indeed has resulted) in the immediate dismissal of the employee (Wang, 7 August 2009). As a

result, Jackson can rely only on his base monthly salary to make a living. No bonuses or transportation or food allowances are provided by Mr. Wang to supplement Jackson's monthly wage (Jackson, 1 August 2009).

In Kampala and other parts of Uganda, shop sellers not only earn a salary, but also seek to gain what Thomas calls *enjawulo*: the price a seller can negotiate to earn a profit for himself above the price determined by a shop owner for a certain product. The most successful sellers are the ones capable of maximising *enjawulo*, which they keep for themselves. At times, *enjawulo* is so substantial that sellers have higher profit margins than the shop owners themselves.

Any discussion of Ugandan employees' perceptions of the Chinese store owners they work for must be grounded in the meaning and socio-economic function of *enjawulo*, a significant means by which employees fulfil their social obligations, desires and dreams for personal advancement. Most employees interviewed for this project enjoy and regularly devise creative ways to maximise *enjawulo*, especially when they are under extreme scrutiny from Chinese employers who seem keen to block the practice (Wang, 1 August 2009). Two essential aspects of this practice must be taken into account: 1) why *enjawulo* is so important for employees and 2) the Chinese owners' attitudes towards it.

First, *enjawulo* refers to a practice in which most shop sellers across all retail sectors hope to engage whenever possible so they can better enjoy the fruits of their labour. If the shop seller manages to convince a prospective buyer to purchase a travel bag, phone or frying pan for more than the business owner wants to get for that object (since most items do not carry a price tag), the resulting *enjawulo* is what shop sellers call "free" money (Thomas, 4 September 2010). From the employees' point of view, this is a legitimate strategy, a vital source of income, and a central part of how they conceive of professional success. Typically, the extra cash generated from this practice is used to supplement the family income or to assert the employees' own status within their extended families through commodity ownership or acts of good will towards other family members (Margaret, 8 August 2009; Thomas, 9 August 2009; Aiman, 1 September 2009). *Enjawulo* makes possible gifts of rice, flour or building supplies. It can also cover a loan payment or be used to pay a relative's medical bill (Arsene 2012). Of the 30 people I interviewed, two also reported

saving enough money from *enjawulo* to buy a plot of land in their home villages (Margaret, 4 September 2010; Thomas, 4 September 2010). This is what Thomas means by solving “problems at home” (Thomas, 4 September 2010).

But most of these shop attendants and cashiers complain that their Chinese bosses go out of their way to prevent this practice. The employees charge that the Chinese are “paranoid” (George, 21 August 2009), “insecure to leave us alone with clients” (George, 21 August 2009), “watching our every move” (Aiman, 1 August 2009), or “obsessive [about] making sure that all the money is handed to them after a purchase” (Okelo, 16 August 2009). That being said, the same shop attendants often confess that their main priority is finding ways to bypass their bosses’ vigilance and get *enjawulo* (Aiman, 1 August 2009; George, 21 August 2009; Okelo, 16 August 2009). As such, *enjawulo* is at the centre of competing perspectives that underpin the contention between the two sets of actors.

The dichotomy is simple and straightforward: Chinese business owners would rather sell as many items as possible for a lower profit, while the Ugandan employee would rather risk a “busted sale” (when the client goes away because the seller refuses to decrease the price even further) in order to earn *enjawulo*. Shop sellers’ actions are based on two considerations: First, it is very possible that a particular buyer will return after being unable to get a more advantageous deal elsewhere. Second, from a seller’s point of view, it is always more profitable to push for *enjawulo* than to simply sell at the expected price (Aiman, 1 August 2009; George, 21 August 2009; Okelo, 16 August 2009). After all, the Ugandan employee will receive his/ her base wage regardless of whether the item sells. However, formal wages are not sufficient for social reproduction. *Enjawulo* provides the much-needed additional capital to fulfil the obligations by which employees can reach their full social personhood potential.

The tension between employer/ employee perspectives often unfolds in unpredictable and elaborate ways. For example, Wesesa, 24, and Okelo, 30, both work in a women’s apparel store in Kampala. Okelo’s primary responsibility is to prevent shoplifting. Wesesa handles transactions under the watchful eye of the Chinese shop owner, who often observes her every move from behind the counter. After each transaction Wesesa is supposed to hand the money over to the shop owner. Over time, Okelo and Wesesa have developed well-

established techniques meant to ensure that when a customer pays more than the minimum price, the Chinese shop owner does not see it.

The language used to negotiate is always Luganda, with which the owner is completely unfamiliar and, according to the employees (Okelo, 13 October 2011; Wesesa, 3 October 2011), shows no desire to learn. When a client and Wesesa have established a selling price that renders *enjawulo*, Okelo is in charge of creating a distraction, such as knocking down some purses or clothes, which is easy to do in the long, cramped wagon-style store where every inch of space is used for display. As the owner comes sprinting over, shouting at Okelo about the mishap in the front of the shop, Wesesa handles the transaction at the counter (situated in the back of the store), hides the difference, then walks to the front of the store to hand the balance to the owner. At other times, Okelo calls the owner to the back room pretending the customer is interested in an item that is not on display. Since the owner is very suspicious of his employees talking on the phone, sometimes Okelo fakes making a call and starts speaking loudly, thus drawing his employer's attention. Okelo spoke of occasions when he went to the back room yelling for help while pretending to have spotted mice (Okelo, 13 October 2011).

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for covert trading that includes *enjawulo* is when the shop owner takes his lunch break. When the business owner is out of sight, Okelo goes outside the store and immediately starts advertising discounts and special offers "as loudly as my lungs let me" (Okelo, 16 August 2009) in an attempt to bring in customers. Any one of these strategies has a high chance of success, but the employees only use them on the rare occasions when the *enjawulo* is likely to be substantial enough to be worth the risk. The two always share the extra money equally at the end of the day (Wesesa, 6 September 2010).

Other employees use less radical, but equally ingenious, methods of bypassing their employers. For example, Aiman, 22, works at a "China shop" (vernacular for a general merchandise store) in Owino market, earning a meagre 100,000 UGX per month (39 USD). The owner is absent from the store for half a day every month to meet with suppliers. In addition, approximately every two months, the shop owner takes a trip to Nairobi to supervise the delivery of shoe shipment containers that come straight from China (Aiman, 4 September 2010). Aiman has been working for the same employer for

over three years and always conducts himself in a manner that ensures he will be entrusted with running the business in his boss' absence. Every time the employer leaves, he threatens that if anything is missing from the store, or if the sales records are not accurate, he will fire Aiman. Aiman has no reason to cheat his boss, since his *enjwulo* margin is often more substantial than his monthly salary (Aiman, 1 August 2009; 4 September 2010; 5 October 2011).

When the boss leaves, Aiman comes to work at 5 a.m. and keeps the store open until 9 p.m. (as opposed to the normal hours of operation from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.). He also brings his sister, who advertises the store by shouting various catchwords meant to attract clients. As Aiman puts it, "on these occasions, the goal is not to sell a lot, but to sell big" (Aiman, 4 September 2010), by which he means that he is only interested in maximising the *enjwulo*. Other employees also report that they often come in one or two hours ahead of their bosses in hope of some early customers. When they see the boss approaching they pretend to have just arrived, take up the broom and begin sweeping the floors (Aiman, 4 September 2010). When the business owner has at least one other Chinese employee in the store, the strategies are different, but the end goal is the same. Thomas, the Ugandan employee working in the wholesale boutique selling travel supplies, has a brother who owns a store located near a downtown hotel, catering to expatriates and tourists. When a new stock of travel bags comes from China, Thomas inspects it and informs his brother if there is anything worth re-selling in his store. Through intermediaries, he and his brother buy in bulk from Thomas' boss. Usually, Thomas facilitates the transaction between his boss and the person sent to shop in the store. In the process, Thomas often tries to convince his boss to give his contact a better deal on the larger order. Later, he gets kickbacks from his brother and from his employer for helping facilitate the sale. This transaction is always lucrative because neither Thomas nor his brother has access to the cheap retailers from whom Thomas' boss gets merchandise. As a result, "there's always room for *enjwulo* on top of what my boss asks" (Thomas, 9 August 2009).

Similar examples are plentiful. Doris, 18, who works in a Chinese-owned grocery store, has her own clients for whom she saves the best vegetables and meats (getting 1,000 UGX/ 0.38 USD per order on top of the invoice price; Doris, 9 September 2010). George, 24, who has worked as a shop attendant at a bicycle spare parts store

for the last four years, keeps 30+ contacts apprised of not only the inventory and tag prices, but also the lowest price for which his boss would be willing to sell an item. In exchange, George receives small tips from the buyers at the end of the transaction (George, 21 September 2009). Nansubugwa, 24, and Aswa, 21, who work at a building materials retailer, developed a system that allows them to “make some cement and other stuff disappear without the two Chinese men finding out”, according to Nansubugwa (3 August 2009). Those supplies are then sold locally through word of mouth. The missing stock is always negligible, but the profits the two make on the side more than double their salaries – approximately 250,000 UGX (100 USD) total per month (Nansubugwa, 3 August 2009).

These ethnographic examples demonstrate how local workers employ practices by which they attempt to not merely coexist, but prosper in a rigidly defined locale where the interests of the foreign bosses are at odds with the desires and expectations of the local employees. In this context, economic practices and cultural notions are intimately interconnected. Locals attempt to establish themselves financially and socially through work by fighting the levelling action of wage labour. Thus, *enjawulo* strategies represent activities enmeshed in the economic logic of market relations that are linked to formal economic practices and parallel economic endeavours, while simultaneously being governed by cultural notions of social reproduction (Parry and Block 1989).

The Elusive Quest for *Enjawulo*

“We do it all for *enjawulo*”, Okelo (12 September 2010) argues, and most of the employees interviewed would agree with that statement. Even so, motivations and outcomes tend to get conflated in profoundly complex ways, making the distinction between them, as well as those between employers and employees, each from distinct cultural backgrounds, difficult to discern. Okelo, for example, is often the person creating a distraction in the store in order to allow his co-worker to finalise a lucrative sale. However, because of that role, he is often the subject of both verbal and physical abuse from his boss. Okelo talks about countless times when his employer has slapped him for his “clumsiness” (Okelo, 12 September 2010). He also speaks of a time when he dropped some bags:

[My boss] ran to me and called me a filthy monkey, which hurt me, but because I am desperate to get *enjawulo*, I had to pretend I didn't hear him (Okelo, 12 September 2010).

Other employees have also reported being reprimanded in front of customers, or being otherwise abused, when they attempt to gain *enjawulo* (George, 16 September 2010; Thomas, 4 September 2010; Wesesa, 6 September 2010).

Tensions arise not only as a result of the *enjawulo* war; they are often a consequence of the fact that employees do not initially know what their employers expect of them. Chinese employers' lack of English-language skills makes it more difficult to communicate. Wesesa was once slapped on the face by her employer for talking on the phone (Wesesa, 6 September 2010). When George brought his uncle to work (the uncle wanted to replace the drivetrain of his motorbike), he made the mistake of spending more time with his uncle than he normally did with other clients, at which point the business owner came to them and, in front of his uncle, called George "a stupid Ugandan" (George, 1 October 2011). On one occasion, Okelo was slapped by his boss for failing to sweep the floor before they opened the shop:

Can you imagine a foreigner beating a native in his own country? But what can you do? You can't tell him anything because he is the boss. And even if I had the courage to tell him anything, he doesn't speak English so he won't understand anyway (Okelo, 13 October 2011).

Another typical example comes from Doris, the 18-year-old woman who works in a grocery store managed by a Chinese family. She recalls:

I was abused when my father came to the place of work and I attended to him. I bought him a soda and when he left, the boss asked me where I got that money that I used to buy my visitor that soda. I had my money, but he claimed that I sold an item, a bag of chips I think, and failed to give him the money. He told me to pay for the chips if I still want the job. I did it and from that time, I do not come with money [to] the shop just because of this [experience] (Doris, 4 October 2011).

What all these stories have in common is that the employees either acted in ways their bosses judged to be suspicious, or failed to do

what they were asked. Over the years, all employees learned the different styles and idiosyncrasies of their bosses and began to adjust their behaviour accordingly. Aiman, for example, remembers being slapped by his boss some three years ago, while walking on the street. He recalls:

He bought me an ice cream, but asked me why I was not eating it. When I told him that eating while walking is abuse of our culture he hit me for wasting his money. Since then, every time he does something that goes against my culture, I keep quiet (Aiman, 5 October 2011).

Aiman, Doris, Thomas and most of the other employees interviewed for this study experienced similar incidents resulting in physical or verbal abuse. Yet they all speak of such conflicts as being a thing of the past – more often than not, “keeping quiet” (Aiman, 5 October 2011) or immediately doing what they were told to do resulted in better working conditions and fewer clashes. Thomas summarised it best by saying:

All things considered, the Chinese are straight[forward]. They just don't know how to explain that in words. They want a person to be punctual at work, trustworthy, obedient and hardworking. If you do all of this, you can work for them forever. Once you know what's going to get you abused, and avoid that, you have no problems. The problem is that you only learn that through beatings as the Chinese have poor manners and cannot tell you what they want from you. They only communicate through abuses and harsh words (Thomas, 14 October 2011).

Embedded in this statement are certain considerations and observations that employees like Thomas have learned from daily interactions with their Chinese employers. For Thomas, like most other respondents (Doris, 4 October 2011; George, 1 October 2011; Oke-lo, 13 October 2011), the clashes are only natural in a setting in which people of different cultures, races and histories are forced to interact. Significantly, as Thomas (14 October 2011) suggests, the interactions are not the end goal. Rather, they form a setting in which employees attempt to adapt their behaviours to new situations, based on the employer reactions, signs and signals they receive. Thomas (14 October 2011) goes even further and alludes to the power imbalance between African workers and Chinese business owners, which accrues in unexpected expressions that occur in specifically African contexts

(Arens and Karp 1989). More importantly, Thomas' statement suggests opportunities for future actions as workers themselves eliminate the "problems" by amending their behaviours. Lastly, these "lessons" are important in and of themselves as they suggest an employee perception that once cultural differences are put aside (primarily through their own behavioural adjustments), the Chinese employers provide an acceptable, and sometimes thriving and permanent, employment opportunity for those willing to work towards this goal. For example, Aiman, Doris and Thomas continue to work for their Chinese employers six years after I interviewed them for the first time (as of 10 February 2014).

These examples suggest that locally grounded economic-cultural categories are not the only areas causing tensions in Sino-African work interactions. The Chinese employers in this study seem to share, along with previous colonial officials and other foreigners in the country, a lack of interest in how local systems of meaning unfold and are expressed on a daily basis in Uganda. They do not speak the indigenous language, they have a very limited understanding of local manners and "proper" social interactions, and they engage in unacceptable practices, such as verbal and physical abuse.

Yet, as Thomas suggests, there is both economic and social value in working for Chinese employers – provided that locals can learn from prior incidents how to amend their own behaviours vis-à-vis their bosses in order to avoid conflict situations. Locals tolerate their employers' actions towards them as part of their quest for *enjwulo* even though they are hindered in that process by the owners' vigilance. In spite of this, workers continue to pursue *enjwulo* and at times achieve it. What locals realise during their employment by Chinese business owners is that loyalty is valued and appreciated (Aiman, 5 October 2011; Doris, 4 October 2011; Thomas, 14 October 2011). Furthermore, once employees figure out the best practices to observe in their employer relations, as Thomas says, "you can work for them forever" (Thomas, 14 October 2011). For example, out of the original 30 respondents (interviewed in 2012), 22 continue to work for the same employer (as of 2014), four have switched jobs (in 2013), while the remaining four were laid off and moved to another employer after the shop they worked in went out of business (as of February of 2014).

As different and contentious as the Chinese business owners might be, culturally and socially, their presence in the market continues to provide a cognitive and practical space to which the native practice of *enjawulo* can be adapted and successfully applied. Conversely, when Chinese store owners manage to limit, if not extinguish, the local workers' capacity to earn *enjawulo*, those deprived of the parallel income become more critical of their bosses, highlighting the negative aspects of interactions, rather than the positive. The question then arises: Are there any instances where a certain meeting of the minds occurs that could provide an alternative operation model and, by default, ethnographic evidence for a different form of interaction between the two groups of social actors?

Not all employees are subject to public humiliation, nor are the employees' attempts to get *enjawulo* always scrutinised and quashed by their Chinese employers. The single most dramatic contrast to the stories presented above comes from six employees (participants 25–30, in Appendix) who work for three female Chinese business owners I came to know personally over the years.

I first met Cai and Min in 2007 at the Kilimanjaro Hotel poker table in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. They were regular players, visiting the casino almost every weekend. Cai was very receptive to my request for assistance with my research project on Chinese businesses that were formally registered with the Tanzanian Investment Centre (those operating legally in the country, at least on paper). At the time, Cai, who had just graduated with a master's degree in English literature from the University of Beijing, was working as the liaison between a group of Chinese businessmen in Tanzania and the local government in Uganda (Cai, 5 August 2007). Min, who was born and raised in Beijing, used to work as an English teacher before being offered a job as a translator by the owner of a Chinese restaurant in Dar es Salaam (Min, 5 August 2007).

Ever since our first meeting, Cai talked about her desire to move to Kampala where she had a cousin who owned an import/ export business. Cai did not want to work for her cousin, so she decided to take a job in Tanzania to earn the capital needed to open her own business in East Africa. In November 2008 she finally moved to Uganda, where she opened a liquor store, stocked with merchandise supplied by her cousin, and later an electronics store (Cai, 15 August 2009).

Min, on the other hand, at first had no desire to move to Kampala. Things changed during the summer of 2009 when she was arrested in Dar es Salaam for not carrying her actual passport (she only had a Xerox copy). After that incident, she was determined to leave Tanzania and contacted Cai, who helped her get a work visa. Once in Kampala, Min, with some financial help from her friend, opened a massage parlour catering to the local expatriate community, as well as to foreign tourists. As of 2014, Min had various arrangements with hotel staff all over Kampala who referred potential clients to her business in exchange for a 10 per cent commission (Min, 15 August 2009). When I arrived in Uganda in 2009, both women were doing very well financially. They introduced me to Ming, the former wife of a construction engineer, who had worked on a Chinese government-sponsored project in Kampala between 2007 and 2008. Her husband passed away from a heart attack during the Christmas holidays in 2008, when they were both home with their families in Shanghai. Rather than stay in China, Ming emptied the family accounts and moved with her then five-year-old son to Kampala, where she invested most of the money (some 85,000 USD at the time) to open a high-end clothing store in the city (Ming, 15 August 2009).

Cai, Min and Ming are not simply three independent women who happen to own and successfully manage their own businesses in Kampala. That characteristic is already an incredibly rare occurrence on its own. They also happen to take very different approaches to their relationships with their employees. First, unlike most other shop sellers working for Chinese business owners, all three women have a very good command of the English language, so employee misunderstandings are rare. Second, they only employ other women, whether Ugandan or Chinese, and only those fluent in both English and the local language (Cai, Min, Ming, 15 August 2009 and 9 October 2011). In addition, Ming's Chinese masseuses take English lessons with a private tutor every weekend. Third, the three women pay their employees higher salaries than all the other workers with whom I spoke (see Appendix). Last, in addition to generous wages, all employees are offered performance-based incentives, which take different forms based on the type of business in which they work. For example, Cai's worker, a liquor store attendant and cashier, gets 10 per cent from every expensive bottle of liquor she sells. What is Cai's reasoning for this generosity? As she puts it,

I sell ten types of whisky from the most disgusting one to the most exquisite. Mary [the employee] can simply sit behind the counter or she can try to convince the clients, especially the foreigners, to buy the most expensive bottles. If she succeeds in selling expensive bottles, we both win [since the margin of profit for expensive drinks is also higher] (Cai, 9 October 2011).

Min's employees have similar advantages. Her masseuses (three Chinese and two Ugandan women, as of January 2014) receive 10 per cent of the massage fees for every single returning customer who asks for a particular masseuse. In addition, the five women are allowed to keep their tips when clients choose to reward them. Since a one-hour session for expatriates starts at 35 USD, each woman gets 3.50 USD for every returning client, which is more than their daily rate (Min, 9 October 2011). Lastly, Ming also awards her employees 10 per cent for every item sold over a certain price threshold. Ming's logic is identical to Cai's:

You know, I have different types of shirts, different types of shoes, different types of ties and so on. The customer will not go straight for the most expensive items. So my employees need to convince them that, for example, a 200,000-shilling shirt is worth buying. But for that to happen, the girls need to think there's something in it for them (Min, 9 October 2011).

Giving incentives to their employees makes sound financial sense to the three Chinese women. It makes even more sense for the six Ugandan women who work for them. Unknowingly, Cai, Min and Ming have formalised *enjawulo*. More importantly, their employees do not have to hide their actions from their bosses and can pursue their own strategies for personal advancement in conjunction with their current responsibilities. Perhaps not surprisingly then, these six workers are also the ones with the most positive view of their employers. For example, Margaret, 26, who is one of Ming's two sales representatives, had this to say about her employment:

I love this job. It is everything I had ever dreamed of. I work for my boss, but I also work for myself. If I lose this job, I will surely die (Margaret, 7 October 2011).

There are various conflating issues in Margaret's statement that need to be contextualised in order to understand her unabashed appreciation for her boss and her job. First, for a young woman with only a

high-school education, Margaret's salary (10 February 2014) of 240,000 UGX (92 USD) is something she never dreamed of getting in her twenties. Second, by her own admission, she never thought she could get *enjwulo* in her current job where all items carry a price tag and "the camera is watching us all the time [surveillance system]" (Margaret, 7 October 2011). Third, the financial incentive she gets to sell higher-priced items eliminates a moral tension Margaret had previously experienced:

At my last job – I was working in a craft shop at Uganda Arts and Crafts Village [the main craft market, situated in downtown Kampala, n.d.] – I often felt very bad of cheating my boss of some of the profits. But I had to live (Margaret, 7 October 2011).

This moral dilemma does not apply at the current job since Margaret is in fact encouraged to keep part of the profits. Fourth, Margaret no longer has to deal with the fear of getting caught with *enjwulo*. She recalls at least two instances when her former boss arrived at the shop while she was finalising a sale that would have given her a significant *enjwulo*. After the tourists left, on both occasions, her boss confiscated the difference she made from the sale, arguing that it belonged to him (Margaret, 7 October 2011).

Margaret mentioning "death" as a consequence of losing the current job is, of course, not literal and needs to be put into a social context. In the last four years, working in Ming's shop, Margaret was able to save enough to buy a small plot of land in the town of Kalisizo, where her parents live. She was also able to pay for a two-bedroom house, which was finally built in February of 2012. Furthermore, with the additional monthly income, she has been able to support other family members, including putting one brother through school and buying anti-retroviral medicine for her sister who tested HIV-positive over two years ago (Margaret, 7 October 2011). Suddenly, from a marginal social position (being the youngest sibling in a family of seven, and a woman), Margaret is now at the social, economic and personal centre of her household. It is in this context that the loss of her current job would have a tragic impact on her life.

By providing incentives to their employees, Cai, Min and Ming have not only managed to make workers identify themselves with the business (something most other Chinese employers take for granted), they have also dismantled an inherent employee–employer tension

which lies in the distinction between labour and work. For, as Margaret puts it:

I come to work every day working for her [Ming]. But every time I convince a rich man to buy an expensive suit, I work for me (Margaret, 7 October 2011).

Margaret is referring to what anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff called “the poetics of contrast” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987: 191). According to them, African workers, especially in “racially coded societies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987: 191), develop a poetic language through which they express their discontent with the uneven and unequal power relations between workers and employers in capitalist societies. This tension is expressed in the distinction employees make between working for “the whites” (the Comaroffs wrote primarily on South Africa) and the work they do for themselves. Since Margaret can work both for herself and her employer, the incentives Cai, Min, and Ming grant to their workers circumscribe the workers’ personal desires, expectations and local categories of meaning within formal labour relations.

In brief, these three cases support the hypothesis that fulfilling local categories of meaning that Ugandan employees bring to their daily employer encounters is not always irreconcilable in a Chinese-run labour environment. When the market context allows it, and when independent business owners provide additional incentives to their workers, local employees will incorporate *enjawulo* within formal labour relations. More generally, the concepts of work and labour will not at all times be construed as antithetical. These concepts are fluid, volatile, constantly changing, yet always intimately tied to local categories of value and prestige (as in Margaret’s case). More specifically, on the point of Sino-African labour interactions, the stories of Cai, Min and Ming suggest there is room in the Ugandan cosmology of work (and power) relations for symbiotic cooperation. This is especially possible when business practices, accidentally or deliberately, conform with, and allow for the fulfilment of, local value categories.

However, such cases of cooperation represent the exception, not the norm, both with Chinese and local employers, as is shown in the next section. Most of the employers in this study, regardless of their background or place of origin, hinder both *enjawulo* and other notions of work and labour. To that end, a brief comparison of Chinese and Ugandan business owners will provide a starting point for the final

discussion in this paper on the overall position Chinese employers have within the larger scheme of capital-driven labour in Uganda, and the role *enjawulo* plays in local employees' perceptions of their bosses.

More of the Same: Local Workers' Attitudes towards Chinese and Ugandan Employers

It was surprising to me that some of the things Ugandan bosses do are the same [as what the] Chinese do. They all want [us to work] seven days a week with no break, for almost no money. They want us to stay poor and not complain about it. And [that's why] we struggle for the *enjawulo* (Wesesa, 24, 3 October 2011).

If it was not for *enjawulo*, we would work from year to year without any achievement, but *enjawulo* has greatly helped us run our homes on a daily basis and the salary caters for other things. And for some reason, both the Ugandan and Chinese want to prevent us from getting the *enjawulo*. Why do they all want us to be poor and in misery? (Aiman, 22, 5 October 2011).

Wesesa and Aiman's statements touch on recurring themes mentioned by all 30 employees at one point or another as criticisms of both their current and previous employers. As far as they are concerned, all employers want to "abuse" them, "keep them poor" and "overwork" them. Another common theme is that no matter how much the employees work, most employers never show any signs of appreciation (Aiman, 5 October 2011; George, 1 October 2011; Oke-lo, 13 October 2011). In addition, while all employees are required to work seven days a week, with no holidays or time off, at the end of the month they have very little to show for it. Their salaries are often just enough to cover basic necessities whereas, as Thomas once told me (14 October 2011), "The boss sits in the store all day counting money." It is the deplorable work conditions, virtually identical regardless of who owns the business, that shop sellers consider unfair, but feel they can never discuss with their employers for fear of being fired.

There is another, more subtle dimension that manifests itself as a profound crisis of legitimacy. Workers see themselves as key actors in a theatrical production for which the director takes all the credit. They are the ones opening the stores in the morning, sweeping the floors, waiting on clients, preparing transactions and preventing shop-

lifting, while also keeping track of purchases and inventory levels. Even so, when anything goes wrong (shoplifting, sales made for less than the price expected by the shop owner, etc.), employees are forced to cover the costs (Aiman, 4 September 2010; Aswa, 4 September 2010; Jackson, 6 September 2010). From the employee point of view, the employers play no role in daily operations, yet they leave the stores each evening with the daily proceedings (George, 9 September 2010; Jackson, 6 September 2010; Okelo, 12 September 2010). For all intents and purposes, other than the original capital invested and the receipt of the daily profits, employees see themselves as the actual entrepreneurs in the business (Aiman, 4 September 2010; Thomas, 4 September 2010; Wesesa, 6 September 2010). Still, all employees would likely agree that this is just how things are in the world of retail (and beyond). For that reason, within this cosmology of unbalanced power relations, shop sellers attempt to even the odds through their pursuit of the *enjawulo*. They live in a world in which health and safety, hours and overtime, unions and labour policies are nothing but empty categories or fancy talk; they are what Thomas once called “the rich man’s luxury” (Thomas, 4 September 2010). For them, there is only *enjawulo*, a practice that is not subversive but is ultimately separate from the formalised employer–employee relations.

In effect, *enjawulo* is the workers’ attempt to reverse and reconfigure the signs of their subjugation. It represents a solution to a problem that can never be openly discussed with their superiors. For that reason, *enjawulo* is like a parallel path, distinct from, yet intimately intertwined with, the wage labour in which they engage every day. The root of the problem is in the status quo, with the workers’ passive revolution, to use Gramsci’s term, manifesting itself through the pursuit of the *enjawulo*. Yet, unlike in Gramsci’s writings (Gramsci 1971), where the passive revolution could gradually lead to an “organic change”, Ugandan workers do not attempt to change the rules for a higher purpose through their tactics. Instead, they only attempt to cohabit with the system, or, at best, game a system operationally rigged against them.

Aiman has no answer when asked why both Chinese and Ugandan bosses want him to stay poor. Nor is an answer relevant to his condition, as far as he is concerned. His goal – like that of most other employees – is to make sure that through *enjawulo*, he can get what his

actual wage is incapable of providing: a fully fledged social life where he can meet his obligations while simultaneously fulfilling his own personal desires, dreams and expectations. To that end, who he works for is irrelevant. His work place is a border zone – a meeting place he cohabits with his boss, a place he plans to leave at the end of the day, preferably with an *enjawulo*, returning home where his own obligations begin to unfold. That is why the Chinese migrants in Uganda and elsewhere are seen as nothing but a racially coded reshuffling of the same old labour relations paradigm. To Ugandan employees, the Chinese are markedly different from Ugandan employers, but still strangely familiar.

A word on how these differences play out is in order. Perhaps the single most dramatic difference between Ugandan and Chinese employers is the actual daily presence of the latter in the shop. For the most part, Ugandan shop owners hire and train local employees and only drop in to collect the daily earnings (Arsene 2012). This practice provides the workers with the means and opportunity to maximise *enjawulo*, generally without the local employers' intervention. The Chinese business owners, however, nearly always inhabit the same social space as their employees. Consequently, the employers inadvertently infringe on the locals' capacity to pursue *enjawulo* and, by default, their desire to satisfy/ meet their own specific social obligations. This tension unfolds, as we have seen, through various strategies employees undertake in order to obtain *enjawulo*. To that end, the Chinese employers are indeed different from the local ones.

There are other differences the 30 employees either alluded to or stated directly, when discussing how they are abused and kept poor by their employers. The Chinese bosses, as we have seen, tend to have a very limited understanding of, or openness to, local cultural norms and often engage in corporal punishment, something none of the employees ever experienced with local shop owners (as in the following cases presented above: Aiman, 5 October 2011; Doris, 4 October 2011; Okelo, 13 October 2011). In spite of that, as most workers admit, there are some clear benefits to working for the Chinese migrants that outweigh many of the difficulties locals typically face. For example, the Chinese always pay their employees on time, every month, with no exception – something none of the workers could expect from their previous Ugandan bosses (Aiman, 4 September 2010; Doris, 9 September 2010; Margaret, 4 September 2010).

Cai, Min and Ming's female workers also talked about asking for advance payments from their bosses, and receiving them every time (Margaret, 7 October 2011; Anna, 7 October 2011). Second, most of the women employees mentioned that, unlike their previous employers, the Chinese never request sexual favours from them (Aswa, 6 October 2011; Doris, 4 October 2011; Nansubugwa, 11 October 2011; Wesesa, 3 October 2011). On that subject, a discourse of safety at work emerges, one which certainly requires further investigation.

Another common theme, brought up by every single worker employed more than two years by a Chinese business owner, is the issue of loyalty (for a more detailed analysis on how employees' loyalty is requested, achieved and maintained, see Giese and Thiel 2012). It appears that virtually all employees received salary raises after working for their bosses for over a year (Aiman, 5 October 2011; Doris, 4 October 2011; Thomas, 14 October 2011; Wesesa, 3 October 2011). Even Okelo, who speaks of being physically abused "virtually every week" (Okelo, 16 August 2009), has seen his salary increase: from 70,000 UGX in 2009, when I first met him to 150,000 UGX in August 2012 to 185,000 UGX in December 2013 (Okelo, 10 February 2014). More importantly, the workers report that these increases are given without any previous pleas from the employees themselves (Aiman, 5 October 2011; Doris, 4 October 2011; Thomas, 14 October 2011).

Local workers also often comment on the strong work ethic and practices of their employers. As Wesesa put it (3 October 2011): "Ugandan bosses are flashy, arrogant and look down on everything we do", whereas the Chinese employers tend to "wear a shirt until it looks like an old rug" (Wesesa, 3 October 2011), work side-by-side with their employees and "even sometimes sweep the floors before we get to work" (Thomas, 14 October 2011). Other workers made reference to Chinese bosses' business acumen, their hardworking nature, as well as their "love for their family" (Wesesa, 3 October 2011), attributes which one female seller called "un-Ugandan" (Doris, 4 October 2011).

As far as Cai, Min and Ming's female workers are concerned, the contrast between their current bosses and their previous ones is even sharper. Margaret describes Ming as a friendly, compassionate and understanding employer, "like nothing I have ever seen, even from my mother" (Margaret, 7 October 2011). Cai's worker speaks of her

boss as honest, nice and “always asking about my family and my being, like a proper Ugandan” (Anna, 7 October 2011). One of Min’s employees recalled being terrified when asked by her employer to join her for lunch:

I was afraid she’s going to ask me to eat frogs and snakes, but I was relieved when she put *matoke* [plantains] and stew on the table (Mary, 7 October 2011).

After that episode, the woman confessed, “I am now looking forward to eating with her”. The point is that when differences between Ugandan and Chinese employers are noted, they are never all-encompassing or immutable, thus allowing for a social context in which a “convivial culture” (Gilroy 2005: 70) can emerge and be fostered. The same is true for their impressions and perceptions of their employers. Moreover, when asked to state their opinions of their bosses, most workers focused on negative aspects or behaviours that infringed upon the workers’ own practices (Jackson, 9 October 2011; Doris, 4 October 2011; Wesesa, 3 October 2011). Even so, when asked to compare Chinese employers with their previous Ugandan ones, many workers either changed their views, or weighed pros and cons (Doris, 4 October 2011; Okelo, 13 October 2011; Jackson, 9 October 2011; Thomas, 14 October 2011).

Here, once again, a certain critical discourse emerges. On the surface, local workers tend to resent the Chinese business owners’ presence in the shops, and accuse them of culturally insensitive practices (Doris, 4 October 2011; Thomas, 14 October 2011; Wesesa, 3 October 2011). By micro-managing most aspects of their businesses, Chinese owners inadvertently clash with the desires and unspoken goals of their workers. However, they do so in a different register than other employers with whom locals are accustomed. The Chinese are neither the rapacious former colonisers, nor are they seen in the same light as Ugandan employers who attempt to control their workers through social infringements – sexual favours, salaries not paid on time, stagnant wages, no benefits, along with increasing responsibilities (Doris, 4 October 2011; George, 1 October 2011; Okelo, 13 October 2011; Wesesa, 3 October 2011). In contrast, the Chinese employers are often seen as honest, hardworking, ambitious, but modest social actors, who seem to appreciate and reward loyalty, trustworthiness and what Thomas (14 October 2011) called “obedience” – the capacity to follow orders and directives in a timely fashion without

questioning the employer. In short, workers see their employers' behaviour as a basis for a relationship that can at times be even more robust than what they experienced with their previous employers. Given the fact that these migrant business owners tend to engage in their own foreign practices (for example, corporal punishment, accusations, insults), the Chinese employers' idiosyncrasies provide new rules by which the same old game is played. In which case, the quest for *enjawulo* remains unchanged and even achievable, although such opportunities are more limited and not fully under the workers' control.

Conclusion

I came to Kampala to study Ugandan employees' attitudes towards their Chinese employers. My initial goal was to research how Chinese migrants were different from the local bosses. The questionnaire I put together was riddled with ideologically biased questions, such as "What cultural differences between Chinese and Ugandan bosses have you noticed?", "How do Chinese bosses deal with your errors?", "What are some of the things Chinese bosses have done that the Ugandan bosses would never do?" and "Is there anything you would like your Chinese boss to change about himself?" What emerged from the very beginning was not a new set of concerns and ethnographic material, but a point I was aware of from a different Ugandan context, involving shop sellers who exclusively work for local employers. The workers in Kampala, while pointing out the many differences between their current and former bosses, kept returning to the same idioms and objections with which I was already so familiar. Even the words they used were the same. The points made concerning Chinese employers being "abusive", "keeping us poor", and "working us to the ground" was not the difference I sought. Even the practice of *enjawulo* came up in the early interviews.

The moment of revelation came when my research assistant was finishing the translation of Thomas' original two-hour interview. Hassan turned to me and said: "You know, you take the word Chinese from this text and I bet you will think Thomas works in Kaya-bwe [the other research site]." He was right. He was, in fact, so right that I was then forced to completely move away from asking what the Ugandan employees do for the Chinese and vice versa. Instead, it was

suddenly obvious that the more important questions were what *enjavulo* does for the locals, and how relations between the Chinese employers and their Ugandan employees are shaped by the former's knowledge and acceptance of this and other local practices.

If seen only as a disruptive foreign presence on the continent, Chinese migrants can easily be “otherised” and “exoticised”. While there are certain differences, such as their everyday practices and the colour of their skin, these independent migrants are still integrated within the larger system of capitalist production. In today's world, this system is practically inescapable. Rather than seeing Chinese migrants simply as fringe occupants, the discussion of *enjavulo* reveals both the Chinese migrants' place and their role within the capitalist order in which their actions unfold. By showing how employees relate to their Chinese employers, I attempted to describe the role these migrants play within the associated labour power cosmologies.

By looking at *enjavulo* as a practice, I show how some Ugandans, in their own ways, interact with the Chinese presence on the continent and demonstrate that, by using various unexpected approaches, they encompass, work around or conjure that presence. It is in this context that I chose *enjavulo* as the entry point for the study of employee–employer relations in Uganda. *Enjavulo* is not just a strategy for engaging in personal advancement or a way to bypass Chinese employers. It is the core of a social construct that gradually conjures material conditions, relations of production, and power struggles, as well as the dreams, desires and expectations of those operating within the realm of capitalistic societies. Within this schema, *enjavulo* is something employees want to appropriate for themselves because they see it as both the product of their labour, as per Marx, and a way to redress what they see as the intrinsic wrong in employee–employer relations. However, it is only on the surface that this wrong is coded in terms of the politics of difference between Chinese and locals. In fact, the redress the locals seek resides in the very nature of the capitalist conception. Scholars might therefore find it useful to conceptualise *enjavulo* within the larger critique of labour relations and imbalances, a context in which *enjavulo* produces social value through labour relations, thus responding to a perceived conceptual injustice, of which the Chinese are just one (other) exemplification. Therefore, *enjavulo* is not meant to fight obvious and frequently discussed injustices. It serves a totally different and more constructive purpose. Spe-

cifically, *enjwulo* creates additional value – both financial and social – that employees can then use to position themselves as greater social actors in culture-specific locales. In this context, *enjwulo* represents the means by which shop sellers' goals are achieved (or so they hope). It also provides a way through which Chinese migrants and their actions can be studied without “otherising” and “exoticising” them.

Still, *enjwulo* is not just an idiosyncratic, capitalist-driven linguistic term specific to a Ugandan context. In fact, the very existence of principal-agent problems mediating personal encounters represents a vantage point scholars may use in order to explore the multidimensional interdependencies between Chinese and local actors. In a narrow sense, *enjwulo*, as a notion of work and labour, serves as an analytical tool to deconstruct the intimate connections between money and meaning, a connection that is too often collapsed into history. Therefore, by focusing on such categories/ practices/ concepts as *enjwulo*, scholars may find useful approaches to empirical studies which can then concentrate on critical issues, such as the meanings and symbols of Chinese-imported commodities for African actors beyond the realm of affordability, the variegated perceptions Africans have towards the “permanently temporary” Asian migrants, and the struggles and tensions both sets of people experience when they meet.

Due to sensationalistic media accounts, we have grown used to seeing overseas Chinese as a menace, or, at the very least, a force with which to be reckoned. We also tend to view their presence through the lens of their differences and particularities. Yet these Chinese business owners are not independent of global economic and social conditions, and do not operate against or on the fringes of a capital-driven world order. They occupy and, indeed, engage in the process Gilroy labelled “conviviality” – a form of relating in which they and their local employees can interact, cohabit, and even, at times, find common ground despite their markedly different social, economic, cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds. In many ways, the Ugandan employees are the ones who were able to see this from the outset. They see the Chinese migrants for what they truly are – markedly different people occupying a strangely familiar role.

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Appendix

Participant no.	Gender	Age	Education	Current job description	Type of business	No. of employees at current business	Monthly salary (in UGX) ^x
1	M	24	Primary 6	Shop attendant	Building materials retailer	2 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	100,000 + sales commission
2	M	25	Primary 4	Shop attendant	China shop	2 Ugandans	140,000
3	F	21	High school	Cashier/supervisor	Building materials retailer	2 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	150,000 + transportation allowance + 3 meals a day
4	F	24	High school	Shop assistant/cashier	Women's apparel shop	3 Ugandans	150,000
5	M	30	High school	Shop attendant/loading/unloading attendant	Women's apparel shop	3 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	185,000
6	M	40	No formal schooling	Janitor	Restaurant	5 Ugandans, 2 Chinese	100,000
7	M	24	Primary 6	Shop attendant	Bicycle spare parts shop	2 Ugandans	150,000
8	M	30	Primary 7	Shop attendant	Women's shoe shop	2 Ugandans	80,000
9	M	27	High school	Shop attendant/cashier	Wholesale luggage store	2 Ugandans	100,000
10	F	18	Primary level	Shop attendant	Grocery store	3 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	140,000

11	F	27	Primary 4	Cashier	Home appli- ance store	5 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	170,000
12	M	22	No for- mal schooling	Shop attendant/ janitor	China shop	2 Ugandans	100,000
13	F	25	Primary six	Shop attendant	Gas station	2 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	125,000
14	M	27	No for- mal schooling	Shop security guard	Gas station	2 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	100,000
15	M	24	Primary 4	Shop attendant	China shop	1 Ugandan	140,000
16	M	27	High school	Mechanic's apprentice	Auto repair shop	2 Ugandans	165,000
17	M	31	Primary 6	Translator/ attendant	Pawn shop	1 Ugandan	120,000
18	F	29	High school	Shop attendant	China shop	2 Ugandans	160,000
19	F	19	Primary 4	Shop attendant	New and used clothing store	1 Ugandan, 1 Chinese	80,000
20	M	24	High school	Shop security guard	China shop	2 Ugandans, 1 Chinese	150,000
21	F	26	Primary 7	Shop attendant	Elec- tronics store	1 Ugandan	180,000
22	M	22	Primary Six	Shop attendant	China shop	1 Ugandan	140,000
23	F	24	High school	Shop attendant/ cashier	China shop	2 Ugandans	100,000
24	M	27	High school	Cashier	Sawing/ tailoring shop	1 Ugandan	180,000
25	F	20	Primary seven	Shop attendant/ cashier	Liquor store	2 Ugandans	220,000

26	F	26	High school	Masseuse	Massage parlour	3 Ugandans, 2 Chinese	200,000 + transportation allowance + commission on returning clients asking for a particular masseuse
27	F	28	High school	Shop attendant/cashier	Electronics store	2 Ugandans	240,000
28	F	27	High school	Shop attendant/cashier	Electronics store	2 Ugandans	240,000
29	F	21	Primary 6	Shop attendant	High-end clothing store	2 Ugandans	200,000 + commission
30	F	24	Sales diploma, post-high school	Shop attendant	High-end clothing store	2 Ugandans	240,000 + commission

Note: ^x1 USD = 2,588 UGX as of 3 April 2014.

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