Kilimani Chinatown: The Racial-Ecological Politics of Chinese Foodways in Kenya

by

Amanda Kaminsky

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Anthropology)
in the University of Michigan
2025

Doctoral Committee
Professor Mike McGovern, Chair
Professor Omolade Adunbi
Professor Kelly Askew
Associate Professor Jatin Dua
Professor Stuart Kirsch

Amanda Kaminsky

aekamins@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-4035-6568

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would never have happened without the many people in Kenya who generously shared with me their time, wisdom, and benefit of the doubt. Thank you to Christine Odera, Timmy Wambua, and Zeal Chow for your friendship and support. Thank you also to James Pan for bringing me groceries when I had Covid, to Mario Schmidt for helping me think through anthropological questions in Nairobi, and to Jimmy and Benard of the Africa Yoga Project for leading your incredible outdoor yoga sessions in the Arboretum. My thoughts are with the family of Albert Magichu, my kindhearted motorbike driver in rural central Kenya, who was killed in the spring of 2023.

Thank you to Mike McGovern, my committee chair, for your support, guidance, and insightful feedback on so many chapter drafts, not to mention all of your advising over the past eight years with fieldwork, grant proposals, letters of recommendation, seminar papers, and more. Your encouragement throughout the dissertation writing process, and reassurance that ideas sometimes just need time to develop, have helped me grow as a writer and as a thinker. I am also extremely grateful for my other committee members: Stuart Kirsch, for your honest feedback and attentive mentorship; Kelly Askew, for your warm and practical guidance through the finish line; Jatin Dua, for always helping me think through the most difficult and interesting questions; and Omolade Adunbi, for all your generous mentorship over the years—you helped bring me into the topic of China-Africa relations, not to mention anthropology in general.

Beyond my committee, I am fortunate to have learned from many scholars across the University of Michigan including Benedicte Boisseron, Rebecca Hardin, Nyambura Mpesha, Ruth Behar, Damani Partridge, Webb Keane, and Bilal Butt, who first introduced me to Kenya and to political ecology. Thank you to Matt Hull and my fellow Ethnolab writers who provided thoughtful feedback on so many of my early chapter drafts: Amelia Burke, Yun Chen, Miranda García, Kim Sanchez, Matt Schissler, and Daniel Varela. So many people have helped the U-M Anthropology Department feel like home over the years, including Yeon-ju Bae, Gene Estrada, Nina Francis-Levin, Elliot Greiner, Randeep Hothi, Salman Hussain, Alex Norwood, Yeori Park, and so many others—please forgive me for not mentioning all of you by name. I owe a special thanks to Chantal Croteau and Miranda García for reading my drafts, keeping me company during virtual writing sessions, and for your unwavering support and friendship from afar.

I am lucky to still have a wonderful community of mentors at my alma mater, Middlebury College, including Thomas Moran, Hang Du, and especially Mike Sheridan, who started me on my anthropology journey with his Human Ecology course way back in 2011.

Generous funding for my coursework, fieldwork, and writing was provided by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, as well as internal University of Michigan funding sources including the African Studies Center, the South Africa Research Initiatives Office, Rackham, the Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives, and the Anthropology Department. I was officially affiliated with the British Institute of Eastern Africa during my fieldwork, and appreciate their guidance with helping me secure my research license and visa.

Much of this dissertation was written from Merced, California. I owe a huge thank you to Christina Lux for welcoming me into the UC Merced community, for always making me feel included in events at the Center for the Humanities, and for organizing the on-campus writing

sessions during which large chunks of this dissertation were drafted and revised. Thank you also to the UCM Political Science and Anthropology departments for making me feel welcome, and to Muey Saeteurn for including me in the 2023-2024 Tea In and After Empire Symposium. I am grateful to Muey, her co-organizer Erika Rappaport, and everyone else from the Tea Symposium for their helpful comments on my chapter about purple tea.

I have received valuable feedback and encouragement on chapter drafts through the American Anthropological Association's annual meetings; special thanks to the Society for the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition (SAFN) for their inclusive community building, and to Andrew Mitchel for organizing early morning virtual writing sessions. Thank you also to the African Studies Association and the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network for helping me present my work.

I will always be thankful for my supportive and loving parents, who trust my judgement unquestioningly no matter what crazy research project I am embarking on. Thank you to my brother Adam for reminding me to enjoy all that is wonderful and hilarious about life, to my in-laws Achan and Amma for their encouragement, and to my brother-in-law Anoop for always expanding my horizons and reframing my perspectives.

And finally, to Anil: this would not have been possible without you. Your diligence as a scholar and integrity as a person have been an inspiration every step of the way. Thank you for everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how foodways—food's physical and cultural transformations from the world to the table—come to structure and reflect Chinese-Kenyan relations in Nairobi, Kenya. Amid contentious geopolitics, racial stereotypes, and accusations of neo-colonialism, this research takes food as a material anchor through which these abstract notions of power and identity manifest in the real world. Since the 2010s, Kenya's foodways have stretched to accommodate the arrival of tens of thousands of Chinese people as a result of China's Belt and Road Initiative of investment and development across the Global South. As Chinese people settled in places like Nairobi's Kilimani neighborhood, new networks have emerged of food suppliers and restaurants catering to China's rich culinary traditions. These networks have entangled themselves within Kenya's multispecies foodways, producing new tastes, supply chains, and sites of cross-cultural encounter. This dissertation explores how these entanglements contribute to racial stereotypes, shape the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and affect daily life for Kenyan and Chinese people working and eating together. Food has played a prominent but overlooked role in Kenyan political discourse about China, from rhetoric about eating dogs and snakes to scandals about the counterfeit and the corrupt. Far from trivial, this ubiquitous food rhetoric manifests in how ecosystems are managed, how restaurants are stocked, and how employees relate to each other across language and cultural barriers. These real-world effects in turn strengthen stereotyped rhetoric in a dialectical process that imbues "Chinese cuisine" with derision, intrigue, and mystique. Whether feared or defended, Chinese food is

never a neutral category in Nairobi, but instead becomes a powerful idiom through which to understand sociocultural difference.

This research builds on fifteen months of fieldwork in Kenya, following ethnographic threads outward from Nairobi's Chinese restaurants to rural sites of production. Each chapter traverses a new scale of meaning-making, from the sensory to the interpersonal and the ecological. The chapters demonstrate how foodways matter to geopolitics by exploring the intricacies of urban fusion cuisine, multilingual workplace banter, rumors of corruption in duck and fish imports, the political ecology of crayfish trapping, and the postcolonial possibilities of Kenyan tea. The passionate hopes and disappointments of the people in these stories reveal larger anxieties about China's evolving presence in Kenya. Overshadowed by the specter of British colonialism, I argue that suspicions about food—its substance, its legality, and its morality—become a way for both Chinese and Kenyans to articulate ambivalence about their shared future.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

"I want to vote for Wajackoyah," Mary[1] told me. She stroked her one-and-a-half-year-old son's thick hair and smiled, "his hair looks like Wajackoyah's." Wajackoyah was a surprise third-party candidate in Kenya's 2022 presidential election. In a political environment dominated by deeply entrenched political dynasties,[2] Wajackoyah was a jolt to the system with his wild gray beard, colorful durags, and shoestring campaign budget. Before he came on the scene in early 2022, Mary had told me that she didn't plan to vote at all. "For real," she said, "they are all the same." As Wajackoyah built up his unconventional campaign, however, his eccentric energy resonated with many of Kenya's downtrodden workers, disaffected youth, and apathetic voters, spiraling into a social media sensation and eventually taking over national and even international mainstream news.

Professor George Luchiri Wajackoyah, an ethnic Luyha and practicing lawyer raised in Nairobi, ran on a simple platform: to decrease Kenya's debt to China. One of his proposed tactics was marijuana legalization. His speeches included chants of "*bhangi! bhangi! bhangi!*" [weed! weed! weed!], eliciting raucous audience participation and spontaneous reggae dance parties.

[1] All names of people and specific businesses are pseudonyms. I have tried to assign pseudonyms in keeping with the character of the person's real name. For example, Mary's real name was another common female Christian name that, like "Mary," is in frequent use across many English-speaking countries. The only exception is Bloom, my Naivasha-based research assistant featured in Chapter 5, who chose his own pseudonym.

[2] The frontrunner candidates in 2022 were William Ruto, then-president Uhuru Kenyatta's deputy, and Raila Odinga, son of Kenya's first deputy president Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and five-time presidential candidate. Both candidates possess immense wealth (despite Ruto's modest background and self-proclaimed "hustler" spirit) and very long political careers. A full discussion of the political and ethno-economic machinations behind this election would be beyond the scope of this project.

Wajackoyah further suggested that Kenya could earn revenue by exporting snake venom and meat, dogs, hyena testicles, and other animal products to China for consumption. As he reasoned during a speech, "One thousand hyenas have two thousand testicles. Chinese use hyena testicles as medicine. A testicle costs about 6 million Kenya shillings. It is much more than ganja. We shall export the testicles, dog meat, and hyenas." The specter of China—and their alleged consumption of the aforementioned animals— was central to his campaign: "We shall deport all undesirable aliens," he announced to a crowd of supporters in July, "We shall deport the Chinese first" (The Hype 2022).

Wajackoyah's outlandish rhetoric sparked jokes and memes across the country, but it also touched a nerve for Kenyans like Mary. Mary had devoted her entire career to the promises of Chinese economic development, only to be continually disappointed. She had painstakingly studied the Mandarin language in China's northern Shandong province, enrolling her elder son in a local kindergarten and enduring the cold, gray winter. She returned home to Kenya to send him to primary school and seek employment in her home country's growing Chinese sector. She was working for a Sichuanese restaurant in Nairobi when I met her, then quit and returned to a translation job at a roofing materials company that she had held previously, then sought work as an English tutor for Chinese children, then found a job in a Chinese grocery store. In each job, she felt underappreciated, underpaid, and overworked. She endured long commutes across Nairobi, long hours, and untrusting managers. She quit her grocery store job soon thereafter, citing the boss's temper. By the time Wajackoyah entered the political landscape, Mary was exhausted, unemployed, saddled with an unplanned baby as a forty-year-old single mother, and unsure where to turn.

I sat outside with her in the sun as we drank the fruit juice I had brought and she brushed her baby's thick hair. Her older son, the one who had attended kindergarten in China, was away at boarding school. Mary had been staying in a newly constructed *mabati* (corrugated iron) house on her family's property in the Ngong hills west of Nairobi. This arrangement was far from perfect. The house lacked electricity, which meant she had trouble charging her phone, hindering her ability to find a new job and maintain communication with her social network. But at least she no longer had to scrape together rent money each month, or spend half her paycheck on *matatus* (mini-buses) to and from Nairobi's Kilimani neighborhood, where many Chinese businesses and residents were concentrated. At least she could rest.

Whether or not Mary actually voted for Wajackoyah, I cannot say. Over the course of my fieldwork, however, I watched the bizarre candidate's rise among my social network of Kenyan friends and interlocutors. Many young Kenyan employees of Chinese restaurants joked and chatted about him during their breaks. Even Bernard, the level-headed and clean-cut Kenyan manager of Kilimani's Chinatown complex, confessed to me that he liked "his ideas and the way he talks, appealing to the *wananchi* [common citizens]." As election day neared, fears that Wajackoyah might actually disrupt the vote began to circulate. If he earned enough votes such that neither of the two frontrunners received 50%, the election would go into a runoff (Chason and Ombuor 2022). Perhaps in response to Wajackoyah's platform—Bernard, at least, thought so—frontrunner William Ruto changed his stance on China just two months before the election. Although Ruto's main opponent, Raila Odinga, was openly critical of Chinese engagements with Kenya, Ruto had been friendly to Chinese interests—that is, until he declared in June 2022 that if he won, he would deport Chinese migrants working in lower level jobs like "roasting maize and selling mobile phones" (AFP 2022).

In the end, Wajackoyah's antics[3] failed to pay off; he earned just 0.4% of the votes (IEBC 2022), while William Ruto won the election and became Kenya's fifth president in September, 2022. Ruto's anti-Chinese populist rhetoric has been credited for helping him secure the cross-ethnic coalition he needed to win (Hess and Aidoo 2025). Nobody, as far as I know, got deported. For a few months, however, Kenya buzzed with memes, jokes, and serious political discussions about hyena testicles and snake meat, China's allegedly absurd appetites, and what those appetites meant for Kenyan debt, international relations, and the economic prospects of ordinary citizens. Never mind that hyena testicles (or hyenas at all) have never been part of traditional Chinese medicine or diets—the mental image resonated with the cultural stereotypes and geopolitical anxieties many Kenyans held about Chinese presence in their country.

Over the last two decades, Kenya and many other nations across the Global South have experienced an influx of Chinese migrants: traders, diplomats, business owners, and most prominently of all, workers for Chinese state and private-led infrastructure megaprojects. The increasing visibility of China across nearly every African country has resulted in a flurry of scholarly and media analysis trying to make sense of a shifting global order in which China, rather than the West, is seen to drive African economic and infrastructural development. Declaring the 21st century to be the "Chinese century" (Huang 2024), writers have produced an outpouring of publications about "the dragon's gift" (Brautigam 2009), the "new scramble for Africa" (Carmody 2017), and "China's second continent" (French 2014). An entire scholarly

[3] Wajackoyah drew plenty of criticism from political commentators. Skeptics questioned the veracity of many of his claims, from his wildly inaccurate revenue estimates from wildlife products and marijuana (Kulundu 2022) to his purported dozens of academic degrees. Various conspiracy theories arose including rumors that he was not really a Kenyan citizen, (Njuguna 2022) and that he was a "government project" planted by the Kenyatta administration—in conjunction with Raila—in order to draw votes away from Ruto (Njuguna 2022, also told to me by Bernard).

subfield of "China-Africa relations" has emerged, complete with international conferences and multidisciplinary research institutes.

A central preoccupation within this emerging subfield has concerned the question of Chinese neo-colonial aspirations. Many skeptical scholars, analysts, and onlookers have suspected a hidden imperial agenda in China's lack of transparency regarding aid, loans, and development programs (e.g. Rapanyane 2021, Lumumba-Kasongo 2011). Many have accused China of practicing "debt-trap diplomacy," arguing that Chinese no-strings-attached loans to Global South countries indicated a long-term agenda to seize those nations' assets when they inevitably defaulted on their loans (e.g. Al-Fadhat and Prasetio 2022). Other scholars, however, have argued against such accusations. For example, political scientist Deborah Brautigam has leveraged Chinese-language data to counter claims of Chinese neo-colonialism and to expose "debt trap diplomacy" as a fear-based myth (Brautigam 2020). She argues that China's lack of transparency regarding foreign aid stems not from an underlying sinister motive, but rather from a tradition of secrecy, internal politics, and a cultural norm of modesty (Brautigam 2009, 166). Since 2010, Brautigam has run a blog called "China in Africa: the Real Story" aimed at separating fact from fiction in the fuzzy realm of China-Africa discourse. Further countering the simple story of Chinese neo-colonialism, many scholars have drawn attention to African agency. Rather than assuming that China is asserting dominance on helpless African governments, work by researchers including Mohan and Lampert (2013), Odoom (2019), and Kimari and Ernstson (2020) point to the agency exhibited by African leaders in seeking out Chinese partnerships, laying out terms of agreement, and negotiating their own political and financial benefits at home. Some scholars began reordering the words to say "Africa-China relations" to emphasize African

agency in these relationships and capture the vast size and diversity of African nations and actors (Alden and Large 2018, 12).

The debate about Chinese neo-colonialism still hangs over the subfield, and threads throughout this dissertation. It was a question often on the minds of both my Kenyan and Chinese interlocutors. Rather than asking whether or not China represents a new colonial power in Africa, however, my work follows the example of many scholars who have instead examined how and why neo-colonial theories emerge through the everyday entanglements between Chinese and African people living together. Recent studies of Africa-China relations have approached these questions with nuance and complexity, offering fine-grained investigations of everything from literary portrayals of China in West African fiction (Yoon 2023) to popular digital discourse about China in Kenya (Plummer 2022). A number of anthropologists have explored these burgeoning geopolitical changes on the ground through ethnography, carefully teasing apart, to name just a few examples, how Niger Delta villagers make sense of Chinese investments in oil extraction (Adunbi 2022), how affective encounters shape the everyday lives of Chinese and Zambians working together (Wu 2020), and how conflict and humor emerge across languages at Chinese work sites in Ethiopia (Driessen 2019).

My project complements this burgeoning body of ethnographic research by focusing on food and foodways. Food lurks in the background of these other works as deals are made at the banquet table, social divides crystallize in the worksite cafeteria, and Chinese restaurants open across Africa's cities. Rhetorically, too, food emerges again and again as a theme throughout the scholarly literature on Africa-China relations. Dogs, snakes, bushmeat, and plastic food constitute anti-Chinese stereotypes so common as to pass unnoticed. This dissertation brings these lurking themes to the fore, arguing that the "material-semiotic" (Haraway 1991)

entanglements of food with political economies of migration and processes of racialization should be considered essential to understanding how boundaries between "insider" and "outsider" are erected and enforced.

I began with Wajackoyah's absurdist campaign not to shock or sensationalize, but to demonstrate the prominent stage from which this rhetoric emanates. Stereotypes about Chinese food and appetites aren't merely whispered behind closed doors; they are widespread political speech that make headline news in Kenya. These stereotypes are sticky, always on the tip of the tongue. They peppered my fieldnotes with jokes about dogs missing from construction sites, whispers about wildlife poaching, and expressions of fear at what one might find in a Chinese restaurant. These stereotypes are not unique to Kenya or Africa alone, but rather echo centuries of racialized and sexualized rhetoric about China and its supposedly insatiable voracity for peculiar species, from "Yellow Peril" anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States (e.g. Kim 2015) to the bat-eating rumors that circulated the world during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Yan and Sautman 2024).

The central questions of this dissertation concern what this rhetoric means for people living their everyday lives, and conversely, how actual eating practices on the ground come to structure and reinforce racializing discourse. I argue that the ways in which humans make narrative sense of racial difference matter to how material food systems unfold across the political-economic landscape. Likewise, the material affordances of food and the multispecies ecosystem in which it is entangled matter to how processes of racialization can manifest as hate and exclusion against vulnerable human populations. In the case of Chinese migrants in Kenya, food-based racial-ethnic stereotypes not only influence how Chinese and Kenyan people eat and relate in daily life, but also shape real-world supply chains and other material processes often

overlooked in abstract discussions of race, identity, and discrimination. These material consequences in turn strengthen stereotyped rhetoric in a dialectical process that reinforces the persistent suspicion and ambivalence of China-Africa relations.

Stereotyped rhetoric might be exaggerated or even grotesque in its overgeneralization of reality, but as many scholars have noted, versions of stereotypes structure human interaction, meaning-making, and even how we think (Agha 1998, Gal 2021). There is no "outside" stereotypical discourse (Schmitz 2018). The shared cultural-linguistic norms that make even the simplest of human communication possible rely on generalized categories that gloss over complexity in order to index meaningful difference (Gal and Irvine 2019). Kenyan and Chinese people understand the stereotypes and interact with each other through infinitely recursive versions of seeing the self through the eyes of the other (Du Bois 1903, Fanon 1967). Meanwhile, people are always subverting the structural norms, playing with them and nudging them open.

Amid the untethered complexity of such theoretical possibilities, food is my anchor. Food is material and multi-scalar: each bite is digested biophysically, perceived sensorially, shared socially, and connected to larger political-economic and multi-species networks of production. Food is the idiom through which many taboo topics are discussed, from sexual behaviors (Askew 2015) to requests for "*pesa ya chai*" [tea money], meaning bribes. Food is also an easy topic with which to engage strangers in friendly conversation. Just as I heard many Kenyans express shock and fascination about an imagined Chinese diet of snakes and dogs, I also heard many Chinese people express bafflement at Kenyan food: "simple" or "boring" were common descriptors, or as one Chinese barber dismissively put it, "like children's food." For instance, *ugali,* the pan-

Kenyan staple food of stiff maize porridge, elicited many strong opinions. So did rice (a key staple in China) among Kenyans.

This dissertation argues that through food—eating it, producing it, procuring it, and thinking about it—complex ideas about culture and identity become easier to articulate. Through a careful consideration of the small businesses and niche supply chains that matter to the lived experiences of my interlocutors, the real-world consequences of stereotyped discourse are thrown into sharp focus. This dissertation seeks to uncover the passionate hopes and disappointments in these untold stories in order to witness how larger narratives emerge about postcolonial nation-building in Kenya and the development of contemporary China-Africa relations. Through the rhetoric of food scandals and peculiar animals, Kenyans make direct comparisons between British colonialism and contemporary Chinese presence in which China emerges as an inferior threat, tempered by the strangeness of its appetites.

Figure 1. Hotpot in Nairobi, 2022.

Why "Foodways"?

While Wajackoyah was making headlines in the summer of 2022, the everyday food consumption of Kenya's Chinese communities continued unabated. One June evening, a group

of Chinese friends and coworkers sat down to dinner at an open-air hotpot restaurant in Nairobi. The air buzzed with voices chatting in Mandarin and other Chinese languages. Kenyan servers brought platter after platter of raw ingredients to the table: pink rolls of thinly sliced beef and mutton, bumpy gray pieces of cow stomach (*niudu*), fresh lettuce and cilantro, whole prawns, spongy tofu, and neat brown cubes of congealed duck blood. The diners emptied the plates one by one into the pot of spicy red broth bubbling over a gas burner at the center of the table. The meal unfolded in a flurry of dipping and scooping, eating and sharing, as the diners used slotted spoons and chopsticks to pluck things from the pot and into their own and each other's bowls of customized dipping sauces. Dozens of bottles of Kenya's beloved Tusker beer crowded the table and rounded out the meal.

Everyday life for Nairobi's Chinese population could sometimes feel far removed from the grotesque rhetoric of Kenyan politicians. As Chinese people migrated to Kenya (as well as other places around the world), new networks of food suppliers and restaurants catering to China's rich culinary traditions have emerged. These networks function through the mutual commitments of *guanxi* (Chinese relationality) and can feel close-knit and secluded from broader society. In reality, however, these are not closed systems. Instead, they have interpenetrated and entangled themselves with Kenya's diverse multiethnic systems of food supply and consumption. These entanglements affect the foods that are available in hot pot restaurants and worksite cafeterias. They influence local economies and ecosystems, and they help shape the taste preferences of Chinese and Kenyans alike.

To me, the term "foodway" best encompasses the material-semiotic complexity of these entanglements. Sometimes defined as "the cultural life of food" (Brellas and Martinez 2024), "foodways" go beyond the political-economics of "food systems," the geographical rooting of

"foodscapes," and the aesthetic and sensory focus of "gastronomy." The term "foodway" likely arose as a parallel to "folkway" among American social scientists in the 1940s, emphasizing the embeddedness of food practices within culture and their resistance to change by government intervention (Laudan 2017). Historian Jay Allan Anderson defines the foodway as:

> The whole interrelated system of food conceptualization and evaluation, procurement, distribution, preservation, preparation, consumption, and nutrition shared by all the members of a particular society. It is essentially a cultural complex, a bundle of ideas carried around by men as part of their conceptual equipment, and the patterned behavior and material phenomena these ideas shape (Anderson 1971, 2).

In the ensuing decades, the term "foodway" has gained widespread recognition in academia and beyond. I particularly appreciate the double meaning of "way": a physical path, like a supply chain along which food moves through space and time, and also the intangible "ways" of being, capturing the normative and symbolic meanings around food that structure how people make sense of their morality, identity, and belonging. This double meaning carries across the primary languages of my fieldwork as well. *Njia* in Swahili can refer to both physical and metaphorical "ways," while *dao* in Chinese (also romanized as "tao"), perhaps most widely known for its abstract and metaphysical meaning—i.e. Taoism—can also refer to a physical road or path.

My choice of foodways as the guiding theme of this dissertation highlights how food can offer a deceptively simple window into nuanced processes of social organization, conflict, and change. On one hand, food is universal; we all require calories and nutrients, and food can easily pass unnoticed in social interactions as a means to an end, the backdrop against which more important matters are discussed and enacted. On the other hand, to quote Ellen Oxfeld, food "serves not only as a source of sustenance but as a vehicle for action. It is clearly a necessity, but

it is also a focus of enjoyment, elaboration, and artistry" (Oxfeld 2017, 29). Food can bring people together; in both Kenya and China, I have been welcomed more times than I can count into a shared social-culinary experience of tea or a meal. Bridges can be built when we demonstrate openness to eating the food of someone different. Like a language, the shared nuances of taste and etiquette—what Michael Herzfeld (2016) calls "the rhetoric of shared social standards"—can come to establish "a sense of common social ground" (35).

At the same time, food can also keep people apart. An invitation refused due to the food's perceived strangeness or unpalatability can signify a much deeper refusal of shared fellowship. When one person's food is another person's "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966), strong feelings of superiority and revulsion can result. These feelings become entangled with ideas about the body and morality of the other, as expressed by the widespread proverb "you are what you eat."[4] As Bourdieu (1984) explains, revulsion for the tastes of the other can become naturalized into revulsion for the other's very essence of being. Bourdieu analyzes, for example, how a propensity for fatty pork among the working classes becomes associated with "a sort of congenital coarseness, the pretext for a class racism which associates the populace with everything thick, heavy and fat" (p. 178). In this way, bodies are "racialized"—their physical characteristics linked to essentialized notions of hierarchy—through the foods they consume or refuse to consume. Such notions of sameness and otherness manifest throughout the foodway, affecting supply chains, multispecies ecosystems, interactions around the dinner table, and notions of what counts as good or bad to eat. I will return to the specificities of Chinese

[4] In Chinese, the expression "以食见人" (people can be understood through what they eat) captures a similar meaning. The English expression "you are what you eat" is also well known in Kenya (e.g. https://nation.africa/kenya/healthy-nation/healthy-and-affordable-dishes-for-festive-season-3659058).

foodways in Nairobi and their political history, but will first explain another key phrase from the title of the dissertation, "racial-ecological."

Racial-Ecological Entanglements in African-Chinese Encounters

In a racialized system, people themselves become "matter out of place." The boundaries that emerge to distinguish insiders from outsiders are multidirectional, even as they also align with larger hierarchical structures of power. Just as Wajackoyah's statements about hyenas and dogs strengthen stereotypes of Chinese people as brutal and grotesque, for example, so do Chinese notions of Kenyan food as "simple" and "like children's food" feed into racist stereotypes of Kenyan people as simpleminded and unsophisticated. In a process that Herzfeld (2016) terms "gastro-essentialism," a set of eating practices based loosely (or not at all) on reality can come to index an "eternal authenticity" (31), an ossified boundary between the tastes, morals, and bodily compositions of Us and Them. Such attitudes have contributed to the denigration and exclusion of many communities across space and time, from bushmeat-eating communities in West Africa (McGovern 2014, 2017) to Jews in Europe (Buckser 1999) and Muslims and Dalits in India (Chigateri 2008).

Here I wish to call attention to the prominence of animals, rather than plant-based foods, in many cross-cultural examples of racializing food discourse. I would argue that the meat of a nonhuman animal, in its proximity to our own human bodies, evokes a powerful kind of discomfort and disgust. Anthropological examinations of the human reaction we call disgust tend to reflect the teeming, power-laden mixtures of shame and contempt that result when boundaries are crossed: bodily fluids leaking outside the body (Livingston 2008) or corpses rotting unburied

(Bubandt 1998). Depending on the relevant boundaries, any number of foods can arouse disgust, from fish for Maasai or Somalis (Dua 2019), to organ meat for many Americans.

Of all boundaries to breach, the line between human and nonhuman carries particular resonance across cultures. In Miller's (1997) detailed analysis of disgust, he suggests that animals remind us that our own bodies also "generate, fornicate, secrete, excrete, suppurate, die, and rot" (49). If feelings of disgust are linked to confrontations with our own animality— those moments when our illusions of human exceptionalism are stripped away—it should come as no surprise that animals figure prominently in food taboos around the world. Eating meat is an uneasy act that requires us to kill a fellow being and incorporate its flesh inside our own bodies.[5] Anthropologists have recorded examples across many cultural contexts of anxiety and moral ambiguity in identifying which nonhumans are acceptable to kill, from the pastoralist Nuer in early 20th-century Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1940)[6] to contemporary Quichua-speaking people in Ecuador (Kohn 2013).[7] In Western urban contexts, "liminal species" that evade easy categorization as wild or domestic, such as rats and cockroaches, might be considered disgusting (Boisseron 2018). Even among communities with traditions of cannibalism, the consumption of

[5] Some spiritual traditions carry this logic beyond animals. Practitioners of the Jain religion in India, for example, abhor the killing of any living thing and refrain from eating root vegetables (which require uprooting the entire plant) and fermented foods (which contain living microorganisms).

[6] Evans-Pritchard describes the entangled bodies and wills of Nuer people and their cattle (1940). When a cow is sacrificed or otherwise dies and is eaten, the Nuer must somehow reconcile their sadness with their desire to consume meat. They do so in part by symbolically separating the stomach from the heart. Evans-Pritchard quotes an informant as saying, when a cow dies, that "The eyes and the heart are sad, but the teeth and the stomach are glad (p. 26)." This duality indicates a latent discomfort with killing and consuming beloved nonhumans.

[7] Kohn examines how animal and human lives are complexly entangled throughout Runa daily life in Ecuador in what he terms an "ecology of selves" (2013, p. 16). From within this ecology of selves, in which "life and thought are one and the same" (p. 116), to eat the animal is akin to cannibalizing one's kin, or to eating oneself (p. 119). The Runa do not practice cannibalism, but they do love to eat meat. To justify eating a fellow "self," the meat must be transformed from a subject into an object through "processes of desubjectivization, such as cooking" (p. 119). Before an animal can be eaten, a moment of transformative thinking is necessary to resolve dissonance and avoid disgust. However temporarily, the human must be divided from the nonhuman.

human flesh tends to be a ritualized practice occurring under tightly specified conditions (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2012), sometimes provoking disgust among participants (e.g. Conklin 2001).

To return to Wajackoyah's evocations of snake venom and hyena testicles, these powerful, disgusting images build on and evoke centuries of similar rhetoric expressing anti-Chinese anxieties around the world. In late nineteenth-century San Francisco, for example, Chinese immigrants were often accused of eating species considered inedible by the hegemonic local culture of the time. These accusations mirrored the so-called Yellow Peril, a cumulation of fear about incoming migrants from China, in which Chinese people were figured as an invasive and ravenous horde devouring everything in its path (Yan and Sautman 2024). Kim terms this stereotype an "optic of cruelty" (2015, 22), meaning an enduringly negative image of Chinese culture as cruel and exploitative that has been mobilized throughout history in order to alienate and exclude. In our current political climate, where the recent Covid-19 pandemic was often blamed on Chinese consumption of pangolins and bats, the optic of cruelty continues to resonate (Yan and Sautman 2024).

Wajackoyah's speech carries additional resonance in Kenya due to the nation's violent history of wildlife conservation. His rhetoric quickly drew harsh criticism from Kenyan wildlife conservation organizations, which expressed concern that poachers would be emboldened to hunt down hyenas and other protected species (Namnyak 2022). These critics explicitly made parallels to Covid-19 and its emergence in China, warning that Kenya could see "a surge of zoonotic diseases" if Wajackoyah's proposals were made into policy. They also stressed the tourism revenue generated by the prevalence of these animals in Kenya's national parks, and described the ripple effects that widespread illegal hunting would have on the wider ecosystem.

This angle of attack against Wajackoyah reveals an entanglement of human and nonhuman rights and interests. In speaking against animal exploitation in Kenya, the conservationists left unchallenged the assumption that Chinese people hungered after hyena testicles and other wildlife products. These were taken as given, thereby adding fuel to the anti-Chinese sentiments already simmering in Kenya. Several Chinese (and non-Chinese but East Asian-looking) interlocutors recalled to me a variety of racist abuse they suffered in Nairobi, from catcalling and taunting in the street to being targeted for violent muggings and being racially profiled by police. In speaking out against Wajackaoyah to protect the hyenas, imagined wrongs committed against animals were effectively being pitted against actual wrongs committed against Chinese migrants. This contributes to centuries of history in Kenya and other African countries of charismatic animal species being prioritized over the lives of vulnerable human beings. Conflicts between poachers and conservationists have a long history rooted in European colonial wilderness ideals, which were achieved through the forced displacement of pastoralist communities to create “pristine” national parks (Akama 1998). Both before and after independence, Kenya has “coerced” conservation through its militarized wildlife service, authorizing the violent removal of those deemed "poachers" or illegal grazers (Peluso 1993). Kim (2015) explains how in a world filled with myriad complex human-animal issues, practical affordances can push political actions in racist directions, even absent racist intentions. This might explain why poachers are blamed for endangering wildlife species while wealthy foreign tourists’ aesthetic expectations remain unquestioned, or why wildlife markets in China are vilified while market demand for wildlife in the United States is ignored (Sanerib and Pickering 2021). These multi-layered entanglements, what I am calling “racial-ecological politics” in the

title of this dissertation, thread their way throughout this project, becoming a particular focal point in my examination of crayfish in Chapter 5.

In cases of conflict between the rights of animals and the rights of racialized or marginalized humans, Boisseron (2018) urges us to "bring attention to the system that created [this injustice] in the first place" (p. xiv). In Kenya, overlapping systems of postcolonialism, white supremacy, and contemporary China-Africa relations complicate our analysis of inequality, animal studies, and differential rights. To help make sense of these issues, the following section will examine the category of "race" and explain why it remains salient to the study of Chinese foodways in Nairobi.

Race in the Africa-Chinese Context

I defined racialization earlier as the process by which a person's physical characteristics become linked to essentialized notions of hierarchy. This definition follows the work of many scholars including Pierre (2020), Glassman (2010), and Monson (2013) who understand race as an emergent process rather than merely "racism as incident" (Monson 2013, 4). While racialization processes are arguably universal—we are always noticing each others' bodies and mapping them onto social categories—how specific racial groupings are constructed and understood is highly complex and contingent on historical specificities. Like the material-semiotic entanglements that produce foodways, material-semiotic processes help structure what "race" and "racism" might mean in a given encounter. Often, global media and dominant Euro-American narratives depict race as something that white people put onto people of color. This leaves whiteness unraced and unexamined (see Walcott 2019), and it ignores the multitudinous ways that human beings categorize and subjugate one another outside of familiar structures such

as slavery, colonialism, and western neoliberalism. Encounters between Asians and Africans have been particularly debated among scholars of race due to the inherent tension between localized processes of racialization on one hand, and their situatedness within global structures of anti-Blackness[8] and white supremacy on the other.

Much interest concerns how race and Blackness are structured and perceived in China. In the aftermath of incidents such as Chinese actors in blackface on state television in 2018 and 2021, many have claimed that anti-Black racism is widespread in China (e.g. Ouassini et al. 2022). However, official Chinese spokespeople (along with individuals I've spoken to) are often quick to complicate the narrative by asserting that anti-Black racism, and indeed the category of "race" altogether, is a Western construction, and that to ascribe Western-style racism to Chinese actors would be to capitulate to white supremacy and undermine notions of anti-colonial South-South solidarity (see Castillo 2020). Instead of asking whether race or racism exists in China, scholars including Tu T. Huynh and Yoon Jung Park (2018), and Derek Sheridan (2016) instead ask questions like, "Where and how is race and racism being (re)produced in Chinese society, and where and how is it being deconstructed?" (Sheridan 2016). In China, where darker skin has long been associated with outdoor labor and therefore lower wealth and class, globally circulating narratives of race overlay with localized notions of ethnicity (*minzu*) and quality (*suzhi*) (Kipnis 2006, Lan 2017, Castillo 2020, Zhang 2024). Mingwei Huang (2024) reminds us that English translations of the Chinese word *hei* (black) should always be read as translations of a word with many unstable meanings covering color, race/class, and the metaphorically illicit or shadowy, as in *heishichang* (the black market) or *heigong* (undocumented labor) (17). The word

[8] Following the convention of the Associated Press, I have chosen to capitalize "Black" and "Blackness" (like "Asian" or "Chinese") when referring to the racialized identity and its cultural communities, while "white" remains uncapitalized.

heiren, literally "Black people," is a particularly potent word because of its ubiquity and its contested impact as a racializing descriptor (Sheridan 2023). I will return to a discussion of this word later in this section.

In African contexts too, racial categories are emergent ideas linked not only to the continent's history with slavery and colonialism, but also to categorization schemes separate from and often predating European ideas. Glassman (2010), for example, traces the non-European origins of racial thought in Zanzibar, where longstanding racialized categories separated Omani Arabs from islanders claiming Shirazi descent, who in turn were distinct from Indians and Mainland Africans. These categories were hierarchical but fluid, rooted not in white supremacy but in the Arab/Swahili notion of *ustaarabu*, or "civilization" (743). Glassman analyzes how this preexisting racial thought intersected with the white supremacy of British colonialism, culminating in a bloody revolution and horrific violence against the wealthier Arab minority by the Black majority in 1964.

In Kenya, ethnicity (*kabila*) likewise functions as an organizing structure, and has been sometimes argued (e.g. Ndegwa 1997) to carry more relevance in contemporary society than race. Since long before the arrival of European colonization, linguistic and cultural boundaries have shaped African notions of identity and community. Despite the salience of *kabila* to Kenyan legal and political life today, however, it is difficult to disentangle *kabila* from race. Many scholars have pointed to European manipulations, distortions, and even outright constructions of ethnic categories under colonialism (e.g. Lonsdale 1977, MacArthur 2013). In many cases, previously flexible and fluid networks of linguistic, familial, and cultural connection were systematically manipulated and cordoned off from one another by colonial officials (e.g. Ranger 1983, Vail 1991). Furthermore, Europeans often racialized African ethnic groups as

belonging to varying degrees to the category of "Black." This resulted, for example, in better treatment for Somali and Nubian residents of Nairobi compared to their Bantu and Nilotic neighbors (Scharrer 2018, Balaton-Chrimes 2016).[9]

Race and ethnicity, therefore, cannot be considered as wholly separate modes of categorization. Both involve the categorization of people based on perceived phenotype, stereotype, and an assumption of shared ancestry. Deeply entangled within Kenyan society, certain racial or ethnic boundaries can emerge as salient depending on the relational context. As I will explore in Chapter 2, for example, the Kenyan employees of Chinese restaurants sometimes discussed their ethno-linguistic differences among each other, but presented a more united Black, Kenyan, or African identity when comparing themselves to the Chinese. Kenyans speaking the same mother tongue might focus on even more fine-grained categorizations than either race or *kabila* such as clan, birthplace, or accent. Debates about the inclusion of "Kenyan Asians" (Kenyan citizens of South Asian descent) as one of Kenya's official "tribes" highlight the lack of any "coherent, essential distinction" (Balaton-Chrimes and Cooley 2022) between race and ethnicity. Under British colonialism, South Asians were considered racially distinct from both Europeans and Africans, as codified in policies such as land rights and housing segregation. After their official inclusion in 2017 as a Kenyan "tribe," both onlookers and Kenyan Asians themselves have criticized how this categorization erases differences in language, ancestral homeland, religion, and other criteria that serve as the basis for demarcating other groups in Kenya (Warah 2018, Balaton-Chrimes and Cooley 2022). The "Kenyan Asian" grouping seems to be defined by a British notion of race, even as it grants political and territorial inclusion into Kenya's wider *kabila* system. Similar discussions and confusions about race, ethnicity, and

[9] Not to mention the racialized preference for the Tutsi over the Hutu under Belgian colonialism in Rwanda.

national belonging have arisen around other Kenyan groups including Somalis (Carrier 2017) and white Europeans (McIntosh 2016). These entanglements suggest that race and ethnicity should never be considered as entirely separate categories in the Kenyan context, but should instead be understood as facets of a larger postcolonial structure of social categorization which can be mobilized in different ways to fulfill different political ends.

How are Chinese people slotted into this racial-ethnic structure? As Haruyama (2023) documented in Zambia, when Chinese people first began migrating to the country to work in mining and other industries, they were considered "white." Only after becoming more familiar with Chinese people, culture, and geopolitical relations did Zambians develop a separate racial category for Chinese with its own stereotypes. In the case of South Africa, Huang (2022) examines how Chinese and Indian communities emerged "adjacent" to one another and in contrast to the Black and the white. In my fieldwork in Nairobi, I also found "adjacencies" between the Chinese population and the much more deeply rooted Indian communities, many members of which could trace their Kenyan ancestry back to the early colonial period. Several Chinese interlocutors remarked to me about this adjacency, citing shared elements of "Asian" [10] culture that contrasted with both white and Black Kenyan norms. From the Kenyan perspective, similarly, Indian and Chinese cultures were sometimes grouped together, particularly regarding business practices and food preferences. Nevertheless, the groups were never conflated, and their distinctions seemed clear to all involved. I will discuss these relations in more detail in subsequent chapters (particularly with regard to food), but introduce them here to demonstrate how newly arrived Chinese migrants can be slotted into preexisting racial hierarchies that go beyond simple Black/white binaries.

[10] As in Britain, the term "Asian" in Kenya usually refers to the community descended from the former British India, and does not necessarily include Chinese.

These complex relations have been conceptualized as racial triangulation, an idea developed by Kim (1999) to make sense of Asian-American identity in the United States context. Instead of a hierarchical understanding of race where Asians occupy a middle rung between white people at the top and Black people at the bottom, Kim suggests a more complex triangular typology in which Asians are simultaneously figured as superior to Black people and inferior to white people, and yet more "foreign" than either of them, and therefore considered less deserving of civic rights (see Figure 2 below). Translating this notion to the China-Africa context, Monson (2013) proposes racial triangulation as a way to draw attention to the often-unmarked category of whiteness. She cites examples from her fieldwork in Tanzania in which ideas about whiteness surfaced in Chinese-African encounters, such as when a Tanzanian expressed surprise at being invited to sit in the front seat of a vehicle with a Chinese driver, since a colonial British driver never would have allowed such a thing (p. 1).

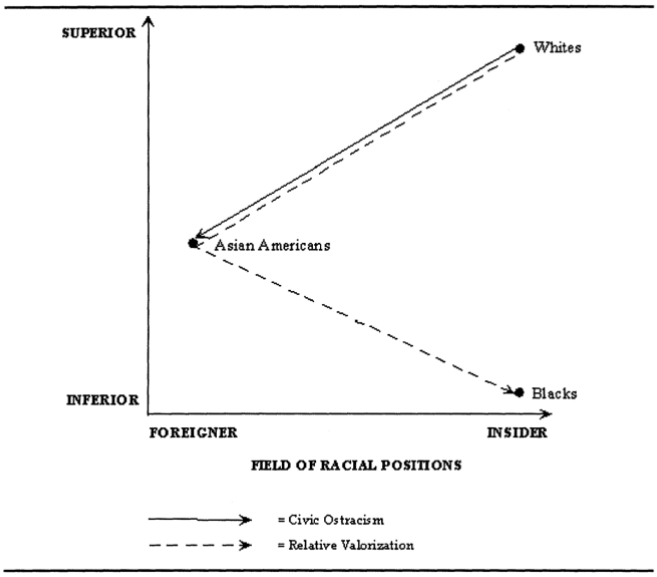

Figure 1. Racial triangulation.

Figure 2. Racial triangulation. Source: Kim, C.J. 1999. The racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & society*, *27*(1), 108. Reprinted with permission.

In his review of race and China-Africa relations, Castillo (2020) expands on Kim's model of racial triangulation. Instead of limiting the three points to Black-white-Asian, Castillo opens up the concept of triangulation to incorporate other analytical categories. After all, he argues, "blackness(es) and Chineseness(es) (outside the West) were not exclusively co-constituted in relation to whiteness" (323). Castillo uses the example of a controversial skit performed during China's 2018 Spring Festival Gala in which Chinese actors in blackface portrayed stereotypical African characters. Rather than focusing on the deeply problematic history of blackface in the United States, which carries less cultural salience in China, Castillo finds it more useful to "triangulate" the skit's race and gender dynamics against a rising narrative of geopolitical Han chauvinism in China, in which Africa is likened to a damsel in distress. Castillo sees value in locating points of reference from which to triangulate, i.e. make sense of, additional fixed points. He encourages scholars to search for and identify the multiple, and even simultaneous, points of reference against which racialization occurs. I find Castillo's model of triangulation useful in thinking through how racialization appears on the ground in Nairobi. It allows us to approach race inductively, or to quote Huang's (2024) description of conducting ethnography on race in South Africa, to "theoriz[e] concepts from the inside-out and bottom-up" (8).

To take an example, I will return to my friend Mary, the Chinese-speaking Kenyan woman who was considering voting for Wajackoyah at the beginning of this introduction. Mary eventually moved out of the *mabati* house in Ngong and started renting an inexpensive apartment in a Nairobi suburb with Chinese neighbors. One day, she took me to visit one of these neighbors, a middle-aged Chinese man who worked for a construction company. We started chatting about food, as so often happened, and the man told us about his routine: "We usually eat rice, or *mantou* [steamed bread]. Usually if it's just us in the house we cook everything together

in one pot, the way *heiren* [Black people] do it. It smells so good, all the *heiren* come knocking at the door!"

Later, back in Mary's apartment, she told me: "I used to be annoyed by the Chinese, they would say *heiren*. With this guy it slipped out." This suggests that she found the word uncomfortable to hear, and believed that many Chinese people knew it was an offensive word and therefore usually censored themselves in their presence. Mary reflected on her time living in China, where she eventually "got used to" hearing such language. "In China," she said, "they once called [my son] *xiaohei* ['little black,' a common term of endearment for anyone darker-skinned] and he was upset. But I said, 'Will you remember their faces? Will you see them again? Don't take it to heart.' Anyway, the Chinese also call themselves 'yellow!'"

In other words, with time, Mary began to see overtly racializing language as a cultural norm in Chinese speech used with equal frequency for everyone, including Chinese people themselves. She began to separate the word *heiren* from the racial rudeness that its literal translation would communicate if it were used the same way in English. Nevertheless, the word clearly stuck in her memory and irked her. Regardless of intent, the word had a hurtful othering and essentializing effect that cannot be ignored. In Sheridan's (2023) analysis of the term *heiren* in Tanzania, he notes that "Commentaries about the character of Tanzanians may not be 'racist' in isolation, but becomes 'racist' once it enters into dialogue with other discourses" (6). In other words, in its triangulation against English-language racial hierarchies rooted in colonialism and still highly salient in many African contexts, the word *heiren* acquires a racializing valence, and should thus be considered "discursively complicit" (Sheridan 2023) with globally circulating anti-Blackness.

I should also note that racializing language goes both ways. Kenyans also tend to refer to Chinese and other East Asian people with essentializing labels like "Chinese" or "*mchina/wachina*." Unlike most Chinese usage of the word *heiren*, Kenyans might even use *mchina* as a form of direct address to get the attention of a Chinese person. Similar words exist for other categories of people too; Kenyans often use "*mzungu/wazungu*" to address white people, "*muhindi/wahindi*" to address South Asians, and ethnic terms to address easily identifiable Kenyans (such as "Maasai" to address Maasai men in Nairobi wearing traditional dress). These terms of address are largely intended to be inoffensive and purely descriptive, much like the common Chinese nickname *xiaohei* (little black). In practice, however, certain contexts can lend these terms a racializing valence. Like gendered catcalling (Cousens 2024), ostensibly neutral or even "complimentary" forms of unsolicited address can become threatening within imbalanced structures of power. Several East Asian acquaintances, both Chinese and non-Chinese, described to me the unpleasant feeling of hearing "*mchina*" called out to them in the street, where they felt vulnerable and otherized. Like "*heiren*," therefore, terms like "*mchina*" should be considered complicit with larger structures of racial discourse.

The comparison of *heiren* and *mchina* opens up a recurring question in race studies about drawing equivalence across racializations. The Afro-Pessimist tradition considers anti-Blackness to exist outside history and to preclude analogy to other forms of injustice (Sexton 2010, Wilderson 2020). I follow scholars such as Annie Olaloku-Teriba (2018) in taking a softer approach, recognizing the "palimpsestic afterlife" (9) of slavery worldwide, while rejecting "the subsumption of 'Africanness' by an Americanised conception of Blackness" (4). Casting aside Afro-Pessimism's "mystification of race" (13), Olaloku-Teriba argues, frees us to "see race as a technology of imperialism" (22), something contingent and unstable, and to rediscover historical

solidarities in liberation struggles. This does not mean that all liberation struggles are equivalent. Huang (2024), for example, following Olaloku-Teriba, considers it important to distinguish anti-Blackness in order to acknowledge its deep-rooted salience on the continent: "Without specifically naming anti-Blackness, its dynamics get lost in discussions of anti-Asian/ anti-Black racism that make them commensurate under white supremacy" (17).

Indeed, those two "racisms" are not commensurate. The Chinese state exerts economic and political power in its African dealings in ways that "trigger the collective trauma of European colonialism" (Huang 2024 18), perpetuating inequality even if not exactly recapitulating of the actions of the British. Anti-Chinese and Anti-Black sentiments are embedded in these imbalanced relations, leading to imbalanced differentials of power. As Huang explains of South Africa, "in the era of China's global ascendance, its ever-expanding structure enlists Chinese subjects into racial projects in South Africa, where anti-Blackness has been foundational" (18). Upon arriving in an African country, Chinese workers are often able to enter upper-level positions or rely on international networks of capital to establish their own businesses, in ways reminiscent of how their European, South Asian, or Arab predecessors might have. This is not to say, however, that Chinese individuals always possess an upper hand in on-the-ground interactions with Africans. As Sheridan (2023) argues, many Chinese individuals in Africa are "economically privileged but politically vulnerable." This means that Chinese people living as minorities in African contexts, as well as the Africans with whom they work and live, might find themselves variously empowered or endangered depending on the situation at hand.

Phenotype, wealth, ethnicity, language, history, and political power—all of these complex factors contribute to how Chinese-Kenyan relations are racialized. As the next section

will begin to illustrate, these relations trace their spatio-temporal roots to the specific history of my primary fieldsite, the Kilimani neighborhood of Nairobi.

Nairobi's Foodways and the Rise of a New Chinatown

My project builds on a rich history of Chinatown ethnographies around the world that break open the proverbial walls of the so-called ethnic enclave to explore its heterogeneities, mobilities, interstices, and discontinuities (Ong 1999, Guest 2003, Oxfeld 2007, Dehart 2015, Gao-Miles 2017, Hom 2024). Chinese communities outside China have existed since at least the 1400s, when the Ming Dynasty began expanding its trade interests into Southeast Asia and beyond, including eventually to the Swahili coast of East Africa under admiral Zheng He. Since then, overseas Chinese communities have persisted under widely varying conditions of integration into the majority society and engagement with the Chinese mainland, from Malaysia (Nagata 1993) and Indonesia (Vickers 2023) to Madagascar and Mauritius (Guccini and Zhang 2021). Known in Mandarin Chinese as *huaqiao* (sometimes translated as "sojourners," see Guo 2022) or *haiwaihuaren* ("overseas Chinese"), members of these communities are transnational and mobile (Ong 1999), experience circular migration and "double diaspora" (Guo 2016), are entangled with flows and counter-flows of capital, goods, and ideas (Guo 2022), and negotiate multiple waves of ethno-linguistically and socio-economically distinct migration over time (e.g. Park 2021). "Chinatowns" often become spatial metonyms for these communities, anchoring them to the urban built environment through their dense concentration of Chinese businesses and residences. For many writers thinking about global Chinatowns, myself included, food is an iconic and evocative source of inspiration, from "whole roasted ducks dangling in windows" (Guest 2003, 16) to a "steaming bowl of wonton soup" in Madagascar (Kwan 2022, 2).

I first experienced the "Chinatown" in Nairobi's Kilimani neighborhood as a master's student in 2016, before the Chinese shopping complexes that anchor this dissertation had been built. I was studying wildlife tourism and had located the address for a Chinese-owned tour company in Kilimani. The office was in a large building labeled "China Centre" that also included a Chinese grocery store and several other businesses. The smells that greeted me when I stopped by the grocery store—dried chilies and seaweed, star anise and tea—transported me back to China, where I had lived for over two years traveling and working various jobs before starting graduate school. In walking distance from China Centre, a large Chinese hotel and several restaurants and casinos marked the area as a burgeoning "Chinatown."

When I returned to Kilimani for preliminary dissertation fieldwork in 2019, now a PhD student in anthropology, China Centre was closed down and in a state of disrepair, but a new complex of Chinese businesses was being constructed right behind the old building. Just up the street, meanwhile, a brand new shopping complex was also under construction called *Zhonghua Jie* or "Chinese street." This complex, which continued expanding and changing throughout the course of my fieldwork through 2023, eventually became my ethnographic home base. When Nairobians referred to "Chinatown," they often meant the *Zhonghua Jie* complex, though they might also have meant the surrounding Kilimani area.

Although *Zhonghua Jie* contained many things including real estate and logistics offices and a hotel, it specialized in food. Wonderful smells beckoned passersby into the security-guarded gates, which eventually developed from simple metal gates to a decorative wooden entryway reminiscent of larger, older Chinatowns around the world. Pulled noodles, bubble tea, Chengdu-style snacks, Fujianese seafood dishes, late-night barbecue—all of these and more could be found behind the gates.

The migration and investment that fueled the growth of *Zhonghua Jie* are part of a new wave of Chinese migration abroad, connected to older diasporic networks but distinct in its connection to official policies of the contemporary Chinese nation state (Guo 2022, Park 2022). This is not to say that most Chinese residents of Nairobi are official state actors or work for state-owned companies; many, in fact, are independent workers and entrepreneurs (Park 2022). Nevertheless, their presence in Kenya, as in many other African countries, can be attributed to the snowballing effects of capital flows, infrastructure, and community building that have gained momentum through the Chinese government's increasing investments in Africa over the past couple of decades. Despite many older ties between China and the African continent—including ancient trade routes and Cold-war era collaborations like the TAZARA railroad linking Zambia with the Tanzanian coast (Monson 2009)—a new era of Chinese engagement with Africa began with the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2006. These relationships accelerated under President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, or *Yidai Yilu* in Chinese), which since 2013 has loosely organized China's investment and development activities across the Global South. The effects of these policies in Kenya have been momentous: China has become Kenya's largest trading partner and has financed multiple highways, a large port in Lamu, and one of the most expensive projects of the BRI, the Standard Gauge Railway linking Mombasa with Nairobi. The prominence of Chinese presence in Kenya and across many African countries has led to debates about Chinese neo-colonialism and the future of Chinese influence worldwide (e.g. French 2014, Kimari and Ernstson 2020). These debates are threaded throughout this dissertation, underlying much of the interpersonal suspicion in the chapters to come.

The Standard Gauge Railway traces the path once traversed by the colonial-era Uganda Railway, along which Nairobi was once nothing but a colonial depot outpost. Prior to the 1890s,

the land that would come to underlie Nairobi's urban sprawl spanned the traditional territories of the Maasai, Kamba, and Kikuyu people. In the ensuing decades, the city transformed from a sparsely populated wetland into today's multinational urban center. The remainder of this section outlines the history of this transformation, highlighting how foodways shifted and expanded to accommodate Nairobi's growing and diversifying population.

Prior to colonization, local communities in the Nairobi region consumed and traded a wide variety of foods from livestock and indigenous staples to non-indigenous crops that had been introduced through trade like sugarcane, cassava, and corn[11] (Kobiah 1978, 32). When the British arrived, the region happened to suffer a period of plague, drought, and famine that wreaked devastation on local livelihoods. "It is no surprise then," write historians Ese and Ese (2020), "that Nairobi and its trains moving to and from the coast became magnets for local trade, and a possibility for a local population in flux to tether their future" (1).

During the early years of the 20th century, people poured into the burgeoning settlements of Nairobi not only from neighboring communities, but also from all parts of Kenya, other parts of Africa, and around the world in search of trade and employment opportunities. Some of these newcomers were displaced from the fertile regions of central Kenya that the British designated for white-only settlement. Through both purchasing agreements and outright takeover, the enclosure of the so-called "White Highlands" created large populations of landless people. Some were crowded into designated ethnic "reserves," some became "squatters" on their own land and worked for European-owned farms, and others migrated to the rapidly growing town of Nairobi (Whitlessey 1953).

[11] Sugarcane, perhaps indigenous to New Guinea, was widely propagated and processed in India before spreading across Asia, Africa, and eventually the world (Mintz 1985). Cassava and corn are New World crops from South and Meso-America, respectively. Their consumption spread worldwide after trade routes were established in the late fifteenth century (Dahniya 1994, McCann 2001).

Meanwhile, large numbers of South Asians, particularly Gujarati and Punjabi speakers from British India (now India and Pakistan), settled in Nairobi's urban center (Aiyar 2015). Wealthier merchants purchased property and operated businesses in the central marketplace known as the Indian Bazaar. These settlers were joined by tens of thousands of laborers recruited from British India to work on the Uganda railway. After the railway was completed in 1901, linking the Ugandan interior to the port of Mombasa, many laborers brought their families from India and settled in Nairobi (Aiyar 2015). Other South Asian newcomers were employed by the British colonial government as office clerks and administrators. Colonial policies limiting where South Asians could buy land—they were explicitly excluded from the White Highlands—helped consolidate the center of Nairobi as a majority-South Asian community. By 1926, Nairobi's population consisted of approximately 60% Africans, 30% South Asians, and 10% white Europeans (Lee-Smith and Lamba, 2000). The South Asian community was (and remains today) incredibly diverse and divided along lines of religion, sect, caste, class, and language. Nevertheless, food preferences common across the Indian Subcontinent established themselves firmly into the fabric of Nairobi's culinary landscape. Indo-Swahili foods long common on the Swahili coast, from chapati (wheat flatbread) to spices like cardamom and cumin, became more readily available in Nairobi. Black tea boiled with milk and sugar—known as *chai* in Swahili as well as in many South Asian languages—gained popularity, likely through a combination of British and South Asian influence (see Chapter 6 for more on tea).[12, 13]

[12] Although tea had begun gaining popularity alongside Arabic coffee in Zanzibar since about the 1870s (Burton 1872: 389, in Rolingher 2009: 124), the beverage likely only made inroads towards Nairobi after the 1920s. This was when Brook Bonds established its first commercial tea estate in Kenya; it was also when tea began to gain widespread popularity among Indians on the Subcontinent (Arora 2023), a habit they likely brought with them to Nairobi.

[13] Contributing to this diversification of foods was the arrival of coastal Muslims of Swahili and Arab descent to Nairobi. Along with South Asians, members of these communities migrated from the coast in large numbers, contributing significantly to an emergent urban culture within Nairobi's African settlements. Islam became the dominant religion, and many newcomers from inland Kenya quickly adopted Islam and elements of Swahili culture

British colonial race ideologies contributed to early Nairobi's segregation. Black Africans were prohibited from purchasing property in the city center or in the white-only neighborhoods in the north and west—including Kilimani. Black African communities settled primarily in neighborhoods east of the city with poor drainage and subpar roads, constructing homes that the colonial government deemed "temporary." These neighborhoods, including Pumwani, Nairobi's first "legal" areasfor African settlement, grew into thriving and bustling communities even as they were continually demolished, refurbished, expanded, and vilified (Ese and Ese 2020). Racialized communities that occupied middle rungs of the British hierarchy—including Sudanese (Nubian), Somali, Ethiopian, Swahili, Arab, and South Asian people—likewise occupied Nairobi's middle grounds. Besides the city center with its South Asian majority, these communities settled in neighborhoods like Eastleigh (where today's Somali population primarily resides) and Kibera (settled initially by Nubian ex-servicemen from Sudan and today the city's largest informal settlement). Of course, these ethno-racial divisions were never clean or absolute. Ese and Ese (2020), for example, call attention to the centrality of "illegal" or "informal" African settlement around, in between, and within the bounds of ostensibly off-limits neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, British colonial policies attempted to preserve the segregation of white-only areas west of the city, including Kilimani. These areas had rich and better draining soil and were deemed suitable for European-style housing. The dense crowding of the city center, with its poor sanitation and frequent disease outbreaks, further helped justify the racial exclusion of these areas (Murunga 2012). For decades, Kilimani remained relatively sparsely populated with two

as a way to foster a sense of community in a strange city (White 1990). Traditional Swahili-style houses came to dominate the architecture of the African-majority neighborhoods (Ese and Ese 2020). The Swahili language, a coastal trade language with Bantu roots and many Arabic loanwords, became Nairobi's lingua franca. The language even spread beyond the city's African settlements and was adopted by Nairobi's South Asian and European residents as well.

schools and a scattering of single-story villas with gardens (Wanjau 2007). The area's development progressed in keeping with its international and wealthy character. Nairobi's first shopping mall, Adam's Arcade—often cited as the first shopping mall in all of East Africa—was built in the 1950s along Ngong road in Kilimani by an Arab businessman named Abdul Habib Adam. When it opened to the public in 1959, Adam's Arcade contained a bakery owned by an Italian couple, a post office, and several other shops. British soldiers and their wives rented apartments on the top floor. Today, Adam's Arcade remains an important landmark in the Kilimani area. The original post office is still operational, joined by a halal butchery, a Turkish grocery store, and several other shops specializing in food and fashion.[14]

Soon after Kenya declared independence in 1963, China became one of the first nations to establish its embassy in Kilimani close to the State House. Constructing the embassy in Kilimani likely paved the way for future Chinese development and settlement in nearby areas. Many other nations also constructed embassies and high commissions nearby. Yaya Centre, one of Nairobi's first and largest indoor shopping malls, was constructed in the late 1980s and opened to the public in 1992. It remains one of the key landmarks of Kilimani today, and many Kenyans know that there is a Chinese community "near Yaya."

Over the last two decades, Kilimani has urbanized rapidly and vertically. Many of the single-story villas have been replaced by luxury high-rise apartment buildings. Although a majority of the neighborhood residents today are middle and upper-middle class (African) Kenyans, Kilimani retains its international character with many European-style coffee shops, Ethiopian and West African restaurants, and residents coming from all over the world. Much of Kilimani's high-rise real estate development has been driven by Chinese investment and

[14]See https://adamsarcade.co.ke.

contractors, to the alarm of many non-Chinese residents who worry that the neighborhood's sewage and other underlying infrastructure systems cannot support this new growth (e.g. Ng'ethe 2024). Despite its critics, however, Kilimani's recent development has also cemented its place as one of the most desirable areas of Nairobi in which to live. In 2022, *Time Out* magazine ranked Kilimani at #28 on its list of "coolest neighborhoods in the world," citing its trendy and constantly changing landscape of art galleries, cafes, and cocktail bars.[15]

Chinese expats have not only settled in Kilimani, but also in other affluent surrounding neighborhoods like Lavington, Kileleshwa, and Westlands. A few settled in industrial areas closer to their factories and warehouses, particularly along Mombasa Road and in Embakasi. Recently, a small Chinese community began establishing itself in Athi River, a town just south of Nairobi that is easily accessible to Mombasa Road. Athi River now has a Chinese grocery store of its own. Small numbers of Chinese people also live in Kenya's second-largest city of Mombasa, as well as in other parts of the country such as Naivasha (see Chapter 5).

The vast majority of Chinese settlement and commerce, however, has concentrated in Kilimani. Several of China's largest Africa-focused state media outlets (including CGTN and Xinhua) are anchored in Kilimani. An ever-shifting number of "Chinatowns"—gated complexes housing a variety of Chinese businesses—help identify the area around Yaya Centre as "Chinese." These include the aforementioned *Zhonghua Jie* and the complex behind the former China Centre, as well as several other pockets of Chinese businesses. The Chinese population in Kilimani probably reached a peak around 2018, when approximately 40,000 Chinese people were reportedly working across Kenya (Goldstein 2018). After the Covid-19 pandemic and a contraction of China's Belt and Road investments, the population today is likely quite a bit

[15]See https://www.timeout.com/about/latest-news/time-out-names-an-area-of-guadalajara-in-mexico-as-the-coolest-neighbourhood-in-the-world-to-visit-101122.

smaller (China Africa Research Initiative 2024). Population estimates vary widely. Nevertheless, the Chinese presence in Kilimani is immediately palpable to anyone passing through. Clustered near Yaya Centre, Chinese and English signage indicates the presence of Chinese-owned casinos, hotels, seafood markets, real estate developments, and other businesses. The Xinhua headquarters stand prominent behind imposing gates, next to which *Zhonghua Jie* nestles in a cluster of colorful Chinese storefronts behind its decorative wooden entryway. Here at the epicenter of Chinese-Kenyan interactions on the ground, foodways and ideologies of eating meet and clash in full force.

Fieldwork in Kilimani and beyond

Zhonghua Jie and its surrounding conglomerate of Chinese development formed the central focus of my ethnographic fieldwork, the home base where I would spend time sitting, observing, and chatting in between other visits and appointments. My ethnography is built on a total of fifteen months spent in Kilimani and surrounding areas, including three months of preliminary fieldwork in 2019, eleven months in 2021-2022, and an additional follow-up month in the summer of 2023.

I first started spending time in *Zhonghua Jie* in 2019 when it was just a single row of container-style shops, newly opened for business. When I returned in 2021, many of the shops and restaurants I remembered had disappeared and were replaced with new ones. A whole new row of shops plus a glittering karaoke club had been added, making the complex feel like a city unto itself. Only a couple of people recognized me from 2019, a testament to the high turnover in Kilimani of both Chinese residents and Kenyan coworkers and employees. This transient population is difficult to count or poll, making population numbers difficult to estimate. I did

recognize a few people in *Zhonghua Jie* when I came back in 2021, however, including the compound's Kenyan manager Bernard, who became a helpful point of contact throughout my time in Kenya. When I came back to Kenya for a period of post-Covid follow up fieldwork in 2023, *Zhonghua Jie* had changed again. New shops had once again replaced old ones, while a newly opened multi-story shopping complex called "China City" right next door made *Zhonghua Jie*'s narrow alleys feel shabby by comparison. Always in flux, it is impossible to write about Kenya's Chinese community in the ethnographic present tense. The places and people captured in this dissertation can only be understood as a flash of frozen time, a piece of history already obsolete by the time I could write it down.

Figure 3. A snapshot inside *Zhonghua Jie*, 2023.

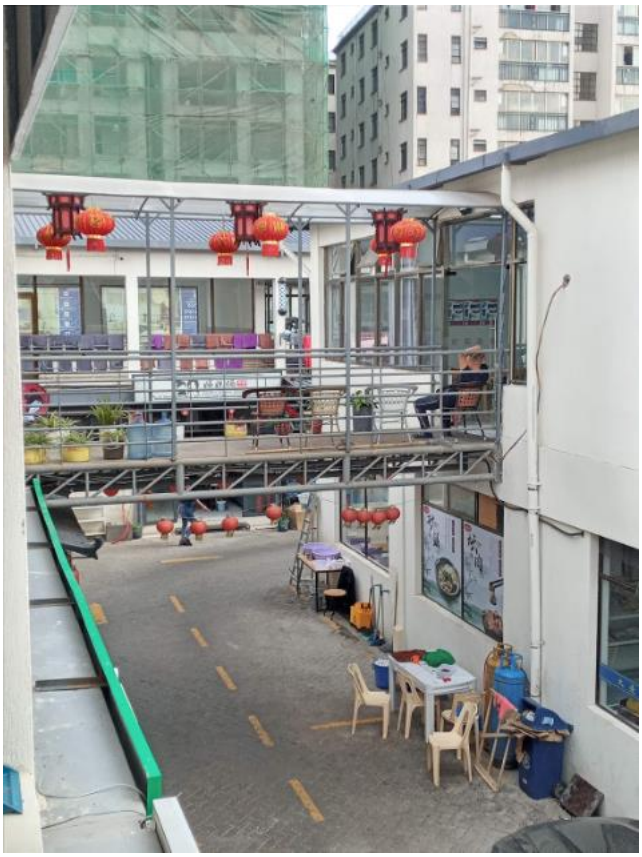

Figure 4. China City, the newest section of Kilimani's Chinatown, as photographed in 2023.

From my home base in *Zhonghua Jie*—particularly a takeaway shop I am calling Duck Express (see Chapter 3)—I followed food chains and social flows to see where they might lead. I ate with different Kenyan and Chinese friends (or by myself) at most of the Chinese restaurants in Kilimani. I ventured farther afield to visit workplaces, factories, lakes, farms, and sometimes people's homes. As threads of narrative, investigative, and analytical interest emerged, I tugged those threads and followed them as far as I could. Some of those threads became the material foundations for chapters of this dissertation, including duck farming, which appears in Chapters 2 and 4, the crayfish supply chain (Chapter 5), and Kenyan purple tea (Chapter 6). Other threads have woven their way more abstractly throughout my work, including the themes of suspicion and humor, notions of health and contamination, and ideas about neo- and post-coloniality.

The conversations and unstructured interviews that fill this dissertation were conducted primarily in English and Mandarin Chinese, with some conversations in Kiswahili as well. Many (if not most) conversations included elements from multiple languages. A few interviewees (particularly in Chapter 5) spoke Kikuyu, and their words were translated into English by my Naivasha-based research assistant. I did not use a research assistant in Nairobi. All interviews were transcribed in Google Docs and analyzed iteratively for themes and patterns in an ethnographic process that Cerwonka and Malkki (2008) describe as an "uneven tempo of analytical understanding and systematic research" (5).

The multifaceted and multilingual relationships described throughout the following pages were sometimes volatile and unpleasant. Such turbulent relations are difficult to write about. The multidimensional racial politics of the China-Kenya encounter are a minefield of intersecting forms of structural violence, including postcolonial geopolitical inequities, global anti-Black racism, and global anti-East Asian racism. Conducting fieldwork amid and after the Covid-19 pandemic, these structures often felt even more acutely fraught. I should warn readers that this dissertation contains strong language and strong feelings of anger, betrayal, and hate. Although I have decided to censor racial slurs with asterisks, I have also decided not to write around the margins of the very real, complex, and multidirectional inequalities and injustices that my interlocutors demonstrated and described.

My goal throughout this research has been to avoid privileging the Chinese perspective over the Kenyan perspective, and vice versa. Recognizing that a perfect balance is impossible—particularly since my fieldwork was conducted entirely in Kenya, not in China—I hope readers will recognize the complexity of the relations described here and forgive my missteps. At times it also felt impossible to ignore the weight of moving through Nairobi as a white woman, following

in the footsteps not only of white settler colonialism and neoliberal American imperialism, but also of white anthropologists probing into the private lives of people in the Global South to profit from their local expertise (Gupta and Stoolman 2022) and expose their personal idiosyncrasies, including their prejudices. To this I can only say that I have done my best to represent my interlocutors' full human selves with depth and nuance. Many of them revealed opinions and behaviors that I find personally offensive or even abhorrent. While I cannot claim that this work will alleviate racism or make the lives of my interlocutors easier in any material or physical way, I do hope that by telling their stories, I can begin to chip away at some of the ossified stereotypes that overshadow the field of China-Africa relations, whether those stereotypes are perpetuated by Chinese voices, voices from the US or the Global North, or voices from Kenya or Africa more broadly.

I should also address my use of the terms "Chinese" and "Kenyan." Each of these terms are ethno-national generalizations, obscuring a wide range of cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and other heterogenous qualities. Kenya is a multi-ethnic nation with over 70 self-defined communities, many of which speak their own languages. The largest community, the Bantu-speaking Kikuyu, comprises only about 17% of Kenya's total population. In China, meanwhile, the widespread use of Standard Mandarin belies a vast ethno-linguistic diversity across geographic areas, as well as variation along lines of class and education. Although 92% of Chinese people (and likely an even larger percentage of Chinese people in Kenya) are ethnically Han, a college-educated Beijinger might have little in common with a Min-speaking line cook from Fujian. Similarly, a Luhya engineer at a Chinese company in Nairobi has little in common with a Kikuyu crayfish trapper in rural central Kenya. There is also plenty of slippage along the Chinese-Kenyan barrier itself. Mr. Wong, the owner of a Hong Kong cafe in Nairobi, is a third-

generation Kenyan who speaks fluent Swahili; many Kenyans who work in Chinese companies attended higher education in China and speak fluent Chinese. Cross-racial marriages between Kenyan and Chinese people exist, as do the children of such relationships who might have widely varying skin tones, language abilities, and degrees of comfort within different cultural milieus.

Despite this complexity, however, "Chinese" and "Kenyan" remain highly useful categories. I draw inspiration from Osella and Osella (2008), who write: "We continually trip over the idea that, as postcolonial anthropologists, we should not contribute to objectifying practices nor take 'communities' as objects of study…But this would be utterly absurd as things stand (2)." People rely on these sorts of categories to make sense of themselves and others, and it would be silly to pretend otherwise. I write about Kenyan and Chinese communities not because the boundary between these two groups is "real" or immutable, but because it is highly salient to daily life in Kilimani. This boundary is a frequent object of discussion by people of many identities and backgrounds. It is continually reinscribed and reinforced by daily habits including food provision, cooking, serving, and eating. Acknowledging and working with this boundary, therefore, allows for a deeper understanding of what people value, fear, and hope for in their daily lives.

Structure of the Dissertation

From the abstract political discourse of Wajackoyah and his supporters, to the mundane details of what a Chinese worker eats for lunch, foodways traverse scales and inscribe all human and non-human participants into an interconnected web of material-semiotic being. In his description of multi-scalar ethnography, Biao Xiang (2013) emphasizes that "scale" is not "self-

evidently out there," but is rather an abstraction, a way of ordering and understanding "the spatial reach of actions." Whether the "action" is eating, speaking, fishing, or policy-making, its impact reverberates across material-semiotic scales, generating meaning across time and space. This dissertation is organized around salient scales of meaning-making that emerged through my ethnographic materials. The chapters that follow loosely adhere to a nested scalar structure that shifts focus from the micro to the macro, even as the material and the semiotic remain entangled throughout. Taken together, a multi-scalar picture emerges of how racial-ecological politics are negotiated along Chinese foodways in Kenya.

Chapter 2 focuses on tasting and eating, the most intimate and interior aspects of the foodway. In an analysis of unfamiliar cooking and food aversions across Chinese-Kenyan encounters, this chapter argues that the concept of "Chinese food" emerges as an object of interest through combinations of material affordances and semiotic fears. I explore how culinary norms and particular cosmologies of eating—what David Sutton (2010) terms "gustemologies"—shape the ways in which Chinese and Kenyan residents of Nairobi approach the consumption of "strange" foods. The chapter draws from theories of new materialism and traverses a variety of Chinese restaurants in Nairobi, serving everything from niche Fujianese specialties to fusion cuisine catering to Kenyan palates. I demonstrate how everyday practices of eating help to establish and strengthen notions of self vs. other in the contested food landscape of multicultural Nairobi.

Chapter 3 analyzes interpersonal interactions between Chinese and Kenyans in restaurant settings. Focusing on a small takeaway Chinese restaurant in the *Zhonghua Jie* complex in Kilimani, I build on Nowicka's (2020) notion of "thin conviviality" to develop a theory of "minimal conviviality" in the multilingual workplace. I analyze multilingual expressions of

humor and anger as a way to make sense of how cross-barrier stereotypes are constructed and reinforced. Like a microcosm of the larger China-Kenya geopolitical relationship, the interpersonal relations examined here are often tense and sensitive, devolving easily into generalizations, disputes, and refusals.

Zooming out to focus on a broader structure of feeling of mutual suspicion, Chapter 4 examines the intertwined notions of corruption, informality, and distrust. In both China and Kenya, preoccupations with fake, counterfeit, and adulterated food pervades society and undermines trust in the visible and the explicit. This doubling of the real and the fake, the facade and the interior, recurs as a theme throughout contemporary discourse in Nairobi, and finds purchase in the uncertainty and suspicion surrounding recent Chinese activities in the city. I focus particularly on Chinese-imported ducks and fish to demonstrate how a broad and multidirectional ethos of suspicion emerges through the corruption claims that Chinese and Kenyans make about each other. Throughout this chapter, ambivalence floats through the narratives I relay, characterizing a dominant stance towards relationality and morality, and perhaps to Kenya-China relations as a whole.

Chapter 5 moves beyond the human to encompass the enmeshment of foodways within complex multispecies ecosystems. The chapter focuses particularly on the political ecology of the Louisiana red swamp crayfish, a nonnative freshwater crustacean found in Kenya that has become an immensely popular food among Nairobi's Chinese residents. I analyze how the politics of invasive species management have intersected with racialized fears about Chinese exploitation, leading Kenyan fishers and trappers to change how they value and manage the crayfish. The chapter follows my investigation of the elusive crayfish supply chain along remote waterways in central Kenya, where an underground market continues to supply Chinese

restaurants outside the control of local authorities. Neither indisputably invasive nor conclusively benevolent, crayfish in Kenya draw attention to the inextricability of the semiotic from the material.

Finally, Chapter 6 traverses the multinational scale in its exploration of Chinese-Kenyan collaborations in the tea industry. Taking as its material anchor a unique variety of tea called purple tea, this chapter examines how Kenya's postcolonial tea industry and traditional Chinese tea culture become entangled with imaginings of health and national identity. As a remnant of British colonial cash-crop economics, Kenya's mass-market tea industry has been targeted for reform as part of the nation's Vision 2030 Plan. Part of that reform has included the strengthening of the national identity of Kenyan tea on the global market by paradoxically embracing Chinese tea expertise, technologies, and markets. These entanglements of the national and the international reveal a powerful hope among purple tea stakeholders of a postcolonial future in which Afrocentrism and global cosmopolitanism are not mutually exclusive.

I conclude with reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic, ethnography about small and marginal industries, and the notion of neo-colonialism. To the latter point, Chinese presence in Kenya has frequently been compared to British colonization; while the resonance between these two phenomena is real, however, many Kenyans perceive China as a different kind of threat. Disgusting food, shoddy construction, counterfeit goods—whether true or false, the stickiness of these stereotypes helps to defang Chinese authority on the continent. Although the opacity of Chinese social relations and state actions arouses suspicion, I reflect on how my interlocutors sometimes found a subversive power in the humor and disgust they felt at the perceived absurdities of Chinese appetites and behaviors.

Overall, this dissertation suggests that food constitutes an essential but overlooked facet of the contentious geopolitical relationship between China and Kenya (as well as other African countries). Far from trivial or frivolous, food emerges not only as stereotyped rhetoric, but also as a potent site of cross-cultural encounter and an industry in which thousands of people directly or indirectly earn their livelihoods. Beyond the political economies of supply chains, food matters to geopolitics for its propensity to inspire strong feelings of disgust and nostalgia, as well as alienation and connection. Food's aesthetic and sensory qualities affect the politics of daily life, from the valuation of tea leaves to the harshness of fisheries management. As one of the most easily recognizable signs of Chinese presence in places like Kilimani, food becomes a metonym for China. The perceived strangeness of Chinese food in Kenya becomes a source of both intrigue and cynicism about Chinese presence more broadly. Arousing disgust, humor, and mystique, Chinese food induces Kenyans and Chinese alike to think critically and ambivalently about their globally entangled postcolonial future.

Figure 5. Along the street near Yaya Centre in Kilimani (2023).

CHAPTER II

Chinese Food in Kenya: Gustemology, Materiality, and Strangeness

Min yi shi wei tian 民以食为天: "The people see food as heaven." This idiom (*chengyu*) was taught to me by a young Chinese man working in his family's restaurant in Kilimani's Chinatown shopping complex. The restaurant's tiny storefront stood out from the row of businesses because of the waist-high traditional clay jar that stood by the door. Inside the jar, insulated from Nairobi's cool June evenings, were individually covered portion-sized clay pots of *waguantang*, an herbal chicken soup from the inland Chinese province of Jiangxi. The young man beamed with pride as he served soup to the restaurant's small crowd of loyal customers, Chinese foodies in Nairobi who appreciated the food's medicinal qualities and devotion to traditional Jiangxi flavors. He ran the restaurant with his mother and father, both from rural backgrounds with little formal education.

One of the restaurant's regular foodie customers was Mr. Hua, originally from Fujian province bordering Jiangxi, who now managed a chain of Chinese-owned safari hotels in Kenya. Mr. Hua came here to eat lunch every chance he could. He told me that the clay-pot soup tasted exactly the same (*yimoyiyang*) as how it tasted in China. Mr. Hua was also impressed by the restaurant's tofu, imported from China, which was perfect in its absolute flavorlessness (*wanquan meiyou weidao*). This allowed it to absorb the full flavors of the dish's complex seasoning. Although this restaurant was small and unassuming, he declared its quality unmatched in Nairobi.

Mr. Hua had tried bringing some of his Kenyan colleagues there to eat with him, but the food proved challenging. “First,” he told me, “it’s because they aren’t used to the chili.” Second, he said while laughing and miming with his hands, “they eat with their hands. They don’t know how to use chopsticks.” The culinary differences were too great for his colleagues to accept, Mr. Hua told me, and they were unable to enjoy their meal. I witnessed a similar situation myself the next time I went to the restaurant, when I overheard the group at the next table discussing the food. A Chinese businessman was treating his African colleagues to lunch. The businessman’s interpreter, originally from Ethiopia, enjoyed the food because he used to live in China. Their Kenyan colleague, however, began laughing with embarrassment after one small taste. He simply couldn’t do it! His stir-fried chicken, which had been chosen for him as a safe and mild dish, was too different from what he was used to. The Chinese colleague laughed graciously with him and the owner brought over a plain bowl of white rice to eat instead.

This restaurant scene stuck out to me because the restaurant’s “Chineseness” seemed to overwhelm the Kenyan diner’s ability to eat a dish containing mostly familiar ingredients. Interestingly, I had also witnessed the exact opposite phenomenon. A Kenyan driver for a Chinese company once ate a simple chicken dish with rice at a Sichuanese restaurant while his boss dined with friends (and me) at the next table. When driving me home later, I asked how his meal had been. “I didn’t want Chinese food,” he told me, “so I just requested chicken and rice… I don’t like Chinese food.” I remembered hearing another Kenyan acquaintance tell me something similar. She worked for a Chinese company, and I asked if she had ever eaten Chinese food before. “No,” she told me. “I ate in a Chinese restaurant once, but it wasn’t Chinese food.” I asked what she had eaten. “I had rice, beef, and vegetables,” she replied.

In these examples, as well as in the opposite case above where the Kenyan diner refused to eat chicken, the food's materiality has been severed from its semiotic meanings such as those indexed by setting and national origin. In the first case, the "Chineseness" of the setting and cooking style, perhaps including smells like soy sauce and ginger, outweighed the familiarity of the chicken meat itself, rendering it inedible. In the second case, the familiarity of the ingredients (chicken, beef, rice, vegetables) outweighed the strangeness of the seasonings and the setting, rendering the food "not-Chinese." Both examples demonstrate how Chinese food, as both a set of material-sensory qualities and as a metonym for Chinese people and Chinese presence in Kenya more broadly, has come to be defined by its strangeness. If a familiar food is cooked in a Chinese restaurant, it can become too strange to eat. Conversely, if a food consumed in a Chinese restaurant does not seem strange enough, it cannot be Chinese.

To make sense of this phenomenon, this chapter investigates the material affordances and semiotic meanings that have come to produce "Chinese food" as a recognizable category in Nairobi. Whether a nostalgic and elevated art form as for Mr. Hua, an object of fear and xenophobia, or an aspirational cuisine for Nairobi's middle classes, "Chinese food" is never a neutral category. It is heavily laden with the baggage of Kenya-China geopolitics, the burden of racial stereotypes, and the power of notions of health and the body, not to mention the weight of thousands of years of discourse and discernment around food within China itself.

I have already explained in my introduction why I chose "foodways" as the guiding theme for the dissertation, encompassing food as material and representational, as well as the product of emergent economies of humans and nonhumans that bring the ingredients from the world to the table. In this chapter, I focus on the consumption end of Chinese foodways in Nairobi: food as it is eaten; food as cuisine; food as sensory pleasure. Many scholars have

employed various terms to describe how food and its cultural meanings shape and reflect our stances towards morality, power, and identity, from "gastropolitics" (Appadurai 1981) and the "gastropolitical complex" (Garcia 2021) to "foodviews" (Trubek 2008) and "culinary capital" (Naccarato and LeBesco 2013). In this chapter, I borrow David Sutton's (2010) term "gustemology" to describe the "ways in which food is central to cosmologies, worldviews, and ways of life" (215). In a later publication, Sutton defines gustemology as "a play on terms used by anthropologists like 'acoustemology,' to suggest cultural focus on different sensory ratios" (2023, Note 7). For my purposes, Sutton's term best captures the centrality of taste (gustation)—that is, the discernment of palatability based on sensory affordances—to understandings of our place in the universe (cosmology). More ontological and all-encompassing than terms like "gastropolitics," the concept of gustemology orients us towards the universe of memories, feelings, and ideas invoked by the act of eating.

This chapter first explores the materiality of food in more depth to establish how the sensory interplays with the representational to create meaning. Next, I explore how Kenyan and Chinese gustemologies come to reinforce Chinese food in Kenya as an object of both fear and fascination. This includes an examination of cultural orientations to food in both China and Kenya, focusing on points of contention when gustemologies clash in Kenya-China encounters and interactions. Finally, I examine the recent emergence of internationalized Chinese fusion cuisine as a prestigious choice for Nairobi's middle and upper classes.

Food and new materialism

Within the larger category of material culture, food and drink are fascinatingly ephemeral, "a kind of material culture made to be destroyed through ingestion into the human

body—they become part of our very being (Dietler 2020, 119). As "embodied material culture" (ibid), food can never be entirely symbolic or representational. Rather, food is always sensory and corporeal as well. We feel its material qualities in the mouth and in the stomach, even as its discursive meanings spin out into universes of metaphors and stereotypes. Food thus lends itself well to analysis in the tradition of new materialism, in which objects are "much more varied, much more uncertain, much more open, and deploy many more types of agencies than the narrow role given to them in empiricist accounts" (Latour 2005, 111). In this line of analysis, the materiality of food provides affordances that have the potential to transform how the "perceptible" is incorporated into wider social "projects" (Weiss 2022 1312). Some anthropologists assert that these affordances are inherent throughout the nonhuman world and can be directly sensed prior to interpretation (e.g. Ingold 2018, Pink 2015). Others argue that sensation does not preexist interpretation, but rather emerges through a semiotic process of filtering the world through socially circulating categories of meaning (e.g. Weiss 2022, Keane 2018). Certainly, semiotic interpretation can sometimes shape sensory perception, as when the Kenyan diner above refused to perceive chicken cooked in a Chinese restaurant as edible: his notions of Chineseness and strangeness obscured and negated the dish's material properties. In the reverse examples, however, when the Kenyan diners ate familiar food that they insisted could not be Chinese, the sensory and the semiotic were more difficult to untangle. Were these cases of the food's materiality—its appearance, flavors, and textures—asserting itself and usurping the diners' preexisting notions of "Chinese food"? Or was this a case of signs against signs, in which the food's adherence to the familiar/known/Kenyan outweighed its alleged alignment to the unfamiliar/foreign/Chinese?

Either way, the existence of these two diametrically opposed examples suggests that no "side" of the phenomenology debate is right or wrong, but rather that many different types of material-semiotic entanglements are possible. Like any path dependency, however, certain patterns of recognition over time come to "stick" (Weiss 2022) to certain material affordances, reifying and reinforcing categories. In this way, many different variations and instantiations of meat-wrapped-in-dough, for example, might be recognizable as Kenyan or South Asian "samosas." The potential to be a samosa, however, is never guaranteed merely by its meat or its dough. If it is served in a restaurant with Chinese-language signage, it might be considered a fried dumpling or *jiaozi* and thus foreign, even inedible.

What interests me more than the primacy or subordination of sensory perception is the persistent fear and intrigue that circulate around "Chinese food." I take inspiration from Jasbir Puar's (2008) analysis of Sikh turbans in post-9-11 USA, in which she examines how the turban's "stickiness" accrues fear and attention over time, marking the wearer of a turban not only as "other," but also as potential "terrorist." Puar draws from Sara Ahmed's (2004) analysis of hate in pointing out that this fear does not "reside in a given subject or object" (such as a Sikh man or his turban), but rather "circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement" (Ahmed 2004, 119, in Puar 2008, 60). Mingwei Huang (2019), building on Ahmed and Puar, examines how the plastic woven bags known throughout South Africa as "China bags" come to mark their African migrant carriers as foreign and poor. Huang examines how "fear, anxiety, and hatred – emotions animating xenophobia – circulate around the China bag, and in so doing, stick together African migrant bodies and signs of foreignness" (2019). The material affordances of the bag, its colorfulness and sturdiness and ubiquity, transform through a

dialectic of the foreign and the familiar, marking the persons of the people who carry it as recognizably Other.

In a similar way, I argue that Chinese food becomes "animated" (Huang 2019) by the anxieties of Kenyans. As these anxieties circulate through the material affordances of Chinese food—its spiciness, strong smells, and use of strange species—the food acquires those same signifiers used to justify fear of Chinese *people* as a threatening presence in Kenya: incomprehensibility, dangerous potency, and disgustingness. As with Sikh turbans in the US, Chinese food in Nairobi has become something like "a perverse fetish object—a point of fixation…a kind of centripetal force, a strange attractor through which the density of anxiety accrues and accumulates" (Puar 2008, 66). But while a turban can be unraveled[16] and a bag can be put down, food once swallowed is digested and incorporated into the body itself. Eating that which is foreign is therefore simultaneously mundane, intimate, and incredibly risky. Eating is tied up not only with notions of self vs. other, but also with feelings of bodily wellness and pleasure (or sickness and pain).

Also like the Sikh turban, part of Chinese food's agential power in Kenya comes from its importance *within* Chinese culture itself. Just as turbans are religiously and culturally consequential within Sikh communities, so is Chinese food an important aspect of Chinese culture, as conveyed through the idiom "the people see food as heaven." The enthusiasm of Chinese people like Mr. Hua, the man who praised the Jiangxi restaurant's flavorless tofu, helps to reinforce Chinese food's prominence as a "fetish object." Attention accrues to the specialness and strangeness of Chinese food every time people like Mr. Hua savor a unique dish, practice

[16] Of course, the weight of a Kenyan person refusing or denouncing Chinese food does not begin to approach the violence incurred by the forced removal of a turban, which "is the paramount insult to the wearer, the most humiliating form of disrespect" (Puar 2008, 56).

discernment in their choice of restaurant, discuss food with their Kenyan colleagues, or try to win them over by taking them to lunch. As I will examine in the following sections, conspicuous differences in the gustemologies of China and Kenya help to magnify Chinese food's magnetic strangeness in the context of Nairobi.

Gustemologies of China and Kenya

Joseph, a Maasai tour guide based in the touristy lake town of Naivasha, had encountered many Chinese tourists throughout his career, as well as visitors from all over the world. One of the most curious things about the Chinese, he told me, was their willingness to eat all kinds of species. "I was shocked when a Chinese tourist in Hells Gate [a nearby national park] saw a lizard, and said, 'I can't believe people are starving in Kenya when you could just eat these,' or the hyraxes." I laughed, remembering when on my first trip to Kenya in 2016, a Chinese tourist in Maasai Mara National Park had said something very similar to me: "[Kenyans] keep all those cows and goats even with so many wildebeests and zebras right there next to them. They don't even eat warthogs!" Joseph did not laugh, however. He appeared genuinely disturbed by the idea of eating a lizard or a hyrax, even out of desperation. As he explained to me, "Maasai believe cows, goats, and sheep were given to them by God, and no other animal can be eaten." Although he had personally relaxed his beliefs since moving to Naivasha and working with people from many different cultures—he now enjoyed eating tilapia and even crayfish—he still shuddered at the thought of eating wild game meat.

Joseph's gustemology might have been particularly circumscribed as a Maasai, but his disgust at the apparent willingness of Chinese to eat various animals was shared by Kenyans from other communities too. In Chapter 5, I explore this disgust in more detail in the particular

case of the crayfish. For now, however, I will examine the notion of omnivorousness as a particular gustemological value. I argue that omnivorousness as a Chinese culinary ideal has emerged out of specific and culturally constructed notions of medicine and the body, as well as class and cosmopolitan cultural capital. I do not mean to suggest that omnivorousness is universally embraced by all Chinese people. However, to the extent that it was explicitly referenced as a marker of Chineseness by my Chinese interlocutors, it stands in sharp contrast to the culinary norms expressed by most Kenyans.

Part of this self-professed Chinese omnivorousness could certainly be explained by the logics of class inequality and social reproduction, which extend far beyond China alone. Many scholars, including Peterson (1992), Johnston and Baumann (2007), and Ray (2016), have identified "omnivorousness" as a key feature of middle and upper class distinction in the United States and even across cultural contexts. Their analyses build on Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), which identifies cultural capital accrued not only from rare and luxurious ingredients, but also from foreign cuisine and even rustic "peasant dishes" (32). Likewise, contemporary "foodie" culture is often analyzed through its adventurousness and expansiveness in the pursuit of cosmopolitan ideals. A similar logic holds true in 21st-century China. Rising incomes have corresponded to rising tastes not only for exotic seafood and meat (Osburg 2013) and global markers of wealth like French wine (Wang 2017) and Western-style coffee shops (Zhi and Chen 2021), but also for quirkier and less overtly prestigious things like ethnic minority cuisines (Tuxun 2022), and social media-fueled food trends like stinky Liuzhou snail soup (Sau-Wa 2024).

In Nairobi, members of the Chinese community tended to be richer (in all three of Bourdieu's senses of economic, cultural, and social capital) than many of the Kenyans they

interacted with on a daily basis. They were all living abroad, for one thing. They were almost certainly employed or engaged in money-making ventures that connected them with a network of fellow Chinese people, strengthened through the bonds of Chinese social reciprocity known as *guanxi*. Whether they were raised in poverty or not—and many of Kenya's Chinese residents were—by the time I met them in Nairobi, they had escaped the confines of their natal villages, broadened their opportunities, and interacted at least minimally with non-Chinese people. Like the nouveau riche classes within China (Osburg 2024, O'Regan et al. 2019), these expats often distinguished themselves from their humbler roots in part through conspicuous omnivorousness. This could include dining at Nairobi's Chinese restaurants representing many different regions of China, hosting banquets with seafood fresh from the Swahili coast, and even experimenting with Nairobi's non-Chinese offerings. Kenyan beer and *chai* (black tea with milk and sugar) were widely enjoyed by Nairobi's expat Chinese community. Nearly everyone had sampled *nyama choma* and *ugali* at least once. Some Chinese people, especially those from rural or less educated backgrounds, decided after a sample or two that they didn't like Kenyan food. "Simple," was a common descriptor, as well as "boring," or even "like children's food." Other Chinese people, however, particularly those from educated backgrounds who spoke English and interacted broadly outside the Chinese community, enjoyed Kenyan food as well as Western-style pastries at Artcaffe (a cafe chain), injera at Kilimani's Ethiopian restaurants, and Nairobi's many other multicultural offerings.

My friend Ying, a thirty-year-old Chinese woman living in Kilimani, in many ways exemplified the omnivorous ideals of contemporary Chinese class distinction. Ying had been raised in a poor farming village in Sichuan Province, before studying English in university and getting a job as a translator with a Chinese tech company in Nairobi. This was a common

pathway towards social mobility among Chinese expats in Kenya, many of whom stayed in shared company housing, ate meals for free in the company canteen, and socialized primarily with other Chinese coworkers. Many employees of large Chinese state-owned and private companies live out their work contracts without ever leaving this bubble. Some housing units do not have a kitchen, encouraging reliance on the in-house cafeteria. Family housing is usually not an option, which means most employees are either single or leave spouses and children behind in China. The working hours are long, often adhering to the common Chinese schedule known as "996": 9am until 9pm six days per week. Employees can explore Kilimani's Chinatown on their off days and travel to vacation spots like Lake Naivasha, Mombasa, or Maasai Mara National Park for holidays, but they often stay within a familiar world of company drivers, work-sponsored events, and Chinese food.

For Ying, however, this world eventually began to feel suffocating. She quit her job and moved out of the dormitory, first to a cramped studio, and then to a simple but spacious flat that she shared with an ever-rotating cast of young NGO workers, interns, and graduate students from all over the world.[17] Money was tight as she scraped together freelance trade deals with Chinese clients and sales of her artwork and handicrafts. She spent as much time as she could on her passion projects: learning Japanese and French, making and selling whimsical fabric and clay handicrafts, and opening her own pottery studio. Her bedroom was filled with sewing projects and half-finished clay models of mythological creatures. While she perhaps lost some social prestige among many in the Chinese community—her friend Ouyang often accused her of being unrealistic and unserious in her life ambitions—she gained a new kind of cultural capital among Kilimani's international young professionals. This community included interns at the United

[17] I never lived in that apartment, but I spent many evenings there cooking with Ying and hanging out with her flatmates, playing scrabble and singing karaoke.

Nations and various NGOs, foreign teachers, and graduate students (like myself). It also included a different class of Chinese expats who had studied in Western countries, spoke fluent English, and consumed Western popular media. These expats tended to work in Kenya as journalists, at the UN, or in the nonprofit sector.

In her new shared apartment, Ying invoked Bourdieu's prototypical starving artist as she embraced omnivorousness while trying to save money. She bought food in bulk and stored the boxes in her bedroom. She mostly cooked simple Chinese food at home, but she also liked to experiment with ugali, local shellfish and fish, as well as international dishes like avocado toast, colorful smoothie bowls, and omelets. She liked to document her more photogenic creations on Wechat for her Chinese friends and on Instagram for her international friends. As Peng (2019) writes, social media provides an outlet for China's *xiaozi*—petit bourgeois or urban middle classes—to distinguish their taste for cosmopolitan consumer culture. For Ying, a special occasion meant hosting an elaborate dinner at home for her multicultural friend group, going out for Chinese hotpot or barbecue,[18] or perhaps trying a meal at a Kenyan or international restaurant like the newly opened Portuguese-African fusion bar down the road.

These experiences contrasted with those of many African Nairobians, particularly those working in low-paying jobs in Chinatown like restaurant servers, cooks, and drivers. Many of these Nairobians were raised in urban poverty, while others had migrated recently from rural areas across Kenya. In alignment with people in subordinated class positions all over the world, the priorities of many Nairobians likely ranked affordability, quantity, and familiarity of food above such considerations as novelty, rarity, or prestige (Naccarato and LeBesco 2013). As

[18] Unlike the large quantities of blackened, lightly seasoned meat associated with Kenyan barbecue (*nyama choma*), Chinese barbecue involves skewering and roasting small pieces of heavily salted and spiced food—lamb meat, chicken gizzards, garlic cloves, green onions, and much more.

Tannahill (1972) writes in *Food in History*, "A nearness of hunger breeds conservatism. Only the well-fed can afford to try something new, because only they can afford to leave it on the plate if they dislike it" (393, in Naccarato and LeBesco 2013). This logic seems to prevail in Kenya, where over one third of the population lives below the poverty line and nearly two million people experience acute food insecurity (World Food Programme 2024). For many working Nairobians during my fieldwork, a celebratory meal meant nyama choma or perhaps biryani (Swahili Coast-style rice with meat), while an aspirational middle class lifestyle included Western-inspired fast food like chips (french fries) and fried chicken. It was a small subset of Nairobi's elite that enjoyed the city's more adventurous and cosmopolitan options like sushi, tacos, and of course Chinese restaurants. When I saw Kenyans eating and enjoying Chinese food, I often came to learn that they had studied or worked in China. Culinary omnivorousness among Kenyans thus seemed to correlate with multicultural exposure and global middle and upper class sensibilities.

Omnivorousness in Chinese gustemology

Although omnivorousness clearly relates to wealth and class, this explanation is not enough if we wish to understand Chinese food culture. A very different—even contradictory—logic was displayed by the Chinese man quoted above, who could not understand why Kenyans weren't eating lizards and hyraxes. In China, a nation just two generations removed from the largest famine in human history, omnivorous eating tends to be associated not (only) with economic privilege, but also with pragmatic frugality. From this perspective, the question isn't about whether or not one can afford to be *adventurous* with one's food choices, but about whether or not one can afford to be *picky*.

This logic was also displayed by Ying, who was always on the lookout for creative ways to save money and supplement her diet. She collected wild mushrooms from the side of the road to cook at home and called meat wholesalers to source unwanted materials like fat. She once commented under a Facebook post about invasive apple snails in central Kenya, offering to collect them to eat. "Apple snails are such a delicacy in my hometown!" she wrote. "Since I'm helping you with your problem, how much would you like to pay for the Pest Control Service?" Her post elicited many reactions both humorous and serious, but I do not know if she ever succeeded in procuring the snails. Once, walking near the Nairobi Arboretum, Ying and I spotted a yellow fruit growing in the roadside hedges. Her phone app identified them as "kei apples," native to southern and eastern Africa, technically edible although very sour. She began excitedly picking them and filling her pockets. A Kenyan lady walking down the road stopped to look at us. She appeared concerned. "Are you eating those?" She asked. We tried to assure her that they were safe to eat, but she remained skeptical and eventually continued on her way. Later, Ying told me that she had cooked the fruits into a jam. "People think I'm crazy for eating these wild things," Ying told me. "Even back at home in China, my mom thought I was crazy because I was always bringing back wild grasses or something to eat." Although Ying's omnivorousness was exceptional—even her mother thought so!— the ethos behind her experimentation echoes the same gustemology expressed by the Chinese man who was surprised that Kenyans do not eat lizards and hyraxes.

This pragmatic omnivorousness, born out of lack rather than privilege, is deeply rooted in Chinese notions of food, medicine, and the body. Chinese cuisine is inextricably embedded within the logic of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). In TCM, all food is medicine. All medicines are characterized by a five-way typology of flavors—sour, sweet, bitter, pungent, and

salty—each of which corresponds to one of the five physical elements—wood, earth, fire, metal, and water, respectively, as well as to the five traditional bodily systems (Farquhar 2002). A given food's medicinal qualities are determined not only by its ingredients, but also by its flavors, which themselves "have powerful physiological efficacies" (Farquhar 2002 66). Flavor, nourishment, and healthfulness are therefore inseparable categories. All food has the ability to *yangsheng*, to nurture or nourish the human body, in ways that depend upon the balance between the opposing forces of *yin* (cold, dark, feminine) and *yang* (hot, bright, masculine). Since different foods affect yin and yang differently, they must be eaten in balance. Although the average Chinese person might not be well versed in TCM's complex typologies, the basics of *yangsheng* are well known among laypeople and are a frequent topic of conversation. For example, a Chinese person might choose to avoid spicy food one day because they *shanghuo*, "are overheated," a condition characterized not by literal heat but by dryness, swelling, pimples, canker sores, and other symptoms. Likewise, my female Chinese friends in Nairobi often adhered to the common norm that menstruating women should avoid cold food and drink, since the body at that time is in a state of depleted *yang*.

The omnivorousness of Chinese cuisine is related to *yangsheng*. A common joke in China goes like this: "We [or sometimes a subgroup like 'the Cantonese'] eat everything with legs except tables, and everything that flies except airplanes." No categorical food taboos exist in China of the sort analogous to the Jewish kosher laws, Muslim halal laws, or the American social taboos against eating dogs and horses (Wei 2016). This is because categorical prohibitions do not make sense given the different proportions of *yin* and *yang* required by different bodies at different times. Certain foods may be considered taboo for pregnant women, for example, or for people suffering from specific ailments, but these are limited in scope to the needs of the

individual. As a Chinese interlocutor Mr. Shi explained to me, “Chinese food is so broad, it takes any ingredients as long as it is good for the body. Food culture cannot be extricated from health culture (*Shi wenhua libukai yangsheng wenhua*).” Foods are judged by their flavors, heat, and other qualities as they pertain to health and the balance of the body. They are rarely judged by their species, by any symbolic religious marker, or by notions of cleanliness or uncleanliness at the categorical level. There is nothing strictly taboo, in other words, about eating a table or an airplane. The only reason why the proverbial Chinese person in the joke does not eat these objects is because varnished wood and metal and engine fuel do not nourish the body.

The omnivorousness encouraged by *yangsheng* can speak back to and strengthen class performances of cosmopolitan “foodie” culture. A study by Oleschuk (2017), for example, found that Chinese-Canadians sometimes drew from their Chinese culinary identities as a way to fit themselves into Toronto’s “dominant foodie narrative of exotic food adventuring” (224). Ying also united these two aspects of her culinary identity together when she added her homemade kei apple jam to a smoothie or chose to celebrate her birthday at Carnivore, Nairobi’s famously touristy Euro-African restaurant serving crocodile skewers and ostrich meatballs. This multifaceted omnivorousness highlights what is perhaps the most important aspect of the Chinese gustemology: food’s utmost centrality to the contemporary Chinese ethos. As Ellen Oxfeld (2017) wrote, “From China’s extremely varied and elaborate cuisine to memories of starvation and want, food assumes a central place in Chinese life.” (3). She quotes archeologist K.C. Chang: “Few can take exception to the statement that few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese” (in Oxfeld 2017, 3). Far from being a mere caloric necessity to consume unthinkingly, food is worthy of careful attention (*jiangjiu*), and something to mindfully and pleasurably taste (*pin*), as a connoisseur might.

This is not to say that Chinese people do not have culinary preferences, of course. Most Chinese expats in Nairobi, regardless of class status, still preferred to eat familiar Chinese food most of the time, whether provided by their workplace cafeterias or cooked themselves at home. As one older Chinese businessman explained to me, after having lived in Kenya for over thirty years, he still preferred the food of his hometown in northern China. As he told me:

> Whatever you eat until the age of twelve influences your food intake for the rest of your life, like speaking a language. So even after living here so long, I like *ugali* and *nyama choma*, but can't eat it every day, I still prefer my northern (*beifang*) food like noodles, buns, dumplings. Kenyans also can eat Chinese food once in a while, but not every day. Everybody in the world is like that with food.

Despite this reflection, and despite the myriad of individual tastes and preferences that make it impossible to generalize about 1.4 billion Chinese people, I can nevertheless safely say that food—food talk, food philosophy, and food categorization—is more explicit and prominent in China than in Kenya.

To give a sense of this explicitness, the culinary landscape of China is traditionally codified into a scheme of nested types and subtypes. Most simply, people in China cite a broad maxim that food is spicy in the east, sweet in the south, sour in the west, and salty in the north. Rice (*fan*) is the dominant staple food in the south, and wheat (*mian*) is the dominant staple food in the north (often in the form of steamed bread, noodles, and dumplings). These broad categorizations give way to further distinctions between the Eight Great Cuisines (*ba da caixi*) of China. These are: Chuan (Sichuanese), known for strong flavors and the heavy use of chili and numbing Sichuan peppercorn; Hui (from Anhui), known for wild herbs, mushrooms, and other unique local ingredients; Yue (Cantonese), China's "haute cuisine' famous throughout the world

for steamed *dim sum* dishes and delicate flavors; Lu (from Shandong), a northern cuisine renowned for braised meats, wheat-based staples, and vinegar; Min (Fujianese), which utilizes the flavors of seafood and fish sauce in its famous soups; Su (from Jiangsu), which emphasizes sweet flavors and soft textures; Xiang (Hunanese), known for hot and spicy dishes (though without Sichuan's numbing flavors); and Zhe (from Zhejiang), which emphasizes light and sweet flavors like sugar, osmanthus, and green tea. Many Chinese people can easily recite these distinctions by heart. On the ground in China, of course, the idealized Eight Great Cuisines gloss over an even richer diversity of regional and cultural variations. Every city, town, and village in China has its local specialties. Buddhist restaurants connected to temples specialize in vegetarian mock meats. Hui Muslims are known for a distinctive halal cuisine found across China. Fast food, street food, and luxury banquet food are genres unto themselves, never mind the complex culinary traditions of over 56 distinct ethnic minority communities in Yunnan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and beyond.

Not only is food something that Chinese people savor and share, it is also a frequent topic of conversation. Food is discussed at length, planned in advance, debated and critiqued. I once took a 30-minute car ride to a food festival with two Chinese friends who passionately discussed food the entire time. I sat in the front of the Uber with the driver, and the two of them sat behind me. They didn't just discuss food in general—they discussed noodles, only noodles, with a fervor and intensity that was impressive to behold. They debated the differences between *mifen*, *fensi*, and *mixian* (all types of non-wheat noodles), discussed where to get them and whether anybody in Nairobi makes them authentically, and argued enthusiastically about the best ways to cook them. Part of the reason why I chose my dissertation topic was because it was so easy to talk to Chinese people about food. While politics and cultural differences might be considered

sensitive and difficult to probe, food was often an easy way to break the ice and get a conversation going.

Kenyan gustemologies

This preoccupation with food could be baffling to many Kenyans. Michelle, for example, was a Kenyan entrepreneur in Nairobi who ran a school teaching the Mandarin Chinese language to Kenyan adults. "Kenyans don't talk about food that much, unless it's the preparation of a wedding," she told me. She reflected on her own experience living in China and studying Chinese. She subsisted on nothing but bread and milk for her first two months. She was too afraid to try anything else. Eventually, her African friends convinced her to begin eating Chinese food, and she gradually became used to it. "Now," she told me, "there is nothing I can't eat." Still, however, she did not regard Chinese food with much enthusiasm. "I've taken it upon myself to give [Chinese food] to the students, though I can't say I love food so much, it's not the first thing that comes to my mind."

A similar sentiment was echoed to me by a Kenyan friend named Aaron, a Kikuyu produce distributor who supplied onions and other vegetables to Chinese restaurants. Like Michelle, Aaron had studied Chinese and was interested in the language and culture. Unlike Michelle, his career was *all about food*. Aaron was a creative thinker, always scheming up new ways to solve the problems facing Kenya's food system from improving poultry genetics to building a prototype for a food dehydrator. He enjoyed telling me about his experiments with mushroom farming, pig rearing, duck hatching, and building a solar oven. The goal was always to eventually scale up, launch a successful business, and contribute to alleviating food insecurity in Kenya. Despite waxing poetic about the systemic and political-economic problems facing the

food industry, however, Aaron was less interested in food as cuisine. I once asked him how often he discussed food with his wife. “Maybe once a week,” he guessed, unsure. His wife chimed in, “Just simple things, like ‘is this *sukuma* [kale] cooked enough?’”

This pragmatic approach to food, of course, is tied to wealth and class. Although Aaron and his wife had post-secondary educations, like many lower-to-middle-class Nairobians, their jobs were unstable and their income could vary widely from month to month (Schmidt 2024). Both of them grew up in poverty and had experienced real hunger and need. While mushrooms and ducks might be fun side hustles, daily meals meant *ugali* and *sukuma*.

At the Jiangxi restaurant described at the start of the chapter, the Chinese owners had one Kenyan employee, a young Maasai woman named Elsie. While Elsie was slowly learning to enjoy certain Chinese foods like fried noodles, she remained cautious around unknown dishes. She too had noticed a Chinese preoccupation with food, and she once explained to me her own physio-culinary theory of why this might be. After I’d translated for her the *chengyu* relayed at the start of the chapter, *min yi shi wei tian* or “the people see food as heaven,” Elsie told me that she thought Chinese people “feel hungrier more often because of the spice. It makes digestion quicker.” She laughed and looked at me meaningfully, likely indicating the propensity for spicy food to trigger diarrhea. She continued: “Ugali stays in the stomach and makes you feel full, so we usually prefer ugali, *githeri* [a mixture of beans, corn, and potatoes], our Kenyan food.” Elsie therefore implied that because Chinese food moves more quickly through the body, Chinese people need to eat more often and spend more time thinking about and preparing their meals. By mentioning ugali, Elsie’s theory alludes to a common perception in Kenya that of all the starchy staple foods, ugali is heaviest and makes one feel full the longest. Many Kenyans expressed to me that they do not feel full unless they have eaten ugali. Wheat-based chapati, Kenya’s second-

most popular staple food, is therefore often regarded as a treat best saved for special occasions. "I need to eat ugali at night in order to go to bed," said one Kenyan driver who worked for a Chinese company. Another driver, when I asked him if he had ever tried Chinese food, replied very ardently: "Me, I like ugali, githeri, heavy food!" Rice, meanwhile, is regarded as a deficient staple, too light and too quickly digested. Rice is sometimes feminized in comparison to ugali, which is masculinized. At the Chinese restaurant profiled in Chapter 3 called Duck Express, the Kenyan employee Kennedy told me: "I can't just have rice, I need ugali for dinner." His female coworker Lina[19] chimed in: "To be a man, the husband must have ugali for dinner." Kennedy agreed and told me, "I have it every night for dinner and my wife does too."

While hunger has pushed Chinese gustemology towards omnivorousness, therefore, similar hardships seem to have pushed Kenyan gustemology towards homogenization and a preference for heaviness. It is difficult, however, to write about any kind of Kenyan food norms without simplifying and essentializing the vast range of climatic conditions and traditional foodways of Kenya's fifty-plus distinct ethnolinguistic communities.[20] To further complicate matters, the food ideologies that might have existed before British colonialism were utterly destroyed by forced displacement from ancestral lands and forced assimilation to a diet dominated by nonnative crops such as white maize, Irish potatoes, cruciferous vegetables, sugarcane, and tea (Ochieng' 1988, Robertson 1997, Raschke and Cheema 2008). In Kenya today, these crops continue to dominate markets, menus and home kitchens across the country. Of course, there exist many ethno-regional specialties such as, to name just a few, Luo *omena*

[19] Lina does not play a big role in Chapter 3 because she started working at Duck Express only near the end of my fieldwork.

[20] The Kenyan government officially recognizes between 42 and 47 distinct ethnolinguistic groups (usually called *makabila* or "tribes"). Depending on who you ask, however, Kenya has upwards of 70 ethnic communities; this discrepancy is due in part to ethnic labels that the British authorities imposed upon diverse regional groups speaking related dialects (e.g. the "Luhya" and the "Kalenjin").

(sardines), Luhya chicken stew, Kalenjin *mursik* (sour milk), or Kikuyu *mukimo* (mashed potatoes or other starchy vegetables studded with greens and beans). A recent resurgence in interest in indigenous ("*kienyeji*") foods, as Rahier (2023) and Zocchi and Fontefrancesco (2020) explore, also suggests a diversity of tastes among contemporary Kenyans. Nevertheless, food taboos and a narrow range of familiar plant and animal ingredients are common features of Kenyan foodways across most ethnolinguistic communities. Experimentation away from these norms can be discouraged, whether by moral doubts related to religious strictures, or by pressure from the family or community. When I asked Kenyans living near crayfish habitat why they did not eat crayfish, for example, several people mentioned a fear that their neighbors would think they were practicing witchcraft if they were witnessed eating them (see Chapter 5).

This is not to say that desperation never pushes Kenyans towards omnivorous eating. While researching crayfish in Naivasha, for example, my Luo driver Brian repeatedly refused my invitations to join me for Chinese food. Even familiar tilapia prepared by a Chinese chef was too far outside his comfort zone to warrant a taste. Crayfish were unthinkable; he said they reminded him of snails in the river. After we got to chatting a little more over the next few days and several subsequent visits, however, Brian admitted to having eaten and enjoyed a wide variety of game meat, including legally purchased hippo liver after a Kenya Wildlife Service cull. Winged termites (*kumbekumbe*) are widely eaten in rural Kenya, even as crayfish and other seafoods are rejected for their resemblance to insects. The consumption of donkey meat, similarly, is often denigrated as a disgusting Chinese practice by Kenyans; and yet, in almost the same breath, several people have admitted to me that they have eaten it themselves. One young woman I met in Naivasha, for example, used to work in a Chinese-owned donkey slaughterhouse. She was telling me all the details about her job cleaning the intestines, laughing with disgust throughout

the entire conversation. I told her I had tried donkey meat once in China, to which she appeared shocked. Eventually, I asked if she had ever eaten donkey meat herself. "Yes," she answered, to my surprise. "It was soooo sweet![21] Very soft." She laughed again.

These examples highlight the fact that while Kenyans, like most human beings, will eat a wide variety of foods when they are hungry, Kenyans tend to downplay this fact about themselves. In contrast to Chinese gustemology in which omnivorousness is a point of pride, Kenyan omnivorousness is often expressed as an aberration. Sometimes this was attributed to religious strictures, as when a young Kikuyu man explained to me that the reason he wouldn't eat crayfish or crabs was because these were forbidden in the Old Testament. Sometimes the aberration was expressed in relation to the law, particularly the strict prohibition against game meat hunting; in the above example of hippo liver, for example, Brian was quick to clarify that this was legal because of a government cull. Sometimes, however, people just expressed a preference for simple food, as when my Luo flatmate in Nairobi described introducing garlic and ginger to her family back home in Western Kenya for the first time, only for them to reject such strong flavors. The ideal diet, for most Kenyans, seemed to stay within a relatively small inventory of plant and animal species.

These simple flavors were not limited to home cooking, however. In urban (and even rural)[22] African contexts, daily foodways rely heavily on hawkers, vendors, and restaurants (Smart 2025). Strapped for both cash and time, even the lowest-earning workers in Nairobi often make a daily practice of buying a cup of hot tea in the morning from a mobile tea seller or a

[21] Food described by Kenyans as "sweet" or "*tamu/kitamu*" does not only refer to the flavor of sugar the way speakers of American English might expect, but rather to a generally positive evaluation of the food's tastiness. Sutton (2010), citing Weismantel (2005), notes that ethnographic examples of taste-word mismatches across languages challenge any universalizing theories of taste and meaning (216).

[22] Although traditional rural African foodways often relied on patterns of agricultural and familial labor, rural people in places like Kisumu increasingly rely on street food obtained outside the home (e.g. Mbae-Mugambi et al. 2023).

quick lunch at a roadside cart selling eggs and smokies (sausages). Many workers across the socioeconomic spectrum could be found eating at casual roadside eateries called *vibanda*, where a filling meal of *ugali* with vegetables or meat could be purchased for under 100 Kenya shillings (about $0.75 USD). There were *vibanda* in every neighborhood of Nairobi; some even provided delivery through mobile apps like Uber Eats. In the evenings, eating out with friends was a common practice, especially as a leisure activity on days off (Spronk 2012). Even on busy weeknights, it was not uncommon for workers to stop by a *kibanda* or a mobile vendor on their way home to buy a pre-cooked container of beans, a stack of prepared chapatis, or other dishes that could be incorporated into a semi-homemade meal.[23] Eating out was therefore a common activity for most Nairobi residents regardless of wealth and class. Although most *vibanda*—and even higher-end restaurants—served familiar foods focused on simple flavors (Zocchi and Fontefrancesco 2020), Nairobi's foodways could be highly varied, mobile, and public.

Chinese food circulations in Nairobi

Nairobi's Chinese foodways were likewise vibrant and varied, even as the materialities of Chinese dining often deterred non-Chinese patronage. Many restaurants like the Jiangxi restaurant described at the beginning of the chapter catered exclusively or predominantly to a Chinese clientele. These restaurants operated within mostly Chinese networks at nearly every step of the supply chain. Many of these establishments, particularly smaller and newer eateries like the Jiangxi restaurant, sourced most of their ingredients from Chinese grocery stores also located in Kilimani. These grocery stores in turn imported most of their shelf-stable and frozen goods from China, while fresh produce and meat were often sourced from Chinese-owned farms

[23] See Devin Smart's 2025 book *Preparing the Modern Meal* for more on the gendered aspects of urban food and labor in East Africa.

or distributors within Kenya. Certain fresh ingredients that are difficult to grow in Kenya, like golden needle mushrooms, were imported.[24] The most commonly cited reason for these ethnically-contained supply chains was the quality of the food. Many Chinese people told me that Kenyan pork, for example, comes from uncastrated adult boars that carry an undesirable flavor, while pigs raised in the Chinese way are slaughtered earlier and taste neutral.[25] Similar complaints about quality have been lodged with Kenyan ducks, which I was told were less consistent in size, tastiness, and availability. Some of these motivations around quality and taste obscured economically and socially motivated reasons to stay within a Chinese ethnic network when procuring food ingredients. Discounted wholesale deals were better negotiated with trusted contacts than with strangers. In the case of ducks, I heard rumors of corrupt officials waiving the fees for large shipments of frozen Chinese ducks to enter Kenya, leaving Kenyan duck farmers struggling to find a market for their birds. Still, most Chinese restaurateurs targeting Chinese clientele were reluctant to compromise on tastes that are *jiangjiu* (worthy of careful attention). Consistency was paramount. Many Chinese chefs and restaurant managers developed a reputation in Nairobi for being finicky and demanding about their ingredients. Some Chinese producers found a lucrative niche catering to this market. Michael, for example, was a successful Chinese factory owner in Nairobi. As a hobby, he began raising pigs for the Chinese market on a plot of land he leased in central Kenya. His target market for his pork was the upscale Chinese consumer or chef who prioritizes quality and "doesn't really care about prices" (*bu tai kan jiage*).

[24] At the time of fieldwork, I was told that nobody had yet managed to successfully grow golden needle mushrooms in Kenya. The climate was cited as the reason.

[25] This same complaint exists in English-speaking Western contexts too. "Boar taint" is considered an undesirable flavor in the US pork industry. Likewise, undesirably gamey "tainted" flavors are associated with meat from uncastrated male sheep, cows, goats, and other animals. The undesirability of these flavors are culturally contingent, of course. I never heard Kenyans complain of boar taint. In Jamaican and other Caribbean cooking, the gamey flavor of meat from older, uncastrated goats is highly desirable for stews and curries (Kaminsky 2025).

Although Michael was still just learning his new hobby, he had no plans to sell pork outside the Chinese community.

Chinese individuals living and working in Nairobi used their comfortable salaries to support this Chinese ecosystem of suppliers. Take, for example, my free-spirited Chinese friend Ying, who sold handicrafts and gathered wild foods. Despite her multinational flatmates and cosmopolitan aspirations, Ying often shopped at the handful of Chinese grocery stores within walking distance from her apartment, all located inside or close to Kilimani's Chinatown shopping complex. Items from these stores were expensive, but familiar and convenient. She still practiced frugality, unlike Michael's target customers. She purchased imported Chinese items in bulk at wholesale prices when she could, relying on trusted contacts. For fresh produce, common vegetables like tomatoes and onions could be purchased from a *mama mboga*, a female street seller, of which there were many across all parts of Nairobi. Staple items like sugar and oil were bought from large Kenyan chain supermarkets like Quickmart or Naivas. Ying could have purchased rice, soy sauce, and other staples from those supermarkets too, but she preferred the Chinese imported varieties only found in Chinese grocery stores. Even fresh meat, in Ying's opinion, was best acquired from a Chinese grocery store where they sold pork belly (*wuhua rou*) and other familiar cuts. Kenyan butchers and grocery stores did not always carry pork, China's most widely eaten meat; if they did, Ying was not always able to communicate how she wanted it cut.

These preferences do not mean, however, that Chinese restaurants and Chinese consumers do not adapt to local Kenyan ingredients. Although many kitchens strive to recreate the exact flavors found in China, many also include aspects of Kenya's unique foodscape that still fit within a Chinese aesthetic regime. This might include Kenyan-grown black tea or purple

tea served in the Chinese style, fresh fruit juices made from locally available fruits like passion and pineapple, and locally sourced animals like crayfish, crabs, guinea fowl, and geese kept alive at the restaurant to indicate their freshness. Freshness, like wildness (see Liu and Zhong 2024) is a highly valued quality in Chinese gustemology. Freshness is often communicated through "immediacy"—i.e. slaughter or harvesting just prior to consumption (Zhong et al. 2020). The presence of these locally sourced ingredients indicates a desire to embrace the culinary value of omnivorousness while staying recognizably "Chinese" in order to appeal to a Chinese clientele. This recognizability is further indexed through Chinese-language signage and menus, curt or inattentive service (see Chapter 3), the presence of tissues, vinegar, and chili oil on every table, free hot tea, wooden chopsticks in lieu of other cutlery, and large round tables with lazy Susans available for larger groups, sometimes located in private back rooms. Most of these accoutrements are imported from China (even the tissues). Even if not directly intended, all of these signs can serve to exclude Kenyan diners from approaching and enjoying these restaurants. I heard many Kenyans tell me that they found the lack of English signage and menus in Chinatown intimidating, deterring them from entering. Even English-language menus could be difficult to parse if the name of a dish (e.g. "mapo tofu") did not clearly indicate its ingredients.

These Chinese-facing Chinese restaurants operate within an interesting tension between independence and in-group networks. The Chinese restaurant and grocery store owners in Kilimani were independent entrepreneurs, rather than working and living under the umbrella of a large state-owned or private infrastructure company the way many Chinese expats across Africa do. Many of them followed a trajectory similar to that of Ying, who quit her job to pursue her independent passions. Like Ying, many Chinese small business operators in Kilimani first came to Kenya as contracted employees of larger companies. Only later, after settling in Kenya and

strengthening their networks, did these adventurous employees decide to branch out on their own. For example, I met a young man in Kilimani named Peng, who first came to Kenya three years ago as an employee of an agricultural import company. When his boss left, instead of finding a new job or returning to China, Peng decided to start his own sausage making business instead. When I met him, he was selling his products to Kilimani's Chinese grocery stores as well as directly to customers. Like many Chinese small business owners in Kenya, I suspect he had other sources of income as well from additional side hustles that were not usually disclosed to me. Another example was Mr. Ceng, the owner of several Chinese restaurants in Nairobi, who came to Kenya originally as an entry-level cook around 2010. He worked his way up in several company cafeterias and restaurants until he was eventually able to open his own restaurant. [26] These entrepreneurs reflect a larger overall pattern of a growing private sector among Chinese businesses in Africa. Chinese state-backed investment in Africa has decreased since its peak in 2016; meanwhile, private companies have increased in their proportional influence on the continent, now accounting for approximately 90% of all Chinese businesses operating in Africa (China-Africa Business Council 2021). Most of these are small or medium sized enterprises (ibid). Like a microcosm of this larger trend in China-Africa relations, Nairobi's Kilimani neighborhood has seen a substantial rise in the number of small Chinese businesses opening up shop.

[26] Another example outside the food industry was Mr. Guo, an older man who owned an eclectic shop in Chinatown selling everything from fishing equipment and designer purses to carved sculptures of safari animals. He came to Kenya seven years ago working for a road construction company. Prior to that, he had worked on construction projects in Ethiopia, Zambia, Sudan, and South Sudan. Eventually, the long hours and stressful work got too tiring and began affecting his health, so he quit to run his own business. He didn't make much money anymore, but all he needed was "a good shelter and a car so people don't harass you on the street." Having grown up very poor in northern China, this was enough.

Not all of Kilimani's independent Chinese workers and entrepreneurs have followed this pattern, of course. Some maintained their original jobs along with a side business, like my Chinese friend Ouyang who worked for a large Chinese tech company and lived in employee housing, but sold imported appliances for extra income on the side. Some came to Kenya for the express purpose of running a business, perhaps relying on a Kenya-based friend or relative's recommendation. Yu, for example, was a middle-aged woman who came to Kenya to open a bubble tea shop with the help of her brother, who had worked in Kenya for many years at a construction company. Other Chinese business owners came seeking greener pastures after struggling at home. Zhao, a seafood seller, came to Kenya after his business in China failed. He had heard from friends that the business environment in Kenya was less crowded and less closely regulated. He decided to take a risk and set up a seafood business in Malindi, a fishing town on the Swahili Coast. By the time I met him, he was a top seafood supplier for Nairobi's Chinese restaurants.

As these Chinese entrepreneurs built capital and familiarity with Nairobi's foodscapes, they interacted with Kenyans and built intercultural linkages even as they remained oriented toward the tastes of their Chinese clientele. Although their tight Chinese networks might have felt exclusive to those both inside and outside of them, Nairobi's Chinese community has always been porous and ill-defined, an imagined community (Anderson 1983) more than a bounded place or closed enclave. Nevertheless, a discourse of exclusivity both within and outside the Chinese community perpetuated the notion that Kilimani's Chinese restaurants were a replication of Chinese food as it is found in China, comforting to expats while impenetrable to Kenyans. The "strangeness" of Chinese food was therefore reinforced in Kenyan eyes as the product of an enclosed ecosystem of production. "The notion we have is frogs and snails," one Kenyan tea-

seller told me when asked about Chinese food. Without exposure to anything beyond these stereotypes, Chinese food continued to seem impenetrably strange.

Increasingly, however, Nairobi's middle and upper classes are becoming familiar with an internationalized interpretation of Chinese cuisine in ways that mirror the familiarity of the average person with Chinese cuisine in the United States, United Kingdom, or India. In the next section, I will examine how this fusion cuisine uses cues from non-Chinese gustemologies to appear less strange to Kenyan diners.

The rise of "Chinese" food for Kenyans

Although much of Nairobi's Chinese restaurants are located in Kilimani and serve a majority Chinese clientele, Chinese food is not limited to the imagined bubble of Kilimani's Chinese enclave. Cuisines, like languages, have always flowed and changed and borrowed their way across ethno-national boundaries. To speak of cuisines as "authentic" vs. "fusion" is to deny that "mobility is woven into the very nature of human engagement with the environment, not only in our times, nor only in the time of our historical ancestors, but also in our evolutionary prehistory" (Ray et al. 2023, ix). In the relatively young city of Nairobi, as I examined in my introduction, cuisines and gustemologies have emerged through waves of migration from all over Kenya and East Africa, South Asia, the UK, and beyond. What many Nairobians consider to be typical food in fact blends ingredients and preparations that once originated in Central Kenya, the Swahili coast, western India, northern Europe, and many other places, from chapati and chai to chips and white maize ugali. China, too, has contributed to the amalgam of species that today constitute "normal" Kenyan food. Rice, which is commonly eaten despite being seen as less filling than ugali, was first domesticated in China 9000 years ago and was likely introduced to

the Swahili Coast many centuries ago through maritime trade with Asia (Uma 2022).[27] In more recent decades, Chinese varieties of cabbage (i.e. napa cabbage and bok choi) are being cultivated more widely and are now recognizable by many Kenyans who have never tasted Chinese cuisine (Njeru 2021, personal communications). Chinese-imported garlic, which is larger, whiter, and milder tasting than locally grown varieties, is taking over Kenya's garlic industry (Chege 2023). These movements of seeds and species highlight Asian studies scholar Robert Ji-Song Ku's insight that "What is now considered authentic was once upon a time apocryphal; what is now considered traditional was once considered fusion; and what is now considered legitimate was once considered dubious" (Ku 2014, 227, in Ray et al. 2023, xvi).

Beyond individual ingredients, Chinese *cuisine* too is a fixture of Nairobi's elite that predates the contemporary rise in Chinese migration to Kenya. In 1978, a Cantonese couple from Hong Kong founded Nairobi's first Chinese restaurant, Tin Tin. Its luxurious interior and interesting but nonthreatening menu quickly became a favorite spot for politicians to host foreign dignitaries. Former presidents Daniel Moi, Mwai Kibaki, and Uhuru Kenyatta all reportedly enjoyed eating at Tin Tin (Yang 2018). It remains today the only Chinese restaurant still operating in Nairobi's central business district. The owners' Kenyan-born son, Henry, took over the restaurant and ran it for decades as an upscale destination for business lunches and visiting dignitaries (Yang 2018). Henry retired a few years before the pandemic, leaving the restaurant in the hands of his nephew (a Kenyan of mixed Indian and Chinese descent), and the Kikuyu head chef. By the time I was conducting fieldwork, Henry was helping his son with a side venture, a small Hong Kong fusion cafe in Kilimani. While I do not know what Tin Tin's original menu looked like, the restaurant's menu today reflects a fascinating mix of Chinese, Indian, Kenyan,

[27] In West Africa, however, rice has been domesticated for several thousand years and is considered central to many native cuisines (Murray 2004).

and European influences. Most of the menu offerings represent internationalized Cantonese dishes recognizable across the world: spring rolls, fried rice and noodles, and sweet and sour pork. Reflecting Indian menu norms, "veg" dishes are listed first, followed by a category called "non-veg." The former contains several non-traditional dishes appealing to the East African palate, including chili sweet corn and stir fried spinach. European-style coffees and desserts such as tiramisu and fruit tarts round out the menu.

Today, Tin Tin has been joined by several other luxury restaurants—none in the central business district—where Kenyans can enjoy Chinese-inspired dishes in a festive atmosphere. These restaurants are complemented by the Chinese-themed food stalls in the food courts of some of Nairobi's large and fancy shopping malls like Junction, Sarit Centre, and of course, Kilimani's Yaya Centre. Some of these restaurants are owned by Chinese people who have embraced the tastes of their local clientele. Some of these restaurants, however, lack a Chinese connection at all.

The material qualities of the food served to Kenyan patrons in these establishments is very different from the food served in the Jiangxi restaurant and other eateries in Kilimani's Chinatown. The dishes served tend to use a smaller inventory of familiar ingredients, supplemented with mild-tasting Chinese seasonings like soy sauce, ginger, and garlic. These dishes would taste familiar to many people around the world who have eaten globalized Chinese fast food. Egg rolls, fried rice and noodles, and sweet-and-sour glazes are staples found on every menu. Despite local variations, these familiar dishes, flavors, and even brands of soy sauce and other key ingredients can be found in internationalized Chinese restaurants everywhere from New York to London to Mumbai. When I ate Chinese food at a mall food court stall in Nairobi,

the sweet and sour pork and vegetable fried rice tasted almost exactly like the Americanized Chinese food I grew up with from Hong Kong Kitchen in Vermont.

To the average person from mainland China, that food court meal might be better classified as "American-Chinese food" (*Meishi Zhongcan*), "overseas Chinese food" (*haiwai Zhongcan*), or just simply, "Western food" (*Xican*). A generous description might be "*Yuecan*," Cantonese food, since internationalized Chinese flavors in the US and UK often trace their origins to early Cantonese-speaking immigrants from Hong Kong and Guangdong. While Cantonese food might bear a closer resemblance to the Nairobi mall food court than other Chinese regional cuisines do, the average international-style Chinese restaurant still differs considerably from the actual norms of Hong Kong or Guangdong, never mind the rest of China.

Like Tin Tin, many of Nairobi's oldest and most popular Chinese restaurants fill a niche for middle and upper-class Kenyans to celebrate special occasions in a festive atmosphere. The decor of these restaurants mirror the aesthetics of Chinese restaurants all over the world with their prominent red color schemes, hanging lanterns, use of dragon imagery, and Chinese characters displayed for decorative effect. The menus reflect a variety of culinary influences, from Cantonese and northern Chinese to Indian, Kenyan, and even American. Cashew chicken, for example, was invented in Missouri in the 1960s by a Cantonese immigrant named David Leong (Edge 2009). Cashew chicken—a mild tasting dish of stir-fried boneless chicken with cashews—can be found on many restaurant menus in Nairobi, and was often recommended to me as a customer favorite when I asked what to order.

Some of these popular Chinese restaurants, like Tin Tin, were founded by Chinese immigrants, but rely on local Kenyan chefs, managers, and waitstaff. Some restaurants, however, lack a Chinese connection altogether. One of these is Taste of China, owned by a Kenyan chef of

Indian descent, located in the heart of Nairobi's South Asian community in Parklands. Taste of China markets itself as "Nairobi's best Indo-Chinese restaurant," explicitly referencing the restaurant's fusion identity. Indo-Chinese food, also called Indian Chinese or Sino-Indian food, is an extremely popular culinary genre in India and worldwide. Common dishes include chicken, paneer, or cauliflower "Manchurian" (in which the ingredients are deep fried and smothered in a spicy-sweet glaze made with soy sauce), fried rice made with basmati rice, and "Szechuan chutney," a bright red chili garlic sauce that bears little resemblance to the flavors of Sichuan Province.

These Indo-Chinese dishes trace their roots to the large number of Chinese business and tradespeople who settled in India, particularly Kolkata, a metropolis in what is now West Bengal in eastern India. Chinese restaurateurs in Kolkata Indianized their cuisine, which spread in popularity even as the Chinese community shrank amid political tensions between China and India.[28] Many members of Kolkata's Chinese population came from Guangdong's Hakka ethno-linguistic group, an identity that lingers today in popular Indo-Chinese dishes like "Hakka noodles." Today, many restaurants across India—perhaps even a majority of restaurants in urban areas like Mumbai, as suggested in a study by Sankar (2017)—serve Chinese-influenced dishes in some form. Many Indian restaurants in Nairobi do the same. Chowpaty, an Indian vegetarian restaurant institution with several Nairobi locations, devotes over two pages of its extensive menu to Chinese-inspired dishes. Other sections of the menu include (North) Indian, South Indian, and Italian pizzas and pastas. The restaurant looks and feels Indian in its decor and

[28] Diplomatic relations between China and India have been contentious for decades, particularly around their shared and contested border; for more information, see Verma, R. (2024). India–China rivalry, border dispute, border standoffs, and crises. *India Review*, *23*(5), 397-408.

clientele, and offers Chinese food as a subset of Indian cuisine rather than as a window into the people or places of China.

Other Nairobi restaurants, such as Mister Wok, serve Indo-Chinese cuisine in an ambiguously pan-Asian atmosphere, creating an exotic feel untethered to any particular place. The Kenyan-Asian owners of Mister Wok do not mention Indian or South Asian cuisine explicitly in their menu (although the influence is apparent in dishes on their menu like "Szechuan paneer"). But neither do they strive for or claim to be authentically Chinese. The restaurant's decor features South Asian-style art depicting vaguely Buddhist imagery (see Figure 6). Furthermore, the owners express a desire to replicate the specifically United States-style Chinese dishes that have become world famous in their own right. As they state on their website, "Chinese takeout has become a staple in American pop culture, thanks to popular sitcoms. Iconic starters like Spring Rolls, Chicken Wings, and Ribs have become household favorites. Other beloved dishes include Kung Pao Chicken, Fried Rice, Noodles (Chow Mein), and Steamed Dumplings (Momo)." The only term in this list that might be unrecognizable to American diners is "momo," which speaks to the restaurant's roots in the Indo-Chinese culinary tradition. Momos are meat or vegetable-filled steamed dumplings common in Tibet and Nepal. They have become a very popular fast food or street food across all parts of India today (Bhat 2024), and are more familiar to Indian diners than Chinese *jiaozi* or *baozi*.

Figure 6. The interior of an Indo-Chinese restaurant in Nairobi (2021).

These restaurants therefore have little to do with the culinary traditions of China, nor are they aimed at Chinese customers. Nor do they appeal exclusively to Nairobi's South Asian communities. They deliver Chinese-inspired flavors to Kenyans of all ethnicities through the more familiar vehicle of Indian food, which has been present in Nairobi since the city's original founding in the 1890s. These restaurants feature an international blended cuisine that draws iteratively and recursively from other blended cuisines, for an audience with cosmopolitan tastes. In appealing to an exotic but not-too-foreign "eastern" aesthetic, they foster an upscale, festive atmosphere well suited to Nairobi's African middle and upper classes. Across Africa, as in much of the world, rising incomes have become associated with an aspirational lifestyle of material consumption (Burke 1996). Focusing on Nairobi, Rachel Spronk has examined how leisure, including meals with friends or family at restaurants, became a defining feature of economic success (2012). Although I have explored how culinary omnivorousness is often discouraged in Kenyan gustemologies, the exception is in the wealthier subsets of the urban population. Mario

Schmidt mentions how lower-middle class Nairobians looked down on the unwillingness to try new food as a marker of recent migration to the city from a rural area (2024, 17). This sentiment increases with cultural and economic capital, with Nairobi's wealthiest residents dining in sushi restaurants, organic cafes, and creative cocktail bars. Like the politicians who have long chosen Tin Tin as their banquet hall of choice, Asian and other foreign food appeals to the sensibilities of Kenya's globally connected elite. This is bolstered by travels abroad and consumption of foreign media—especially Western media, which likely informed Mister Wok's descriptions of American-Chinese food from "popular sitcoms." While Spronk (2012) references *nyama choma* and US-inspired fast food as the genres of choice in the early 2000s, I would argue that Chinese food now appeals to wider segments of the middle class than ever before.

This has been furthered by the rise of Chinese-inspired fast food, a sub-genre of Kenyan-Chinese food found in the food courts of Nairobi's upscale shopping malls. There, Chinese food often occupies one stall amid a row of fast food options such as fried chicken, burgers and fries, Kenyan Swahili dishes, Indian fast food, and pizza. While these mall food courts get busy on the weekends with middle and upper-class shoppers and families on outings, I often found them very empty throughout much of the week. I learned that these businesses rely primarily on delivery through Nairobi's robust system of motorbike delivery services using apps such as Uber Eats, Glovo, Bolt, Jumia, and more. The (Kenyan) manager of one of these food courts told me that since the pandemic, smaller restaurants like these have had to rely on takeaway to survive. At his particular food court, the manager told me, the Chinese fast food stall was second in popularity only to the Indian fast food stall. "You'll find that Chinese is similar to Indian," he explained. "Kenyan food tends to be dry, but Chinese and Indian food are cooked in similar ways and are more wet." He told me that the most popular Chinese dishes for takeaway are noodles, cashew

chicken, and “curries.” Chinese food, to this manager, signified internationalized-Indo-Chinese food. To delivery app users, these Chinese food offerings appear in the app among many different local food options, all formatted exactly the same. This removes many of the perceived obstacles that make Chinese restaurants intimidating to some Kenyan diners, including the unfamiliar appearances of the restaurants, their location inside gated Chinatown shopping complexes, and the lack of English signage. On the delivery apps, it takes exactly the same amount of effort and knowledge to order Chinese dishes as it would take to order anything else.

Figure 7. Lo mein served in a mall food court in Nairobi, with a trio of chutneys on the side (2023).

Even in person, the food court format offers an easy entry point into eating Chinese food. In a row of food stalls all with similar layouts and English menus, Chinese dishes represent a few

out of many international and familiar culinary options. When I spoke to a Kenyan family eating at a food court, the father and daughter were eating Chinese food (fried noodles and kung pao chicken), while the mother and sons were eating fried chicken and chips from another stall. The father told me that he hadn't eaten Chinese food in nearly a year, so he had wanted to try some. The Chinese stall's Kenyan chef told me that the vast majority of his customers were Africans, plus sizable numbers of white and Indian people, and a few Chinese people as well. The owner of the stall, meanwhile, was a Chinese expat who also owned a larger sit-down restaurant on the outskirts of Nairobi aimed at Chinese customers, featuring a large menu of unusual dishes that would never appeal to Kenyans like sea cucumbers and pig's ears. The most popular dishes here at the mall, in contrast, were the sweet and sour chicken and pork.

Regarding the materiality of the food itself, I was surprised when the Kenyan chef at the mall food court told me that he had been trained by the restaurant's owner in "Chinese cooking," including adding lots of sugar and vinegar to his dishes. He told me that the reason many Kenyans do not like Chinese food is because they do not like sweet things, and they are not used to so much sugar. Although some cuisines within China are known for being sweet, particularly Shanghainese food and the original sweet-and-sour dishes from Guangdong and Hong Kong, Chinese food in general does not contain much sugar. Chinese people I have known in the United States have expressed to me their dislike of American-Chinese food, particularly its cloying sweetness. I am left to speculate that the Chinese owner of the food court stall instructed his Kenyan chef to cook with so much sugar in order to cater to an imagined preference for sweetness among non-Chinese diners. Other Chinese chefs who cater to local Kenyan customers have told me that they have learned over the years to simplify and dull down their flavors. The fame of American-Chinese food, as indicated by the descriptions provided by the Nairobi

restaurant Mister Wok, is also widespread around the world. Many Chinese chefs are likely familiar with the sugariness of Americanized dishes. A few American-Chinese restaurants even exist in Mainland China itself, appealing to locals mainly for their novelty (Feng 2023).

Still, Nairobi's Chinese expatriate community does, occasionally, choose to eat at these internationalized restaurants. Chinese chefs and restaurateurs are continuing to innovate on their native cuisine to suit local tastes, while still enjoying the food themselves. The food court manager I interviewed claimed that many of the food delivery clients ordering Chinese fast food were Chinese (although I could not verify this). Henry, the retired owner of Tin Tin, had helped his son create an explicitly fusion-focused Hong Kong cafe that served everything from *char siu* samosas and Singapore noodles to Vietnamese coffee, durian shaved ice, and chicken and waffles. I often saw Chinese people eating at the cafe, although they tended to be family friends of Cantonese background, perhaps with longer histories of residence in Kenya than the average expat in a restaurant like the Jiangxi restaurant with which I opened the chapter.

Nairobi's most popular Chinese restaurant, according to almost every Kenyan I asked over the course of my fieldwork, was a family-oriented upscale establishment just outside Kilimani. Owned by a middle-aged Chinese woman and her Kenyan-Asian husband, this restaurant—which I will not name due to the owner's stated preference for privacy when I asked for an interview—has managed to appeal to both Chinese and non-Chinese diners in Nairobi. When I visited, the prices were reasonable compared to the restaurants in Kilimani's Chinatown. The menu featured a wide range of internationally recognized dishes, including the ubiquitous spring rolls and fried rice, Cantonese-inspired dim sum, American-influenced cashew stir fries, and Indian-influenced "Manchurian" dishes. Additionally, the menu included more traditionally Chinese dishes like whole crabs and mapo tofu. Despite these offerings, the restaurant served a

majority Kenyan clientele, including both Africans and South Asians. The restaurant would fill up with large groups on weekends celebrating birthdays, graduations, baby showers, and other events. Such events are markers of a specific upper-middle class sensibility in Kenya, where these secular rituals are rising in popularity and opulence (Teyie 2022, see also Feldman-Savelsberg 2020). Many groups I observed in this restaurant were visibly Muslim, while others appeared Christian or Hindu. Children in fancy clothes ran around and played on the outdoor playground in the back garden. When I ate there with a group of Chinese expat acquaintances, they called the food "*Xican*"—Western cuisine—but they liked it anyway. They particularly enjoyed the deep-fried prawns, which when I glanced around at the other tables, seemed to be a popular choice that transcended race, religion, and language. Beyond the food and the playground, this restaurant's biggest draw was undoubtedly its service. The owner floated between the tables in an elegant gown, chatting with each customer individually in impeccable English and Mandarin. At the end of the meal, every guest was given a free serving of ice cream along with a small gift like a plastic toy or pencil case.

This restaurant perhaps epitomizes the original niche that Chinese restaurants have filled in Nairobi's foodscape: upscale but family-friendly, where diners enjoy not only exotic (but still mildly flavored) food, but also an atmosphere conducive to celebrating a special occasion. Tin Tin, Mr. Wok, Taste of China, and a few other spots also fill this niche. The Chinese fusion mall food court kiosks, meanwhile, fulfill a slightly different role, offering a new flavor of fast food for a consumer class willing and able to shop at malls and order from food delivery services. All of these restaurants are located in Nairobi's fancier neighborhoods where middle to upper class Kenyans are likely to rub shoulders with East Asian, South Asian, and European diners. Other parts of Nairobi, especially the lower to middle-income neighborhoods in the city's historically

African east, do not have any Chinese options. The spread of internationalized Chinese food in Nairobi is still highly classed, therefore, and dependent on the rise of omnivorousness as a culinary value among the wealthy. By tempering its foreignness and strangeness with the familiarity of Indian food and the cultural capital of American media, internationalized Chinese food is gaining a foothold in Nairobi, even as it remains materially and representationally distinct from the Mainland dishes found in Kilimani's Chinatown.

Conclusion

"Africans do not eat duck!" The butcher glared sharply in a way I found disconcerting. Somehow, my question about duck meat in a hole-in-the-wall butcher's shop had struck a nerve.

I was shopping with my Chinese friend Ying at City Park Market, a labyrinthine produce market in Nairobi's Parklands neighborhood. Here in the heart of the city's historic South Asian community, City Park Market offered a wide range of niche goods rarely seen elsewhere in Nairobi. City Park Market attracted local South Asian shoppers as well as middle-income Kenyans and international residents of all backgrounds searching for affordable produce to remind them of home. This was the place to go for bitter gourd, curry leaves, mushrooms, blueberries, raspberries, and more. Recently, the market had been seeing a rise in Chinese customers, particularly restaurant owners looking for wholesale deals. In addition to learning the Hindi names for things like onions and tomatoes, vendors were beginning to learn the Chinese names as well. They began stocking bok choy, daikon radishes, and lesser known Chinese vegetables like water spinach and celtuce. Amid a cluster of tiny butcher stalls at the edge of the market, one even had a sign for "pork" (猪肉) and another for "peanuts" (花生) in Chinese characters, hung upside down.

It was not absurd, in this context, to ask one of these butchers about duck. A staple component of Chinese cuisine, duck meat is rarely eaten by Kenyans. Even so, I had seen plenty of ducks in Kenya. They scurried around the margins of the informal *vibanda* (food stalls) near the University of Nairobi. They were sold in cages along the rural highways outside the city, and they could be found frozen at the wholesale meat market in Nairobi's central business district. They could even be found on the menus of internationalized Chinese restaurants that attracted local Kenyan customers, like Taste of China and Mister Wok.

I have puzzled for years now over why this particular butcher was so insistent that "Africans do not eat duck." Here was a perfect example of a food's representational meaning usurping its materiality. Duck meat is not taboo for most Kenyans, and its taste is rarely found offensive by those who have tried it. Ducks do carry some stigma for their association with dirty water, their messy eating habits, and their ability to survive in impoverished neighborhoods. "They eat dirty dirty things, like pigs," one Kenyan acquaintance told me. "Ducks eat things from the mud and trash…to me it is just like pork because they eat all those dirty dirty things." However, many of the butchers in City Park Market sold pork without qualms.

I have come to believe that it was the specific association of duck meat with Chinese people that led to the butcher's harsh reaction. Chinese people were a relatively recent entrant to City Park Market. Their arrival has brought new types of produce, new faces and accents, new requests and demands. New business opportunities, yes; but new anxieties as well about foreign powers influencing the local food economy and disrupting Kenyan norms and ways of life. These anxieties have found material purchase in foods like duck meat, foods that are common enough to be visible and recognizable in Chinese restaurants, but strange enough to arouse disgust and suspicion. When confronted with me and Ying—a white foreigner and a Chinese

foreigner—asking about duck, the reaction drew a line in the sand between us and them. The butcher grouped himself together with "Africans"—not Kenyans, but all Africans, a mega-grouping with racial and postcolonial baggage. The emotion in his response highlighted how my request about meat was anything but neutral. Ducks had become a "sticky" object, a "strange attractor" (Puar 2008) because of their metonymic invocations of Chinese food and by extension Chinese presence in Kenya.

This chapter has explored how differences in Kenyan and Chinese gustemologies—universes of meaning opened up through the sensory act of eating—come to produce "Chinese food" as an object of interest in Nairobi. There is nothing inherently stranger or more exotic about Chinese food than any other type of food available in multi-cultural Nairobi. Within walking distance in Kilimani, one can find restaurants serving West African, Ethiopian, French, Japanese, Korean, and many more global cuisines, each containing unique ingredients and flavors. Nevertheless, Chinese food has acquired a mystique among many Kenyan people. This mystique imagines Chinese food as antithetical to the idealized Kenyan diet. Where the ideal Kenyan diet is heavy and wholesome, Chinese food is seen as insalubrious and insubstantial. Where the ideal Kenyan diet is ordered and predictable, Chinese food is seen as omnivorous to the point of chaos. These impressions are bolstered by attitudes that Chinese people themselves take to their food. Food is a dominant and conspicuous industry in Kilimani's Chinatown, a passionate topic of conversation among Nairobi's Chinese residents, and a treasured source of cultural pride. The material affordances that mark Chinese food as different from the dominant Kenyan inventory of dishes—spiciness, strong flavors, oiliness, and the use of less common species like ducks and crayfish—become "sticky" over time with the fears and anxieties of

Nairobi residents who are likewise fearful and anxious about the geopolitical and economic implications of Chinese presence in Kenya.

These fears are dampened, however, when Chinese cuisine is served to Kenyans outside the context of Chinese people and their culinary traditions. Among Nairobi's middle and upper classes, internationalized Chinese food bearing little material resemblance to Chinese food in China is becoming a novel and prestigious choice. These Chinese dishes are delivered through the more familiar and popular culinary norms of India and the United States.

Perhaps over time, Nairobi's elite might embrace omnivorousness as they branch out into more adventurous or "authentic" culinary options in Chinatown. This is already beginning to happen for some social media-savvy Kenyans, who are posting their experiences in Chinatown on TikTok and Instagram. Perhaps eventually, as internationalized Chinese food becomes more commonplace and spreads to Nairobi's lower-middle classes, Chinese food in general will begin to lose its mystique. At least for now, however, appealing to Kenyan consumers is not a focus for Chinese chefs like the owners of the Jiangxi restaurant. Amid a community of Chinese expatriates who are willing to spend more for familiar and high quality cuisine, there is no need to win over non-Chinese tastes and wallets. These chefs will continue to try their hardest to replicate the flavors of China, giving their Chinese customers a nostalgic taste of home.

CHAPTER III

Minimal Conviviality: Micropolitics in Kilimani's Chinatown

"I hate that cabbage," Grace exclaimed to me. She was pointing angrily at a pale green cabbage wilting in the corner of a glass display case. "I can't even look at its face. I'm not a Kikuyu lady!"[29] We both burst into laughter. Grace was an employee of Duck Express, a small takeaway shop in Nairobi's Chinatown shopping center. Every day, lunch time was a source of great resentment (and humor) for Grace and her fellow employees, who were given only cabbage, maize flour, and wheat flour with which to cook lunch.

Duck Express was located in Kilimani's China Street shopping center in a small square room amid a row of other shops. Customers approached the counter and were greeted with a glass display case of dozens of cold braised meat dishes, known in Chinese as *luwei*. These dishes had been braised for hours in an aromatic brine, giving them a tangy, complex flavor with lingering notes of star anise and tingly Sichuan pepper. Here customers could find prepared snacks unavailable elsewhere in Nairobi: pig ears and trotters, duck heads and necks, several varieties of intestines, feet, wings, and other offcuts. Whole ducks hung from hooks and whole chickens were nestled into metal trays behind the counter, heads still attached. A few vegetables rounded out the options, including seaweed, tofu skin, and marinated potatoes. According to the

[29] The Kikuyu ethnic community, from the farming highlands of central Kenya, stereotypically eat a lot of cabbage. Grace was an ethnic Luo from the shores of Lake Victoria, where staple foods centered on fish of various kinds.

customer's preference, these products could be packaged whole or chopped and tossed with extra condiments including chili oil, soy sauce, fresh garlic, and cilantro.

I was initially drawn to Duck Express by the prominence of the roasted ducks hanging from the ceiling, a sight iconic of Chinatowns worldwide but rarely seen in Nairobi. As part of my quest to understand Kenya's nascent duck meat industry, I began to visit Duck Express frequently. As I became closer with Grace and her fellow full-time employee Kennedy, I was eventually invited behind the counter to sit on a plastic stool, chat, and observe.

At lunchtime, the Kenyan employees of Duck Express were not allowed to eat their own products. Other neighboring Chinese restaurants might give their employees a bit of extra cash every day to buy lunch, but this was not the boss's policy. Instead, Grace and Kennedy were expected to cook their own cabbage with *ugali* or *chapati*[30]. Grace found this offensive when they were surrounded by so much delicious food in all the neighboring restaurants of Chinatown. "Could you eat cabbage every day?" she asked me. I admitted that I could not. "It's so boring," Grace lamented. Sometimes she and Kennedy would experiment with the Chinese seasonings stored on the shelves, sauteeing the cabbage with soy sauce, rice vinegar, and chili powder. These things made lunch more interesting, but they risked getting caught by the chef and being reprimanded, or having their salaries docked. Salaries were already low, although they resembled average restaurant salaries throughout Nairobi.[31] They could even be fired—it happened all the

[30] Ugali and chapati are considered staple foods throughout Kenya. Chapati, etymologically derived from the Indian flatbread, is made from wheat flour and fried. It is denser and oilier than its Indian equivalent.

[31] An employee at a Chinese restaurant might expect to make between 15,000 and 50,000 KSH per month (about $125 to $400). Based on information I could find online, this is more or less comparable to average waiter/waitress salaries in Nairobi, including salaries at Kentucky Fried Chicken, the Starbucks-inspired Kenyan chain Java House, and the high-end cafe chain Artcaffe. A high-end restaurant might pay a bit better, and menu prices at Chinese restaurants were often surprisingly high; this may have made salaries look comparatively worse at Chinese restaurants, though I cannot substantiate this definitively.

time in Chinatown, where employee turnover was high and many young Kenyans were available and desperate for a job.

The owner of Duck Express, a Sichuanese businessman named Yan[32], spent most of his time at his larger sit-down restaurant in a leafier residential neighborhood. With the boss absent, the Sichuanese chef—who the Kenyan employees simply called "the chef"—acted as his deputy. The chef split his time between the two locations. He prepared the *luwei* snacks at the larger restaurant every morning, then drove them by van to Duck Express by about 10am. For the rest of the day, the chef was largely engaged with driving back and forth running errands between the two locations. He might appear at any time to engage with Chinese customers, or to chat and smoke with neighboring Chinese chefs across the parking lot. Sometimes he could be found napping at the back of the Duck Express shop, lounging on an old upholstered car seat tucked into the corner. When he was present, Grace and Kennedy busied themselves with tasks like peeling garlic, sorting chilis, or organizing receipts. As soon as the chef drove off in his van, they breathed a sigh of relief. "This is the work we do when he is here," Grace told me. If they did not look busy, they invited his criticism. "Every mistake he yells at us," Grace said, "and he takes notes to show to the boss."

Communications between the chef and the Kenyan employees were tense and minimal. The chef spoke no English and communicated with them largely through a translation app on his phone. This only happened in cases of necessity—relaying a message from Yan, communicating an online delivery order, correcting a mistake, or demanding that a particular action get done. Often these minimal communications were accompanied by hand gestures and untranslated

[32] Yan's wife, who became an ex-wife during the course of my research, was also heavily involved with the restaurant. I never met her. After the divorce, I heard about her less and less frequently. Yan later told me that she was working for the Standard Gauge Railway and had plans to return to China with their young daughter.

phrases of Mandarin or Sichuanese dialect, often shouted harshly. The chef sometimes smiled and chatted politely with Chinese customers, but I never heard him joke around or make small talk with the Kenyan employees. Grace and Kennedy resented the chef's lack of English, which they attributed to his lack of effort to learn despite having lived in Kenya for five years. As Grace told me, "The chef never says sorry and never laughs with us, he just stays over there; if he comes here he is just serious."

The isolation between the chef and the Kenyan employees continued during lunchtime. While Grace and Kennedy were left to cook their own ugali and cabbage, the chef often joined his Chinese friends at neighboring restaurants to share more elaborate meals. Grace and Kennedy were never invited. "One time the chef came in with this big fish," Grace told me, gesturing with her hands to indicate the size of the fish. "He took it to eat with his friends and didn't let us eat any. Can you imagine? He is so stingy!"

This particular word, "stingy," is a loaded one in Kenya-China relations. Several Kenyans used it with me when describing their opinions about Chinese presence in Kenya. The word resonates not only with the financial restraint valued in the Chinese business world and with the Chinese cultural norm of bargaining over prices, but also with a wider wealth inequality felt between Kenyans and Chinese. Most Chinese expats in Kenya have access to capital and material resources through the tight social networks (*guanxi*) of the Chinese community. The Chinese foods and products sold in Duck Express and other shops in Kilimani's Chinatown are very expensive—about $0.75 USD for a single cooked chicken foot, for which you could get a whole meal from a local food stall elsewhere in Nairobi—while the average salary of a Kenyan employee is very low—about $200 per month. When Chinese customers purchase goods that the employees themselves could never afford, this throws the wealth gap into sharp relief. Any

frugality on the part of a Chinese person begins to look deeply unfair and ungenerous. Each instance of perceived "stinginess" strengthens and reinforces the stereotype, which can take on a racialized and geopolitically significant valence. Kenya's (and Africa's) political discourse on China often echoes the language of stinginess, from the perceived poor quality of "fake" Chinese imported goods to criticisms of the Chinese government's exploitative lending practices (Plummer 2022). Although Grace was careful (at least in my presence) not to generalize her resentment of the chef to a resentment of all Chinese people—she often compared him unfavorably to other Chinese cooks in Chinatown, for example, who learned more English or acted friendlier with their employees—her choice of the word "stingy" nevertheless resonates with, and therefore implicitly strengthens, the wider stereotype.

Rather than confront the chef and stir up additional drama, the Kenyan employees of Duck Express often bonded with the Kenyan employees of neighboring restaurants. They shared and traded food items with them, or pooled their resources to order delivery from a local *kibanda* (roadside food stall). This group of Kenyan employees were highly diverse and spoke a variety of languages, though English and Swahili were shared by all. The Chinese-Kenyan boundary, rather than the many intra-Kenyan regional, ethnolinguistic, or religious barriers, became the salient one along which employees segregated themselves at lunchtime.

For the chef, meanwhile, lunchtime was likely a welcome respite in the long workday. It was a chance to escape from his delicate and precarious role as liaison between his boss Yan, who was upper-class and notoriously strict, and the Kenyan employees with whom he could not communicate. Although most Chinese chefs and middle managers in Chinatown earn more than the average Kenyan server or cashier, they live tightly circumscribed lives. Living in company housing and working long days with little time off, their daily routines are limited by time,

resources, language, and, importantly, fear. Among Chinatown's working class Chinese employees, a pervasive fear of violence, thievery, and the Kenyan state kept them from venturing beyond the bounds of Kilimani. Some of these cooks and managers, including the chef of Duck Express, lacked a formal education; a chef two stalls down from Duck Express was illiterate in any language. Some of them lacked proper visas and work permits, leaving them vulnerable to bribery and arrest by police and other state officials. Beholden to their better-equipped Chinese bosses, these middle managers had little choice but to perform the role of the strict disciplinarian to uphold the hierarchy of the business. Lunch was a time for the chef of Duck Express to connect and relax with his fellow chefs, many of whom came from similarly poor and rural backgrounds in Sichuan Province and spoke the same dialect.

As this chapter will demonstrate, lunchtime at Duck Express offers a window into wider patterns of sociality in Kilimani's Chinatown. The brief, tense, and easily misunderstood interactions between the chef and the Kenyan employees of Duck Express are representative of many encounters that rely on perfunctory dealings between strangers and near-strangers. During my time in Kilimani, deep relationships across the structurally important Chinese-Kenyan divide proved difficult to come by. Instead, superficial flashes of interaction—shouts, jokes, formalities, mistranslations, and nontranslations—often slipped by uncontextualized and unexplained. I was often frustrated in my fieldwork by my lack of complete insight into the opinions of each interlocutor within a complex social situation. The chef for example, was never available or interested in speaking with me beyond a few pleasantries here and there. And yet, my notes full of fragments of interaction mirror the experience of anyone spending time in Chinatown who does not speak every language represented in the workplace. No such person exists, fluent not only in Mandarin, Swahili, and English, but also a myriad of additional Chinese and Kenyan

mother tongues. Writing this chapter has encouraged me to confront the fact that my aim as an ethnographer should never be to excavate my interlocutors' interior truths, as if such a goal were even possible. Instead, I hope in this chapter (and beyond) to demonstrate the value of studying those fleeting, puzzling, interactions that are so easily misinterpreted. These moments, which anthropologist Tilmann Heil (2014) terms "minimal sociality," are the bedrock of the bustling workplace of Chinatown, where employees and customers alike are just trying to accomplish their necessary tasks. They are forced in this professional setting to do business together, whether they enjoy cross-cultural encounters or not.

This chapter focuses on micro-level interactions in Kilimani's Chinatown as negotiations of minimal sociality. In a complex workplace with a highly salient language barrier, even the most minimal successful communication can be difficult to achieve. The first section of this chapter elaborates on the concept of minimal sociality in more detail, locating it at the intersection of theories on framing, conviviality, and politeness. The second section examines moments where minimal sociality not only succeeds, but is stretched in new directions through humor and play. The third section looks more closely at the moments where minimal sociality fails, focusing particularly on anger and the stereotype of the verbally abusive Chinese boss. Overall, I aim to demonstrate why a careful attention to these moments of minimal sociality can explain how stereotypes emerge and deepen in real time, both in Kilimani's Chinatown and beyond.

Figure 8. The display case of *luwei* poultry and snacks at Duck Express (2022).

Minimal conviviality in overlapping frames

Scholars have long tried to make sense of how people of different backgrounds, speaking different languages, manage to coexist through mundane interactions. Much recent literature on this topic has centered on the concept of conviviality, literally, "living together." Unlike its meaning in everyday spoken English, where "convivial" tends to describe joyful communions and the celebratory sharing of food and stories, I use the term here analytically to connote spontaneous moments of mutual recognition between people—both good and bad. As British sociologist Paul Gilroy explains, "conviviality" emerges from the "processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life" (2005, xv). Concepts like racial and ethnic identity, Gilroy argues, presuppose an untranslatability across difference that is proven false every day through the ordinary, unremarkable interactions of diverse human beings (see also Keane 2009). Even in situations of rigid social hierarchy, conviviality

nevertheless flourishes in the cracks, opening up a more dynamic and spontaneous way of understanding human difference than the siloed, hardened identities implied by the dominant discourse of "multiculturalism" or even "cosmopolitanism." While identities are often discussed by interlocutors (and other non-anthropologists) as bounded and static, conviviality reveals the ways in which identities are constantly being made and remade through everyday interpersonal encounters.

Such boundary-negating interactions have the power, at least theoretically, to spark empathy and create desirable moments of disalienation in an often alienating world. African literature scholar Tina Steiner (2021), for example, celebrates conviviality for its ability to "craft conditions of human flourishing and beneficence" (16) and "break open ossified ways of relating" (17). Steiner draws from Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1986), citing Fanon's desire in the face of alienation simply "to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself…I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness (231-232, in Steiner 2021: 10).

These moments of recognition can include jokes and happy banter, but they can also include uncomfortable statements, awkward silences, insults, and conflicts. Because of the common connotations of "conviviality" that limit its meaning only to the benevolent side of sociality, some scholars have discarded the term altogether in favor of other terms like "mutuality" (e.g. Sheridan 2018). Other scholars, however, have recast "conviviality" as a neutral analytical term capable of encompassing the full complexity of engaging with difference, both positive and negative (e.g. Heil 2014, 2019, Nowicka 2020, Mahieus and McCann 2023, Costa 2019). As Heil (2014) explains it, "The minimal and fleeting kind of sociality, not least in

relation to difference, seems full of uncertainty, discontinuities and ruptures that emerge from translating between differences and negotiating minimal consensuses in conviviality" (322).

The key to convivial relation, according to Heil, is in the fragile "minimal consensus." This can emerge through the often-fraught attempts of different people trying to relate to each other. The process of reaching such a consensus is a messy one, and a scary one to navigate given the social costs of failure. As Goffman (1955, 217) notes, a common strategy for navigating an unknown or foreign social situation is avoidance. If one does not know the appropriate thing to say in an interlocutor's language, a safe choice can be to avoid saying anything at all. This choice also entails a social risk, however, as demonstrated by Derek Sheridan (2018) in his analysis of failed greetings between Tanzanians and Chinese traders in Dar es Salaam. Sheridan observed a pattern that I and others have also noticed in East African contexts, in which Chinese people fail to return the greetings of African strangers on the street. What Sheridan's Chinese interlocutors interpreted as a polite avoidance of a socially uncomfortable or even dangerous situation, Tanzanian greeters interpreted as a rude affront.

East African greeting rituals are important, elaborate, and given freely to strangers. Many Kenyans I met are adept at greetings across multiple languages, and several Kenyans who had never met a Chinese person before surprised me by knowing the basic greeting "*nihao*" (hello). Chinese people, in contrast, tend not to say "*nihao*" or otherwise greet strangers unless approaching them for a particular purpose; with close friends and relations, greetings are sparse and utilitarian i.e. "You've arrived," or "Have you eaten?" This mismatch in greeting styles has been documented widely in ethnographies of China-Africa relations, including by Ying-Ying Tiffany Liu (2018) p. 435, and Di Wu (2020), pp. 54-55. Wu describes "avoidance" as a preferred strategy for his Chinese interlocutors in Zambia, who interpreted greetings by strangers

as potential threats. Avoidance [*duo*] becomes a way to preserve harmony [*he*] and avoid conflict, thereby maintaining a polite public order. In East African contexts, however, avoidance can instead *instigate* conflict by violating the norms of polite behavior. Chinese people who have lived in Africa longer might learn to counteract this by learning basic Swahili and English greetings. These stock phrases, termed "phatic communion" by Malinowski (1923) and many subsequent scholars (e.g. Heil 2014), constitute "a truncated multilingual register needed to sustain minimal interactions" (Heil 2014, 68). Phrases like "*nihao,*" "hello," or "*habari yako*" ("how are you" in casual Kenyan Swahili) can constitute a bare minimum of common ground for Chinese-Kenyan interaction.

Compounding the difficulty of reaching a minimal consensus is the complexity of semiotic framing. The meaning of a given encounter is communicated and interpreted not only through words and actions, but also through the often unspoken or subtly cued semiotic layers that Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974) call "frames." To illustrate the basic definition of a frame, Bateson (1972) describes a physical picture frame delineating a separate set of rules or premises: "The picture frame tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame" (188). In social contexts, the parameters and meaning of a given interaction can be completely different depending on whether it took place within a meta-communicatively-marked framework of play, for example, or of anger, or of rehearsal.

Frames are "vulnerable" (Goffman 1974, 10) to misunderstandings in any circumstance; this vulnerability is further compounded when strangers from different backgrounds, speaking different languages, approach the same situation with different frames. Effective communication

can only emerge when frames overlap, producing the lowest common denominator of shared ground, i.e. minimal sociality.

This minimal sociality is not limited to hyper-diverse, multilingual, or multicultural settings; it is always all around us, a constant negotiation of performances and accommodations between different individuals with different agendas and norms. Settings of more palpable multicultural interaction are useful, however, because they make the fragility of the minimal consensus much more visible and dramatic. That is why relations between Chinese and Kenyans in Kilimani present an interesting case study for conviviality, where the two self-defined groups tend to perform very different norms of public behavior and often share few words of any common language. Unlike Gilroy, who sees ethnic, racial, and other differences slowly eroded by their very mundaneness in everyday urban interactions, Heil sees these same differences negotiated, managed, and even strengthened through conviviality. "Living *with* difference," Heil writes (paraphrasing Achille Mbembe 1992), can shed light on how "all people involved inscribe themselves into the same epistemological field and trick and toy with it" (2019, 22). Frames are not static or preexisting—they are continually performed in the moment, and can be toyed with or played with in ways that are never entirely predictable. Through the process of negotiating towards a minimal consensus, hierarchies and inequalities are not only revealed, but also strengthened, weakened, and altered.

This spontaneity reveals itself in the wide repertoire of interactional modes that the employees of Duck Express could draw from when speaking with customers, managers, and each other. Depending upon their familiarity with the interlocutor and the interlocutor's attitude and use of language, Grace had several options: using her basic Chinese (thereby limiting the interaction to food items and prices), speaking a nonstandard English pidgin (enabling language

play, joking), speaking formal standard English (perhaps to impress), using Swahili or her mother tongue Dholuo (either knowing that the customer will understand, or in the case of most Chinese customers, knowing they will not understand), or remaining mute and communicating only with pointing and glances.

The freedom to choose one's response does not, however, remove one from the complex web of social consequences entailed by that response. Conviviality is always still constrained by the frames that pattern "appropriate" public behavior, frames embedded in larger hierarchical norms and structures of inequality. When public behavior seeks to avoid conflict, these structures are upheld and reinforced under the pretense of politeness. In the examples that follow, spontaneous conviviality and the strictures of politeness are carefully negotiated into a fragile, and often unsuccessful, minimal consensus in Kilimani's Chinatown. Like Anna Tsing's points of "friction" in encounters (Tsing 2005, in Nowicka 2024, 250), the moments where frames mismatch and the minimal consensus is jolted or challenged offer a window into how people assert a particular self against an imagined other, how identities are performed or rebelled against, and how stereotypes are reinforced or broken.

Playing with the rules at Duck Express

"I'm getting good at dealing with these Chinese guys," Grace told me one day after joking around with a customer. Daily life in Chinatown was often very boring. While evenings and weekends would come alive with crowds of drinkers and diners, the long weekdays tended to stretch with tedium. Whenever the chef of Duck Express was away, Grace and Kennedy would sit and chat, watch music videos on their phones, or wander to the shop next door to gossip with friends. The monotony would only be broken by the arrival of a customer, a supply

delivery, or a city councilor looking for a bribe. City councilors periodically came through Chinatown, ostensibly to check if the businesses had all of their licenses and paperwork in order. Many Kenyan employees and Chinese owners alike told me that this was a pretense; no matter how meticulously a given business followed the rules, the authorities could always find (or make up) a small infraction. As the next chapter will explore in more depth, many of my interlocutors agreed that Chinese people were seen as easy targets with their relatively deep pockets and often poor English. Eager to make the problem go away, many Chinese business owners would offer money without resistance. If the Chinese business owner or manager wasn't present, however, the authorities would often leave without a bribe, knowing that the Kenyan employees did not have access to cash. These interactions could be a source of great amusement for the Kenyan employees, particularly Grace, who was gregarious, funny, and sharp-tongued.

Grace's jokes and playful exchanges not only kept her entertained, but also served to disrupt what Nowicka (2020) terms "thin conviviality." This term, Nowicka explains, embodies the tenuous peace kept by suppressing or downplaying differences in order to produce polite consensus—thereby marginalizing certain norms of sociality in favor of maintaining the status quo. Although the status quo in Chinatown is always in flux, this thin, minimal consensus might still be said to preserve the strict workplace hierarchy of Chinese bosses and Kenyan employees, as well as the material inequality between these two groups. Minimally polite transactional exchanges thereby preserve the racialized stereotypes fed by this inequality—e.g. stinginess, harshness, and anger (of Chinese) and untrustworthiness, laziness, and desperation (of Kenyans).

The power of play, Bateson (1972) argues, lies in its ability to meta-communicatively call attention to the constructedness of the default frame within which most of us operate in daily life. "Play" need not necessarily connote "humor" or "joking." Play can be very serious, from the

earnest pretend-play of children to the intensity of adult theater, sports (i.e. golf), and games (i.e. chess). However, both play and joking/humor involve the suspension of normal rules for the primary purpose of fun, pleasure, or entertainment, resulting in significant overlap and conflation in everyday usage. Relations of play have a long history in Africa, structuring social relations and allowing for types of expression that would otherwise be inappropriate (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1940, Black 2012). By manipulating the parameters of an interaction from utilitarian to humorous, Grace and her interlocutors can unsettle the ossified norms of minimal conviviality. Some humor is culturally bounded, relying on inside jokes and serving to strengthen in-group solidarity at the expense of the Other. I saw this kind of humor occasionally at Duck Express, as when Grace made fun of a Chinese customer's grammatical mistake in English. She and Kennedy laughed without the Chinese customer ever knowing why. Other times, however, a playful joke crossed the Chinese-Kenyan cultural-linguistic boundary and made the other party laugh. When such jokes succeeded, they could bring unspoken tensions to the surface, provide an outlet to express otherwise repressed feelings, and spark unexpected moments of shared affinity. "Like a flash," Tina Steiner writes, humor "can connect strangers who have very little in common… It is an irresistible mode of social interaction, if somewhat volatile and unpredictable" (Steiner p. 144). Even if for only an instant, thin conviviality can give way to something deeper and more meaningful.

I noticed this when I brought my Chinese friend Ouyang to Duck Express. Ouyang was gregarious, like Grace, and always looking to improve his English. Like most Chinese workers in Kilimani, he came from a poor and rural background; unlike many, however, he was well educated and interested in the local culture; he had recently been accepted into a masters program in Nairobi. He had a white collar job at a tech company and a wife and young daughter

back home in China. Soon after meeting Grace and exchanging pleasantries in English, Ouyang announced to her: "I am MBA—Married But Available."

Grace laughed at this and said to me (in front of Ouyang): "I can't believe I've met a Chinese who is entertaining me and telling me stories! Some of them are nice, some of them are like animals."

Ouyang looked a bit offended at this and asked, "What?"

Grace explained: "Most of them here treat us so badly, they do not treat us equally."

Ouyang replied: "Maybe, but it's different among educated people in the office."

Grace said, "With white people, if you do something wrong, they tell you what is wrong and how to fix it. Chinese are just like, *Ahhhhh!*" She screamed and ran around in circles.

Ouyang laughed, and said, "It's mostly language problems."

In this exchange, the frame of joking was established early on by Ouyang's quip, but it was an unstable frame. He seemed to take offense when Grace overstepped their fragile consensus with her comment about "animals." She rescued herself by acting silly, yelling and running around in an overtly exaggerated manner, thereby reestablishing the joking frame.

Their conversation continued from there into other sensitive topics: Grace asked Ouyang to be her "friend with benefits," to which Ouyang flung up his hands and said, "Too fast!" Grace asked for a job in his office, which Ouyang could not promise, but he did give her his phone number and offer a discount code on his company's tech products. Later, the topic of religion came up, a sensitive and prominent cultural difference between most Kenyans and most Chinese. "I am an atheist," Ouyang declared, "I believe in sense and objectivity." Grace replied, "You should love God, I will pray for you." Both of them were laughing throughout this exchange. Their laughter signaled a joking frame within which usually taboo topics—flirtation and sex,

inequality, religion—could be spoken about more openly. Since each knew the other was kidding, there was less risk of causing offense.

The depth and complexity of such joking behavior is severely curtailed, however, in the absence of a common language like English. Nevertheless, even with Chinese customers who spoke little or no English, Grace often managed to joke and play with conversation. This often took the form of a unique pidgin language that, when wielded deftly by Grace, rarely failed to elicit smiles and laughs from everyone present.

Given the lack of common language between many Kenyans in Chinatown and their Chinese employers, colleagues, and customers, an English-based pidgin language was sometimes used to get a point across. This speech variety is less widely spoken than similar pidgins documented elsewhere, including at Chinese-owned worksites in Ethiopia (Driessen 2020) and Zambia (Haruyama 2023). Nevertheless, it shares features with other pidgin language varieties worldwide including a simplified grammar, reduplication of words for emphasis, and elements from multiple languages—in this case, English, Mandarin, and sometimes Swahili. For example, when serving a Chinese customer, Kennedy asked, "*"Lajiao* small small?*"* [Do you want a small amount of chili pepper?]. A different Chinese customer asked Grace, "*Jitui* have no have?" [Do you have chicken legs?] Grace mirrored the customer's Chinese-inflected syntax when she replied, "No have." [33]

I suggest that the dynamics of pidgin at Duck Express differ from those documented in other accounts of similar pidgins used in African-Chinese encounters. Miriam Driessen (2020), for example, describes a pidgin language used among Chinese employers and Ethiopian

[33] Others in Chinatown (outside Duck Express) also sometimes spoke in pidgin, although I did not hear it often. At the small Sichuan restaurant next door to Duck Express, a Kenyan employee used a pidgin English variety to explain her schedule to her Chinese manager while pointing at the calendar: *"*Me no rest, me no rest, me rest.*"* [Not my day off, not my day off, that's my day off].

employees at construction sites in Ethiopia. There, the Chinese bosses were structural authority figures, and lacked a common language with their employees. Nobody spoke standard English, and everyone involved had "no choice but to make do with pidgin" (436). This eroded the hierarchy by putting all parties on common ground. By "playing" with this malleable new code, the Ethiopian employees were able to subvert and challenge the hierarchy of the workplace. Justin Lee Haruyama (2023) also describes a pidgin language used at a Chinese-owned mine in Zambia. There, Zambians who spoke a Standard variety of English looked down on the pidgin English used by their Chinese bosses. The Zambian employees denigrated this so-called "shortcut English" and used it with contempt, feeling that its simplified features justified a racialized resentment they felt against their Chinese employers.

In Kilimani's Chinatown, like at the Zambian mine studied by Haruyama (2023), most of the Kenyan employees could speak and understand Standard English. Pidgin English was therefore not a necessity, as it was at the Ethiopian construction site (Driessen 2020). Instead, the Chinese population in Chinatown were the ones usually expected to accommodate to local Kenyan norms by using English to the best of their ability. This accommodation came about not in the context of the boss-employee hierarchy, since the bosses were rarely around during the middle of the day, but rather between Kenyan employees and Chinese customers. This is a very different power dynamic from the ones usually examined in cases of China-Africa relations. Service encounters between strangers in China can sometimes look very different from those in Kenya. In China, service encounters have been described as marked by directness—sometimes seen as coldness by non-Chinese (Pan 2000, Sheridan 2018). Customers, not employees or servers, are the ones who must initiate the interaction. This was observable at Duck Express, where the Chinese customers were often the ones who spoke first and assumed the burden of

attempting to use English, often with perceivable difficulty and embarrassment. In contrast, across many African contexts, service encounters have been described as analogous to traditional host-guest relationships (Hinson et al. 2024, Brown and Rammidi 2014, Callahan 2006). The worker/host, in other words, assumes a position of accommodation or even deference to the customer/guest. I saw this when the employees of Duck Express would make an effort to communicate with their customers in a way that would be understood, such as with basic Chinese or pidgin English, rather than using standard English or Swahili. Given these norms, the use of a pidgin language at Duck Express might represent a mutual accommodation or convergence to the language preferences of the other. When Grace or Kennedy replied to these overtures in pidgin rather than Standard English, they encouraged a relaxing of the rules, a lowering of the boundaries of grammatical "correctness" that stood between speakers without a common language. The mood lightened, and everybody usually laughed.

Sometimes, Grace's use of this pidgin language veered away from the utilitarian and became creative, for even greater humorous effect. When a customer asked for a discount, for example, instead of replying with a simple "no," Grace said: "I get that small money where? No *sawa*, bossu check me money." [Where will I make up the difference? It's not okay, the boss will check my money]. She and the customer both laughed.

In another example, Grace riffed with a Chinese customer: "You madamu China, come here get madamu Kenya. Kikuyu? Kikuyu money big." [You have a Chinese madam/wife, but when you come here you should get a Kenyan wife, maybe a Kikuyu. Kikuyus have lots of money].

Grace seemed to take delight in speaking this way. I was continually impressed by her ability to unleash a fluent torrent of speech in a language that, presumably, she had never

explicitly learned or practiced. Her riffs often hurtled across sensitive topics that would have been difficult to speak about in a non-joking frame. Here is another example:

Two older Chinese men approached the counter to ask about the price of the roast duck. They asked in Mandarin, which Grace understood. She was able to reply with the price in Mandarin, after which she said, "*Beijing kaoya* [Mandarin: Beijing roast duck]." This is a phrase she had likely picked up due to the iconic fame of the Chinese dish, even though it was not a technically correct description of the product at Duck Express.

One of the men replied (in Mandarin), "No, this isn't Beijing roast duck." Grace seemed not to understand, so instead she changed the subject. She asked in pidgin, "You, madam in China?" The man shook his head.

Grace said, "No *sawa*! [English/Swahili: Not okay!] I am your madam. We go eat *lamian* [Mandarin: noodles]." She pointed to the noodle restaurant next door and mimed eating with chopsticks.

The man laughed and pointed too, saying, "Okay, *gen wo zou ba*" [English/Mandarin: Ok, let's go together]. Grace laughed and mimed walking away in that direction. They continued laughing and joking until the order was served and the men walked away.

In this example, Grace's use of pidgin brings attention to several key sources of stress underlying her encounters with Chinese customers. First is the language barrier itself. As a potent source of awkwardness and conflict in Chinatown, stress about the inability to effectively communicate underlies every cross-boundary encounter. Given the norms of employee-customer relations, many Chinese customers approached the counter at Duck Express with obvious trepidation, feeling the burden of needing to express themselves using their limited English. Whenever Grace replied in a pidgin language variety—whether her utterance was utilitarian or

playful— she switched the frame from a minimal economic transaction into a meta-communication about language use. Within this new frame, the usual boundaries between linguistic codes went out the window in favor of new rules, which stated that conviviality mattered more than formal grammar. Grace demonstrated these rules in the example above by deftly navigating the language barrier using her own language abilities. She used the Chinese words she knew (the price, followed by *Beijing kaoya*), then changed the subject when she reached the limit of her understanding to keep the conversation going. The only Swahili word she used, *sawa* [okay], is often the first Swahili word learned by Chinese. Grace and Kennedy sometimes joked about this, mimicking how their boss and his wife would always say "sawa." The Chinese customer, who might have completed the transaction in silence and left feeling like an outsider, was instead drawn into a playful and friendly interaction that elicited laughter from all involved.

I should also draw attention to the sexual overtones of Grace's banter, which bring to the surface the racialized and gendered power dynamics that simmer throughout Chinatown. Speaking openly—but jokingly—about flirtation and extramarital relations acknowledges that the Chinese customers see her not only as Kenyan, but also as a young and attractive woman. Informal sex work is very common between Chinese men (who often come to Kenya alone, sometimes leaving behind a wife in China), and Kenyan women, who may lack resources and a material safety net outside their meager salary. Grace told me she fended off offers from many Chinese men since coming to work in Chinatown. Right at the beginning of her employment, she was propositioned by the chef of Duck Express. She turned him down by demanding an outrageously large sum of money in return, which she knew he could never afford. Since then, the chef had asked her to set her up with other women, acting as his broker. She refused every

time, and her dislike of the chef grew and deepened. The chef was not alone, however, in his expectation of finding transactional sex among the Kenyan employees of Chinatown. Grace told me that such relations were very common. They were echoed throughout Kilimani in the not-so-subtle posters hung on every telephone pole advertising "massages" with photographs of scantily clad Kenyan women. When Grace told me she was "getting good at dealing with these Chinese guys," then, this meant preempting inappropriate or threatening advances by controlling the limits of flirtation on her own terms. One way she accomplished this was by keeping her pidgin-language interactions within a joking frame, bringing the tension out into the open and thereby disarming it.

I would like to draw attention to an additional form of play I witnessed at Duck Express: the kind of play that needs no language at all. One day near the end of my fieldwork, I walked into Duck Express after over a week of absence while I recovered from Covid-19. I arrived to find Grace engaged in a joking wrestling match with a young Chinese woman. They had each other in headlocks, laughing uproariously. I laughed along with them until they calmed down enough for the Chinese woman, Hannah, to introduce herself. She had recently started working at the larger parent restaurant, of which Duck Express was a subsidiary. Hannah and Grace seemed to have an easy joking chemistry with each other, giggling and cavorting. We chatted and exchanged contacts, then Hannah was called back to the main restaurant, and Grace was called back to her duties in the shop. The brief moment of levity had passed.

After Hannah left, Grace turned to me and sighed. Her youthful energy seemed to have dissipated, and she spoke in a tired voice. "She is naive," Grace said, referring to Hannah's age and lack of experience. "These Chinese don't know what it means to be a manager," Grace

continued. “Hannah doesn’t pay us, the madam[34] [boss’s wife] pays us. Hannah speaks good English, but sometimes I just want her to look at a dictionary and see what ‘manager’ means…she doesn’t need to be in the kitchen telling people what to do—this is wrong, that is wrong.” Grace sounded exhausted. Obviously, her interactions with Hannah had involved more than just the silly scene I had walked into. There must have been past interactions too, interactions that piled onto Grace’s other exasperations about working at Duck Express: conflicts with the chef, being shouted at by the boss and his wife, repeated pay docking, and the long dullness of workday after workday. What those interactions with Hannah really looked like, though, I will never know.

A few days later, I met Hannah at the parent restaurant to speak with her one-on-one. She also seemed dejected. Her life in Nairobi was lonely and dull. Aside from her boss, the restaurant owner Yan, who she said is “tough/harsh [*yange*] but like a brother to me,” she had few friends. She had been traveling back and forth to Kenya from a very young age because of her father’s residential plumbing business, but her formative schooling took place in Henan, China. Hannah moved to Nairobi full-time several years ago to attend an international high school, where she faced racist taunts from her peers and lacked confidence in her spoken English. She graduated just as the Covid-19 pandemic erupted, putting her college plans on hold indefinitely. Stuck at home during lockdown, her loneliness and boredom were almost unbearable. She lived in an apartment owned by her father in Embakasi, a working-class area of Nairobi with few Chinese people, where she did not feel comfortable walking around. Now that she was working at the restaurant, and in the process of moving closer to Kilimani, life was looking better. It was friendly people like Grace, people she could laugh with and relate to, that made Nairobi feel

[34] “Madam” is commonly used as a respectful term for women in Kenya. I was often addressed this way by strangers.

more liveable. Nevertheless, Hannah could sense Grace's frustration: "I am worried about Grace, do you think she is ok? These last few days she has not seemed happy." I told her that Grace seemed tired and underpaid, but I did not repeat what she'd said about Hannah's managing skills.

This incident has stuck with me because these two women, who regarded each other in such different terms, nevertheless came together in the shop for that brief moment of convivial levity. I was lucky, in this case, to be able to interview both Grace and Hannah separately, to perceive a sliver of the chasm separating their jovial play from what they might "really" have thought about each other. What I witnessed might best be described as a spontaneous and mutual switch from a typical workplace frame to a new frame: one of play. A passerby in Chinatown might have thought that Hannah and Grace were fighting for real, were it not for the laughter and smiles that tend to index "joking" or "play" even across languages (Ladilova and Schröder 2022). For Hannah, Grace, and passersby to understand this requires a subtle and complex communication of signs: "The playful nip denotes the bite," Bateson writes, "but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson 1972, 180). For a few brief moments, Hannah and Grace seemed to be in complete, joyful agreement about the parameters of their game. All of their private doubts, resentments, and misgivings were put on hold. When the moment passed, the old antagonisms and stereotypes reemerged. But the moment still happened, and it had an effect on its participants and observers. Their joy was infectious—I could not help but laugh when I entered the scene, and I do not doubt that other passersby at least cracked a smile.

The above examples illustrate the power of humor to expand conviviality, however briefly, beyond its thinnest minimal consensus. To a casual observer in Kilimani's Chinatown, however, such moments were the exception rather than the rule. Once, after a chatty and joking

Chinese customer left with his order, Grace sat down on her stool and sighed. “This is exhausting,” she told me. Playfulness takes effort, and it was easier to exist in Chinatown day-to-day in a state of minimal interaction, as demonstrated by the employees and the chef at lunchtime at the start of this chapter. Much of the time, this felt like a safer way to keep the fragile peace, to prevent conviviality from tipping over into outright anger and conflict.

Yelling and Rudeness

> Dealing with these Chinese is hard. They just yell, it’s a cultural thing I noticed immediately in China. So really all of them are like that, you can’t say it’s only some. [My boss] is not so bad, but he yells too. You just have to understand and remember that it’s not personal.
>
> -Kate, a Kenyan employee of a Chinese company

The discourse of Africa-China relations is replete with stories about the archetypal Angry Chinese Boss. This stereotypically short-tempered employer is loud, difficult to reason with, even abusive. Several widely reported cases of extreme abuse by Chinese employers in Africa seem to prove the rule, including: a Chinese mining engineer convicted of torture in Rwanda in 2022 after videos surfaced of him whipping an employee (Bartlett 2022), the nonfatal shooting of two workers by a Chinese mine owner in Zimbabwe in 2020 (Chingono 2020), and the brutal beating of a Kenyan employee in a Chinese restaurant in Nairobi, before I arrived for fieldwork in 2020 (Odula 2020). Much more common than these cases of physical violence are widespread reports of verbal abuse by Chinese employers. Wyrod and Chang (2023), for example, found in their analysis of a Chinese-owned dam project in Uganda that “verbal abuse was persistent and

routine across the many years of our data collection." The authors examine the mental health toll that such abuse has taken on their Ugandan interviewees. They conclude by arguing "that this [verbal abuse] may well be a distinctive aspect of Sino-Africa labour relations and a dynamic that merits much more focused investigation."

Wyrod and Chang's findings support my own first and second-hand experience with verbal aggression against Kenyan workers by Chinese employers, as well as customers. This was a source of significant stress for many of my Kenyan interlocutors, and was often cited as a reason for quitting a job or deciding not to work for a Chinese firm again. The allegation of verbal abuse is widespread enough to warrant serious consideration. Are Chinese employers and customers prejudiced against Kenyan workers, and therefore unduly rude? Are Kenyans prejudiced in their categorizations of Chinese anger, and therefore unduly offended? Is this a case of mismatched workplace cultures running up against each other? Or is it all a big misunderstanding exacerbated by the language barrier? As I examine in this section, while elements of all these questions can ring true in different circumstances, no single explanation can account for the persistence of the trope of the Chinese temper.

To illustrate this temper in action, take the example of Mr. Ceng, a Chinese restaurant owner who invited me to chat over lunch at an upscale Chinese restaurant (not his own) in Kilimani. As we ate an extravagant meal of Cantonese-style roasted duck and dim sum, he told me about his experience coming to Kenya over ten years ago to work as a chef in a friend's restaurant. Over the years he slowly worked his way up to opening his own Chinese restaurant in Westlands, an affluent business area of the city. At one point, he paused our conversation to answer his phone. A Kenyan employee was calling out sick. Mr. Ceng's change in tone was startling. Enraged, he shouted in English into the phone, "Fuck you, go home!" He ended the

call. Then he picked up his chopsticks, switched back into Mandarin, and continued our conversation.

Trying not to appear alarmed, I asked Mr. Ceng what it was like working with Kenyan employees. He complained about his employees' constant need to feel respected. As he told me: "They say, 'you don't respect me' [*ni bu zunzhong wo*] but I pay them a monthly salary; isn't that respect? [*na bushi zunzhong ma?*]" I merely nodded, speechless.

How much of Mr. Ceng's outburst can be attributed to unambiguous anti-Black racism? Could—or should—such an analysis be moderated by the idiosyncrasies of this man's personality, or perhaps by wider managerial norms common among Chinese bosses in general? My mutual connection with Mr. Ceng, a Kenyan food distributor named Aaron, had warned me that he had a short temper. Aaron had studied Mandarin for several years and knew lots of Chinese people in the restaurant business. "He is not nice to his employees," Aaron told me, "very harsh." Other Chinese people he had worked with were kinder. And yet when Mr. Ceng spoke to me, a person with the cultural capital-laden identities of whiteness and Americanness, he had modulated his behavior significantly. Any inherent "harshness" in his personality must have been tempered according to relational factors, with Kenyan employees seen as occupying the bottom rung of a hierarchical ladder. This does not necessarily mean that Mr. Ceng was uniquely racist or intolerant, however. Even within all-Chinese workplaces, similar dynamics exist between bosses and employees. My Chinese friend Ouyang, for example, who joked with Grace in the previous section, described his relationship to his boss as one of anger and hierarchy. He worked for a Chinese tech company in marketing, earning a good salary. "The way I see it, they pay me, so they are allowed to yell at me and I just take it." Ouyang told me matter-

of-factly. This echoed Mr. Ceng's equation of salary and respect, revealing a mindset in which the structural position of boss entitles one to treat one's subordinates harshly.

Plenty of Kenyans recognized this as a norm of the Chinese workplace. Aaron theorized that in Chinese culture, "to be a boss is to be harsh." I often heard similar statements from Kenyan employees in Chinatown. Mary, for example, was a former restaurant employee—the same Mary who was considering voting for Wajackoyah in the opening of the introduction chapter. Coming from her considerable experience living in China and speaking Mandarin, she explained it this way: "The Chinese believe the boss has ultimate control, like god…[yelling] shows other Chinese that they are running their business well. At [the restaurant] I saw passersby just laughing when they heard bosses yelling at the staff." "They treat Chinese that way too, it's their culture," another Kenyan employee told me.

In published accounts of Chinese workplace norms within China, hierarchy is understood to be paramount and is strictly enforced. Ju et al. (2020) cite a "paternalistic leadership style" as a frequent cause of "bullying and incivility"(1160) in the Chinese workplace. An authoritarian workplace culture discourages employees from questioning the manager's will, and authorizes the manager to "use abusive supervision as a punishment to sustain authority" (1161). Similar norms of authoritarian hierarchy in Chinese workplaces, where mistakes are punished rather than corrected, have been recorded and substantiated by scholars such as, for example, S. Wang (2017), Leung and Caspersz (2019), and J.J. Wang (2020). These norms may be exacerbated in the restaurant and food service industries. In Euro-American contexts too, these industries tend towards hierarchical and strictly disciplined management styles—see Gill and Burrow (2018), Gordon Ramsay's TV career, and the 2022 American black comedy film *The Menu*.

It is important to note that while Western audiences may instinctively associate workplace anger with normative male gender expression, this may not necessarily hold true in a Chinese-managed workplace. In a 2012 study of gender and hierarchy in a Hong Kong workplace, Ladegaard (2012) documented many instances of female bosses using "rudeness as a discursive strategy," leading to the conclusion that "normatively masculine and feminine management styles may be culture specific" (n.p.). Although men in leadership roles were more common in Chinatown during my fieldwork, several of my Kenyan interlocutors mentioned cases of Chinese women in managerial positions—sometimes the wives of the owners—yelling and expressing anger in the workplace. Grace at Duck Express, for example, often noted the strictness of "the madam," the owner Yan's wife. In another example, I helped my friend Mary—the same Mary quoted above on the topic of yelling, who had considered voting for Wajackoyah—find a job in a Chinese grocery store owned by a lady named Ms. Chang. Mary quit within a week, however, because, as she said, "the Chinese lady was too loud. She shouted at everybody…she even yelled at [her husband], he would just look straight ahead and not react at all." Workplace yelling, therefore, should not be considered a quirk of male bosses only.

When I heard that Mary had quit her job, I remembered how Ms. Chang, the boss, had treated me when we spoke: warmly and politely, without a hint of temper. This fluctuation between calmness and anger suggests that Ms. Chang, like the restaurant owner Mr. Ceng, should not be understood as inherently short-tempered or possessing of an unusually angry personality. Rather, anger and warmth become performative gestures undertaken to correctly or properly fulfill one's role as "boss" in relation to the interlocutor (Ju et al. 2020). To fail to act sufficiently harsh with employees would mean failing in one's leadership role. In other words,

much of the yelling and aggression came from the frame of proper workplace conduct, a frame that Kenyan employees tended not to abide.

While strict leaders certainly exist in Kenyan-managed workplaces, the Kenyan employees I spoke to in Chinatown almost universally described their Chinese bosses as angrier and more aggressive than other bosses they had worked for in the past. “I learned to deal with it,” said one young server in the Chinese restaurant next door to Duck Express. “The other waitress said to just get used to it and don’t let it affect you,” she told me. She quit after a few months, despite a strong interest in Chinese language and culture, and is now wary about working for another Chinese company: “I’m in a Telegram group of Chinese speakers in Kenya, and they all share stories about how horrible their Chinese bosses are,” she told me. The Chinese frame of proper workplace conduct is not universally accepted by Chinese people either, it should be mentioned. My Chinese friend Ying cited this as a reason for quitting her well-paying job at a Chinese tech company and trying her luck as a freelance trader. She makes less money now, she acknowledged, “but the culture is kinder, people don’t yell at each other.”

This is not to say, however, that racial prejudice does not play a role in how workplace hierarchies are managed in Kenya. Plenty of Chinese people in Nairobi expressed to me a view of Kenyans as being fundamentally simpler, less intelligent, unreliable, and uncivilized; these stereotypes mimic the tropes of globally circulating anti-Black racism and suggest their resonance within Chinese understandings of human difference. As many scholars of systemic racism have explained, even individuals who reject racist tropes can act in ways that maintain racist structures (e.g. Beliso-De Jésus and Pierre 2020). In the context of Chinese firms in Africa, Huang (2024) explains how Chinese actors enter into the upper tiers of a system of racial capitalism already in place since the colonial era, their very presence perpetuating a system that

benefits racial-ethnic minorities at the expense of Black Africans. When the dominant workplace norms mean that Chinese bosses are yelling at Kenyan employees and never the other way around, the wider structure of racial hierarchy is reinforced. Many Chinese people espouse egalitarian ideals and denounce racism as a tool of Western imperialism, even as they benefit from this system; other Chinese people express more explicitly racist views as they justify their own perceived superiority. Mr. Ceng's use of extreme language seems to push his outburst firmly into the latter category.

Beyond managerial norms and outright racism, however, I would posit an additional linguistic explanation of the anger often attributed to Chinese people by Kenyans. This explanation concerns the prosody of Chinese languages and their (mis)perceived communication of emotion to non-speakers. "Prosody" refers to the sound and intonation patterns of a language, the melodies and rhythms that not only give a language its particular aural flavor, but also communicate important information such as the speaker's intention (e.g. irony) and emotional state (Larrouy-Maestri et al. 2024). I suggest that in some cases, the prosody of Mandarin (and perhaps other tonal languages) can *sound* angry to the ears of a non-speaker, even when no anger is intended. By raising this speculation, I do not intend to detract from the very real anger, yelling, and even abusive interactions that I and other scholars have documented in Chinese-managed workplaces in Africa. This point is not meant to negate the unambiguous anti-Black racism displayed by some Chinese people, including Mr. Ceng. Rather, this point is meant to add nuance to those cases where racism is less clearly diagnosed, and where more complex and sensitive dynamics of cross-language (mis)communication might be at play. An interaction between a Chinese owner of a photography business and his Kenyan nanny illustrates this phenomenon:

Mr. Zhu and his wife, who went by the English name Clara, had recently hired a new nanny to watch their baby. They were unhappy with her performance so far. The nanny, barely twenty years old and living away from home for the first time, had been unable to stick to the schedule they gave her for the baby. Standing in the main room of their joint living and working space next door to the Chinatown shopping complex in Kilimani, Mr. Zhu told the nanny all of this in Chinese. His part-time translator, a Chinese-speaking Kenyan named Lucas, interpreted into English. The nanny began to cry, while Mr. Zhu insisted over and over again, "I am not angry, I am not angry (*wo bu shengqi*)." Lucas interpreted this too, but it did not help. The nanny rushed up the stairs, and Lucas followed her to comfort her. Mr. Zhu appeared shocked by this emotional response, and dismayed to have been so profoundly misunderstood. "I am not angry," he repeated again, "I am not angry. I never raised my voice!"

In this particular case, as I wrote in my field notes, I agreed with Mr. Zhu. He had sounded disappointed, perhaps, but to my ears quite calm and friendly throughout the whole interaction. I remembered, however, while beginning to learn Mandarin in college, how the language would sometimes strike me as *sounding* angry, even when clearly no anger was intended. I specifically remember the difficulty of learning the fourth tone, a downward fall in pitch represented in pinyin by the diacritic [`]. To me and many of my native English-speaking classmates, this tone sounded unnaturally harsh and commanding when it came out of our mouths. Many of us adopted physical quirks to accompany our pronunciation of this tone such as hand waving or head bobbing, as if to indicate to each other as we practiced speaking—I'm not really shouting! It's just the fourth tone! Over time, particularly during our study abroad semester in Hangzhou, the tones began to feel and sound more natural and our bodies gradually

stopped mapping them out in space as we spoke. I distinctly remember, however, that feeling of emotional incongruity.

It is perhaps a cruel irony that the second syllable of the word "angry," the *qi* in *shengqi*, is pronounced with the fourth tone. The more Mr. Zhu insisted he wasn't angry, the angrier he might have sounded to the young nanny.

Although this phenomenon has received little serious analysis in anthropology, a 2014 study by Paulmann and Uskul found that native speakers of Mandarin Chinese and English in the UK were better able to correctly identify emotions in nonsense pseudo-sentences in their own language, compared to the other language—though they correctly identified the emotions of both languages at rates better than chance. This suggests that while elements of human emotionality can be understood across languages, we are worse at accurately naming the intended emotion of unfamiliar languages, compared to our own. The phenomenon of perceiving an unfamiliar language as angry or scary is not uncommon in popular discourse and on the internet, and may be applied to any language. In Kilimani, however, where widespread monolingualism by Chinese expats leads to many opportunities for workplace miscommunication, Mandarin in particular is often taken up as an object of fear and ridicule. As one Kenyan employee in Chinatown explained to me, laughing: "Because of the language barrier, I don't know if they're fighting or not! They will be shouting, then suddenly laughing. I'm like, a second ago you were shouting at the top of your lungs, I thought you were angry!"

Prosodic miscommunications related to tone can also exist even when both speakers are technically speaking the same language. In a 2016 study, Laukka et al. compared speaker recognition of emotional prosody across English dialects from the US, Australia, Kenya, India, and Singapore. Like Paulmann and Uskul (2014, see above), they found that while people were

able to accurately identify emotions of all English varieties at rates better than chance, they were best at identifying emotions in their own English variety. This finding supports my observations of misattributed anger or rudeness between Chinese and Kenyans, even when both were speaking English. For example, Mr. Zhu's wife Clara explained to me that she had been really happy with her previous nanny, but that their relationship had been rocky. The previous nanny had written Clara a text message asking, "Why do you hate me?" Clara was baffled by this, and could only reply, "I don't hate you! I feed you and clothe you and treat you like part of the family." But, Clara told me, the nanny said that Clara had been impolite [*bu limao*], and would always answer the phone with "What's up." As Clara wondered aloud to me, perhaps the nanny might have preferred to hear something like, "How can I help you please?" As Clara explained to me, "You know, my English isn't good, I didn't mean anything, but apparently the nanny was offended." I believe that part of the problem was a misunderstanding of prosodic emotion. Clara's "what's up," as she related it to me, did indeed sound a bit harsh to my ear, as if it had been pronounced with a Mandarin fourth tone on the second syllable. Coupled with Clara's lack of English fluency and a reliance on simple words and phrases, a false diagnosis of rudeness might be interpreted onto her speech.

In Kilimani's Chinatown, Chinese managers often speak this way to Kenyan employees as well as customers, while Chinese diners often speak this way to Kenyan servers. At one of the Chinese tea shops that I will discuss in Chapter 6, when the boss needed his Kenyan employee Mercy to come prepare tea for a guest, he would shout across the room, "Mercy! Tea!" One Chinese restaurant manager shouted "Get out!" to a Kenyan man who entered the restaurant just after closing time. At Duck Express, customers would often approach Grace or Kennedy at the counter with only a single word, often the name of the food item they wanted in English or

Chinese, followed by "How much?" The "much" might be pronounced with the falling fourth tone.

Some of this shortness might come from intentional rudeness rooted in Chinese racial prejudice against Kenyans, while some might come from differing norms of public speech in service contexts in China. It is perfectly normal in China, for example, to shout "Waiter [*fuwuyuan*]!" or "Pay the bill [*mai dan*]!" across the room in a very loud voice. Many servers in China, accustomed to this norm, will not approach your table or offer the bill unless they are summoned in this way. In Nairobi, however, I suggest that a lack of English fluency also contributes to the perception of shortness. Like Clara, some Chinese speakers are aware of their linguistic limitations and know that they sometimes come across as rude when speaking English. One Chinese student, newly arrived in Nairobi for a research project, asked me anxiously if I find Chinese people impolite because of the way they order food in restaurants. My Chinese friend Selina once asked me earnestly how to say "no" more politely. This came up particularly in the context of refusing a request by an unknown man on the street to take our picture. Selina did not know what to say beyond the single word "no"— "I'm not a native speaker and I'm afraid to sound rude," she told me. I suggested "I'd rather not" as a softer alternative.

I was reminded of Selina's question sometimes at Duck Express when a customer interaction struck me as brusque. A Chinese customer asked about the price of a dish, heard the answer and said "NO!" in a loud voice, then walked away. Another Chinese customer thrust his cash down on the counter without a word for Grace to take. Many interactions consisted only of the phrases "this one," "that one," and "how much."

However, I do not want to overemphasize tone here at the expense of the complexity of perceived (and misperceived) anger. I certainly cannot ignore, for example, the raced and classed

valences of Chinese aggression towards Kenyan employees. Neither can I ignore the "harshness" and "yelling" described by Kenyans like Mary, who could speak good Chinese and were therefore unlikely to misunderstand prosody. Much of this aggression should rightfully be interpreted as anti-Black racism, full stop. Take the example of the restaurant owner Mr. Ceng, who yelled at an employee in almost the same breath as being polite and friendly to me. This switch in behavior was certainly more than just a misunderstanding, and more than the performative turning on and off of the "boss" role. Not only was I not Mr. Ceng's employee, I was also a white American. Not only was the employee on the phone a structural subordinate within the workplace hierarchy, but he was also a Black African, a label that carries significant connotations of racial and class inferiority (see Chapter 1). Several Chinese people in Nairobi suggested to me that Kenyan employees *need* to be treated harshly, or else they will never learn. As one Chinese woman told me with regard to her household help, Kenyans were "difficult to manage…They are so simple, you have to tell them exactly what you want them to do several times and still they won't do it."

Such utterances demonstrate how over time, Chinese and Kenyan negative stereotypes of the other become entrenched. In a complex entanglement of structural norms, prosodic misunderstandings, and racial/class prejudice, Chinese anger becomes immutable and essential in the eyes of Kenyan employees. Two separate people asked me if the Chinese were "hostile" to me when I lived in China, expressing surprise when I said no. "It's in their blood to be harsh to employees," one Kenyan restaurant worker told me. "They get angry very quickly, it's in their nature," said the Kenyan manager of Chinatown's main Chinese grocery store. He explained further, essentializing "Africans" in direct contrast to "Chinese people":

[Chinese people] might be calm, then suddenly they're up here [gesturing at head level].

> Africans know how to remain calm. The best thing to do is when they are up there, you just stay down here [gesturing lower]. Otherwise there will just be screaming, it won't be good. But you have to respect people's differences, it's the way they are.

Just as Chinese stereotypes about Africans affect the safety and wellbeing of Kenyan employees, essentialized stereotypes held by Kenyans can also have real-life consequences for Chinese people trying to live their lives in peace. These stereotypes also ripple across global diasporas, affecting many lives including Africans living in China (e.g. Ke-Schutte 2022).

Hannah, the young Chinese woman introduced in the previous section, had struggled against identity-based stereotypes for years. She described her life in Nairobi as haunted by the antagonistic, racialized gaze of the Kenyan public. Her high school classmates used to taunt her with racial slurs like "ch***," accompanied by the clucking sounds of a chicken. She was treated as even more of a threat during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when anti-Chinese sentiments skyrocketed in Kenya and around the world. Someone threw wads of wet paper at her through the open window of her car. Grocery store clerks refused to process her items. Her shyness and lack of confidence in English were exacerbated by the feeling of always being watched, always being judged for being Chinese rather than for being an individual, and for being an always-already hostile presence in Nairobi.

Chinese stereotypes about Kenyans similarly become entrenched as they witness employees' discomfort with and lack of acquiescence to their aggressive managerial style. Unlike Chinese employees like Ouyang who might be willing to "just take it," many Kenyans were very willing to sacrifice the financial benefits of a steady job in order to escape what they saw as unacceptable verbal abuse. Several Kenyan employees told me they felt no loyalty to their Chinese employers and were always searching for a better job opportunity elsewhere. As Grace

told me, “I have been at this company for over a year, but I am ready for anything, to be fired, it's not my father's company.” Turnover was high in Kilimani, with many employees staying in a job for only a few days or weeks, like Mary at Ms. Chang’s grocery store. As the next chapter will explore, this turnover might be seen as a reflection of informal workplace dynamics, where it is considered normal for individuals to “hustle” and cobble together a livelihood from a variety of odd jobs and short-term gigs. For many Chinese employers, this can look like laziness or disloyalty. Mr. Ceng complained to me, after angrily hanging up the phone on his employee, that “It’s hard to keep employees, if somewhere else is offering just 500 shillings [~$4 USD] more, they will run [*pao*]. They don’t even greet you [*da zhaohu*] or explain anything, they just run.” These misunderstandings can travel in rumors from person to person, evolving over time into full-blown racist stereotypes against Kenyans as fundamentally unreliable workers.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how conviviality operates between Chinese and Kenyan workers within the hyper-diverse bounds of Kilimani’s Chinatown. Like a microcosm of the larger China-Kenya geopolitical relationship, interpersonal relations here were often tense and sensitive, devolving easily into generalizations, stereotypes, and conflicts. By carefully examining at the interpersonal level how conviviality is negotiated, played with, and misunderstood, I hope to have demonstrated the value of what Heil (2014) terms “the in-between, the fleeting, the superficial and the unremarkable.” Through these seemingly mundane interactions, we can glimpse how people assert a self against an imagined other, how identities are performed or rebelled against, and how stereotypes are reinforced or broken.

These social dynamics recall anthropologists' study of traders, the "strangers" (Simmel 1908) who cross borders and conduct transactions in languages in which they are not fluent (Obadia 2020, Jaworski and Thurlow 2010). Through fleeting and pragmatically motivated encounters, idioms of trust, hospitality, and kinship bring people momentarily together, then fracture again as everyone goes their separate ways (Dua 2016).[35] Most of the everyday encounters in Kilimani's Chinatown were ephemeral and shallow, relying on minimal consensus achieved through linguistic accommodations to get through the tasks that needed to get done. Even over time, relationships between people who worked shoulder-to-shoulder over many months often remained at this shallow level. Greater depth was rarely considered necessary. With the chef of Duck Express, for example, I exchanged pleasantries and asked simple questions over the course of twelve months without ever progressing deeper. Even Grace, with whom I spent lots of time and who I eventually came to consider a friend, was hesitant to reveal details of her personal life to me. I do not know much about her life outside Duck Express, including why she chose to work in Kilimani's Chinatown, although I do know that she was supporting a daughter and needed the income. She would occasionally mention to me various untruths that she had told her Chinese employers, including downplaying her education on her CV ("they don't like to see you're too educated because you might ask for maximum salary," she told me) and rounding down the age of her daughter so as not to reveal that she had been a young mother. Even with me, the age of Grace's daughter seemed to fluctuate every time Grace mentioned her.

[35] These ephemeral yet interconnected dynamics are embodied by a word which seems to float untethered through Indian Ocean spaces of encounter: "*alibaba*," meaning something along the lines of "thief," is a common pidgin word that my Kenyan interlocutors attributed to Chinese, Chinese interlocutors attributed to Kenyans, Miriam Driessen notes among Chinese and Ethiopian construction workers in Ethiopia (2020), and Jatin Dua quotes from an Indian sea captain describing Somali pirates (2016).

I mention these gaps to reiterate that my aim as an ethnographer is not to excavate my interlocutors' deepest secrets or compel them to give up information they would rather keep discrete. Instead, I see the reticence displayed by most people in Kilimani's Chinatown as interesting in itself, a glimpse into the fragmented sociality of a multilingual workplace where minimal conviviality, rather than trust, formed the bedrock of everyday livelihoods. Furthermore, these individual gaps in peoples' knowledge of each other added up into a broader ethic of suspicion, in which distrust was wielded as a tool by the streetwise and savvy seeking to navigate a precarious and uncertain world. Surrounded by secrets and untruths, the careful withholding of information can become a powerful way to navigate structures of informality, perceptions of corruption, and the cultural logics of Chinese relationality (*guanxi*) and Kenyan "hustling." In the next chapter, I scale up from individual encounters to focus on broader "structures of feeling" in the Chinese-Kenyan workplace and analyze how suspicion, particularly with regard to notions of informality and corruption, comes to shape the Chinese foodway in Nairobi.

CHAPTER IV
Hustlers vs. Guanxi: Examining Suspicion and Corruption

For several months during my fieldwork, Duck Express was out of ducks. The hooks above the glass display case looked empty and forlorn, although sometimes Grace and her coworkers would hang whole *luwei* (braised) chickens there to fill the visual gap. Several Chinese customers came asking for roasted ducks but were sent away empty handed. Grace explained that the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic had disrupted import logistics, delaying the usual shipments of ducks from China.

I was confused by this—why couldn't they buy locally raised Kenyan ducks? As discussed in Chapter 2, freshness is highly valued in Chinese culinary ideologies, and at least one Chinese customer at Duck Express told Grace that she would have preferred to buy a duck that had recently been alive, rather than a frozen import from China. Furthermore, as I mentioned in the conclusion of Chapter 2, although Kenyans ate little duck meat and often found the birds disgusting due to their propensity to live and feed in dirty water, plenty of Kenyans still raised ducks. They were commonly kept as pets or as an emergency source of food and funds. They could also be found on the menus of high-end restaurants in Nairobi and at the European-style butcher shop inside Yaya Centre. I had begun meeting with Kenyan duck farmers to learn more about the industry, and found many enthusiasts. One man raising a whole flock of ducks (along with various exotic birds) in the outlying neighborhood of Utawala told me, "I will not give up, I

must do ducks. They are my passion." Why couldn't Duck Express buy from this man instead of relying on frozen imports from China?

I asked the Chinese chef at Duck Express, who simply replied that Chinese ducks are "better tasting" (*haochi*), while the local ones "have an off smell" (*you xingwei*). Later, Grace expressed her skepticism that there was really any difference: "The Chinese say they can tell the difference, but customers sometimes taste this and ask if they are from China, so I think they don't really know. The chicken and pork are just from City Market [Nairobi's central meat market]," and nobody had complained about the taste of those. A few surrounding Chinese restaurants and grocery stores did carry locally-raised duck meat, although its supply seemed sporadic and its price high. When I tried to help Grace connect her boss with some of my duck farmer contacts, she hesitated. All of the Kenyan farmers sold by weight, but her boss bought ducks by the unit. She would need to see the prices first before sharing anything with him. After I showed her some prices, her evasive tone convinced me that she did not want to share this information with the owner of Duck Express. I let it go.

Part of Grace's reticence was no doubt a result of the tenuous relationship with her employers that I explored in the previous chapter (Chapter 3). Any disruption to the boss's routine, even if it came from me, might look like troublemaking on Grace's part and could carry serious consequences for her. Beyond the interpersonal risk, however, I soon learned another potential piece to the puzzle. I was meeting with a large-scale and well-established duck farmer in a rural area, and she was visibly distressed. "I don't know what to do," she told me. "We are already charging the same low price [for duck meat] as we did fifteen years ago, but we can't raise it or we will lose to illegal Chinese imports. The Chinese have impunity." My thoughts

flashed to Duck Express—could they be relying on informal channels of importation, either to cut costs or to maintain a relationship with a trusted seller?

To be clear, I do not know of any actual wrongdoing, nor did I investigate the issue. It is not my intention to uncover the veracity of any claims of corruption or lawbreaking of any kind. Instead, I am interested in the claims themselves, in how they circulate along Chinese-Kenyan foodways and resonate with cultural logics of informality and relationality.

The duck farmer's mention of corruption was hardly surprising given similar allegations I had heard across many Chinese food industries in Kenya. In Kilimani, in particular, rumors of money laundering, Chinese prison labor, sex worker trafficking, drug deals, and mafia violence layered on top of smaller scale whispers about visa violations, bribery, and workplace abuses. In this chapter, I explore how multidirectional allegations of corruption and scandal come to shape a broad hermeneutics of suspicion that pervades everyday life among Chinese and Kenyans in Kilimani. Counterfeits sold, bribes paid, numbers spun—these minutiae of corruption floated through my fieldwork as open secrets, the subjects of intrigue and whispered rumors.

The phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" (attributed to philosopher Paul Ricoeur) usually refers to an ethic of interpretation that seeks to uncover a truth hidden beneath the explicit and the visible (Strowick 2005). Going beyond this "Anglo-American ethos" (Sutton 2003) where words are *supposed* to index reality, anthropologists have explored the hermeneutics of suspicion within other contexts that do not take an underlying truth for granted. Maria Frederika Malmström (2019), for example, examines how the lurking power of the state suffuses every aspect of everyday life in Egypt. David Sutton (2003) discusses an ethos of distrust in Greece where "it is the height of hubris to announce one's intentions openly" (203). Similarly, Sarah Muir (2016) studied Argentina's "era of total corruption," in which "corrupt practices imitated

legitimate ones,… penetrated the social world and consumed it from the inside out" (134). Similar notions of empty signifiers and discourses of imitation and doubling have been noted and analyzed in China as well as in many African countries, from the relational logics of Chinese social networks (e.g. Smart 1998) and African informality (e.g. Roitman 1990), to preoccupations with fakery and the counterfeit (e.g. Blunt 2004, Mu 2024). In contexts like these, the hermeneutics of suspicion is not an attempt to expose the truth, but rather an all-encompassing mode of being in the world that takes uncertainty to be the default.

This chapter focuses on food supply chains as particularly potent sites from which to glimpse suspicion. As material-sensory substances that we incorporate into our bodies, food items bring to the surface underlying fears and tensions regarding corruption and adulteration. The chapter begins with an exploration of suspicion and discretion in Nairobi. I then discuss Chinese relationality (*guanxi*) and its associations with the notion of corruption (*fubai*). Next, I explore similar notions of corruption within the context of Africa and Africanist scholarship on informality, followed by a closer examination of empty signifiers and the "fake." The final section places these discourses together in an examination of Chinese counterfeits in the Kenyan context, focusing on the case of "plastic" fish imported from China. These analyses scale outwards from the previous chapter, contextualizing Kilimani's fleeting and fractured encounters within a broader ethos of multidirectional suspicion.

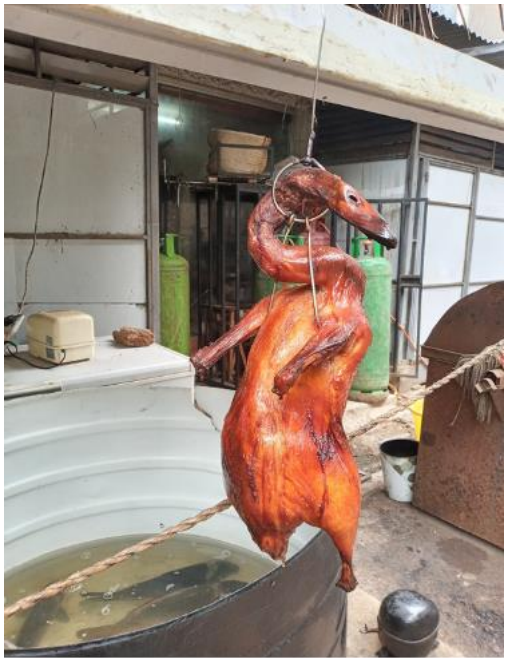

Figure 9. A braised duck hanging outside Duck Express's parent restaurant (2021).

Multidirectional suspicion in the field

Many people, including the duck farmer, told me rumors about Chinese corruption throughout my fieldwork—but I could always count on one man, Lucas, for the latest gossip. Educated in China and fluent in Mandarin, Lucas had carved out a career niche for himself in Kilimani as a "cultural consultant" for Nairobi's Chinese community. When a Chinese expatriate ran into legal, financial, or personal trouble, he positioned himself as the one to call. Lucas expressed an immediate interest in my research and took it upon himself to walk me through *Zhonghua Jie,* introducing me to potentially useful Chinese contacts, each time providing a different lie about who I was.[36] Usually, he portrayed me as a business owner looking for a deal;

[36]I never asked Lucas to do this, and it raises obvious red flags regarding informed consent. I eventually stopped reaching out to Lucas after I had explained to him why he couldn't continue lying about my profession, and yet he continued to insist that Chinese people would never trust me if they knew I was doing research. Lucas was not completely wrong, of course, and I did indeed move slowly with Chinese (and Kenyan) contacts instead of asking for consent to participate in my research up front, but I never told interlocutors an outright lie.

once, for reasons unknown, he introduced me as a psychologist looking for an office space. If we stopped to greet one person, he would insist we make the rounds and greet everybody, "in order to not look suspicious." Meanwhile, other Kenyans working in Chinatown expressed their own suspicion of Lucas and warned me that he was not trustworthy. I could never quite tease fact apart from fiction, but it was clear that Lucas found Kilimani's underworld exciting. "They are up to something," he would tell me, pointing out a Chinese restaurant he thought was a front or gesturing towards the security cameras outside the newly constructed Xinhua media headquarters. Although he complained about the corruption he saw all around him, he also relied on those same interstices between the licit and the illicit, earning a living by mediating with police and translating in court. His ambivalence, and the ambivalence others expressed about him, I soon came to recognize as a common orientation towards corruption. "Ambivalence" refers to a lack of synthesis between two irreconcilable poles (Kierans and Bell 2017). Throughout this chapter, competing values—e.g. personal profit vs. justice under the law—oscillate discordantly in relation to race, class, and nationality. Suspicion is inherently an ambivalent position: poised between trust and distrust, doubting but discerning, skeptical but willing to take a well measured leap (Pelkmans 2018).

The flip side of suspicion is "discretion" (McGovern 2012), a political and aesthetic mode of withholding salient information. Just as the discretion of *Forestière* communities feeds the suspicion of the Guinean state and vice versa (McGovern 2012, 234), secret keeping and secret probing existed alongside one another in Kilimani's Chinatown in what Mirco Göpfert (2020) calls the "circular performance of a will to conceal and a will to know." Lucas would sometimes give me a pointed glance when chatting with a Chinese contact and cryptically mutter that he would "tell me later." He warned me never to reveal too much about my research: "Go

slow, don't ask direct questions, throw your real question in with a bunch of other questions." I noticed similar discretions throughout the fleeting interactions described in the previous chapter, in which distances were preserved and attempts to probe deeper were subtly rebuffed. Grace displayed reticence when I attempted to learn more about duck suppliers. She also revealed to me some of the everyday discretions of running a business, like telling customers that the ducks were "finished" for the day rather than admitting that they were out of stock entirely.

I have come to understand that suspicion and discretion were inextricable to everyday sociality at the nexus of China-Kenya encounters in Kilimani. As Schmitz writes of Chinese-Angolan encounters, "The tentative cultivation of mistrustful collaboration" meant that "neither party hid their distrust of the other, and yet they continued to work together" (2021). Building on Schmitz, Driessen (2022) studies how Ethiopian lawyers and their Chinese clients attempt to establish predictability and loyalty in place of a deeper and more elusive trust. In the Nairobi context too, rather than being considered aberrations of a more "straightforward" and "literal" (Sutton 2003, 203) mode of relationality, discretion and suspicion were considered savvy and mutually beneficial, an ideal mode within which to navigate uncertain terrain.

The hermeneutics of suspicion that comprises the central focus of this chapter is multidirectional, but neither indiscriminate nor uniform. While suspicion might describe a dominant "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977, Vanke 2024) among both Chinese and Kenyans in Nairobi, their experiences are not equivalent. Overwhelmingly, from successful business owners to low-skilled workers, Chinese migrants possessed greater access to social and economic capital than most of their Kenyan coworkers, employees, and clients. An Afro-pessimistic view, in line with theorists like Sexton (2010) and Wilderson (2020), would be that the entrenched structures of global anti-Blackness preclude African people from ever becoming

full beneficiaries of foreign-funded development projects on the continent, including those started with Chinese capital. Mingwei Huang (2024) takes an analogous, but slightly softer, approach that also resonates with what I've witnessed in Nairobi. Following from Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Huang (2024) argues that Chinese economic activity in Africa "exacerbates uneven geographies of accumulation and development initially established by Euro-American colonial racial capitalism" (221). Even among the most marginalized Chinese migrants fleeing hardship and poverty back home, Huang argues, this fundamental inequality holds, since these migrants are still enabling the funneling of capital away from African laborers and into China, or at least into the pockets of local Chinese and African elites.

This uneven access to the benefits and protections afforded by both formalized and informal capitalist growth is reflected in the differences in how Chinese and Kenyans saw each other during my fieldwork. I mostly witnessed Chinese people viewing Kenyans with a suspicion couched in racialized class disparagement—claims like, to use examples from my fieldnotes, "You can't trust *heiren* [black people][37] around money like that" or "*bendiren* [locals] always want something from you, so it is hard to [make friends]." We might call this "downward suspicion." In contrast, Kenyans often viewed Chinese people with a suspicion couched in resentment of their perceived privileges—their relative wealth, business success, and ability to travel internationally. This resentment often merged with globally circulating anti-Chinese stereotypes to produce rumors about insidious economic takeovers, the flooding of the market with "fake" or adulterated goods, and redoubled suspicions about how suspicious *Chinese* people seemed to be of *them,* as if this proved that the Chinese must have something to hide. We might

[37] The Chinese word *heiren* literally means "Black person." I discuss this term in more depth in my introduction chapter.

term this “upward suspicion.” I therefore suggest that while encounters between Chinese and Kenyans might involve a vast diversity of people with widely varying socioeconomic backgrounds, racialized stereotypes become a means by which a stark *class* boundary can be drawn between the two groups. This race-class division can be seen in everything from political rhetoric to on-the-ground interaction, and it is categorized on both sides by a deep ambivalence, towards which a stance of suspicion becomes a shrewd way forward. As the remaining sections will explore, these suspicions were often verbalized through claims of corruption by the other side, including everything from bribery and counterfeiting to collusion and unfair pricing.

Chinese Relationality and Corruption

The word “corruption” by definition indicates something gone wrong, an aberration of the norm, a transgression upon the morally good. Beyond its universally negative connotations, however, corruption is notoriously impossible to pin down, reliant as it is upon relational and highly contested boundaries between categories like private vs. public, protection vs. piracy (Dua 2019) and gifts vs. bribes. Unlike outright crimes such as theft or burglary, corruption lurks beneath the surface of plausible deniability. Naming corruption as such, Muir and Gupta (2018) explain, “is always a performative judgment that invites disagreement across the entangled fields of legality and legitimacy.” Traditional social formations might be considered perfectly legitimate by their participants, only to be penalized under an external legal code with different logics, as Schmidt (2014) analyzes in the case of ethnic Luo “gastro-moral” networks in western Kenya. Bayart’s (1993) analysis of the “politics of the belly” similarly points to the internal legitimacy of patrimonial networks within African systems of governance that might appear corrupt to Western observers.

In Nairobi, after hearing rumors about corruption in the Chinese importation of ducks, I asked another local duck farmer named Aaron if he had ever heard similar accusations. The young man smiled knowingly. “I have been wondering about that,” he said. He had told me before about his frustrations trying to sell ducks to various Chinese restaurants. “The lady in the restaurant said, ‘We can’t buy ducks from you,’” he told me, then explained how “someone else offered to sell ducks [to her] for 1000 each [a very low price of about $8 USD]. But they want to support, maybe a Chinese farmer, or it's their farm, it's a bit disappointing.” Aaron had run up against informal business agreements that seemed to defy both legal regulations and the logic of the free market. These interpersonal networks seemed impenetrable and often appeared to dominate the movement of goods and services among Kenya’s Chinese residents.

Anthropologists have long noted that Chinese *guanxi* (social relations) draw strong boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders” (Fei 1992, Smart 1998, Sheridan 2018). The modern concept of Chinese *guanxi* is often thought to have emerged out of the Communist period of the 1950s-1960s, in which a widespread shortage of food and other necessary goods led to the formation of informal networks of exchange beyond the traditional obligations of the family and village (Kipnis 1997, Liu 2008). Building from Chinese social values like face (*mianzi*) and loyalty (*zhongcheng*), *guanxi* has continued to operate in the present day as both an organizing principle of everyday life and an object of metapragmatic discourse in contemporary China and throughout the diaspora (Ke-Schutte 2022). Much of this discourse has concerned the ambiguous and shifting lines between reasonable (*heli*) *guanxi* and its “dark side” of *fubai*, meaning corruption (Yang 1994, Ke-Schutte 2022). All *guanxi* involves gift exchange[38] for

[38] This gift exchange has often been described as adhering to the logic of the gift as outlined by Mauss (1925), in which the giver holds power over the receiver in the form of future favors owed. In everyday practice, this logic can be seen, for example, in the classic scramble for the bill at the end of any Chinese meal at a restaurant.

instrumental purposes, but whether the instrumental gain is emphasized above the nurturing of the relationship itself can help tip an interaction into *fubai* territory (Smart and Hsu 2017, 172). Maintaining this balance has been described as "an art" (Smart 1998), that requires skillful "tact" (Smart and Hsu 2017) to successfully accomplish. To pursue instrumental gain too directly or tactlessly risks damaging the relationship, as well as one's reputation more broadly.

Stable, trusting *guanxi* relationships take a long time to develop organically, and usually require a point of connection such as friends in common or a shared native dialect. To forge a relationship with someone of higher wealth or status, in particular, requires the skillful employment of points of common ground, as Hongqin Li et al. (2023) examine in their reflections as Chinese researchers conducting elite interviews in financial firms. As they reflect, "Chinese people tend to be suspicious of strangers such that they appear unwilling to talk without any 'catch-up' in advance" (912). In cross-cultural and diasporic contexts, this tendency toward initial suspicion has been interpreted as coldness or rudeness (Sheridan 2018, Wu 2020). These impressions likely shaped many of the shallow and angry interactions explored in the previous chapter.

As an ethnographer, *guanxi* for me has meant the very slow development of relationships with Chinese people through word-of-mouth mutual connections, rather than through cold-calling or asking directly for interviews, which were often refused. Without a doubt, my cultural capital and novelty as a Chinese-speaking white American helped me access these networks in ways many Kenyans could not, including those who had lived in China and could speak the language. Benefit of the doubt was extended more readily given my racial, national, and assumed class background. My previous experience living in several Chinese cities was also a help, since I could often share my experiences with an interlocutor's hometown or nearby regions.

For most Kenyans without a mutual contact or shared cultural connection, *guanxi* was very difficult to establish. Most necessary business interactions took place outside the bounds of *guanxi*, leaving the encounters perfunctory and without any openings in which to build trust or deepen the relationship. Sometimes these surface-level encounters were actually preferred by Kenyans in Nairobi. The duck farmer Aaron, for example, despite his disappointment trying to sell ducks to the Chinese, had met with better success brokering vegetable sales between Chinese restaurants and Marikiti, Nairobi's central wholesale produce market. Marikiti operated largely through informal networks and required the careful negotiation of trust, credit, and bribes paid to local officials. Compared with this volatility, Aaron described his Chinese buyers as more predictable. "Kenyans give good profit margins but they never pay, they only buy on credit," Aaron explained. "The Chinese only accept the lowest price, but they always pay in cash. Or if they don't have it on them, they will say, 'Meet me here at this time and I will pay you,' and they always do." This dependability helped compensate for his smaller profits. It also reflected a common inverse correlation within the logic of *guanxi* between the depth of a relationship and the time within which to return a favor (Smart 1998). Weak ties mean an immediate need to pay for the goods received, even if they also mean no trust and no guarantee of a repeat customer. As Aaron observed of his Chinese buyers, "They have no loyalty; if someone offers a lower price, they'll just leave and go there."

Of course, *guanxi* is highly malleable and should not be considered determinative of actual relationality in Nairobi (Ke-Schutte 2022, 36). In the African context, however, where local people not only lacked mutual connections but were also racialized as lower status in the eyes of many Chinese people (Huynh and Park 2018), *guanxi* can begin to ossify along racial-national lines. This was certainly intuited by many Kenyans, including a mushroom seller who

told me starkly that Chinese people "wouldn't buy from me because I'm Black." In the context of South Africa, Huang (2024) suggests that "Chinese identity is the precondition for trust," and that "a logic of endogamy gatekept who was included or excluded" (238), effectively erecting a racial boundary across which *guanxi* could not flourish. A Chinese acquaintance named Ruby once explained *guanxi* to me bluntly (in English) over coffee in Yaya Centre: "We are more comfortable with our own people, okay. So when outsiders approach to us, we feel, 'what are you?'...I know Chinese, okay, I know them; if I am in trouble I know they are there. I know there must be several people there who is waiting for me, to help me."

To Ruby and many others embedded within a *guanxi* network, the fears and uncertainties of life far away from home could be mitigated. Many Chinese interlocutors described being warned not to trust Kenyans when they first arrived in the country (see also Sheridan 2023), and felt entirely reliant on their Chinese networks for housing, transportation, and community. When I asked if he had local friends, for example, a young Chinese logistics worker newly arrived in Nairobi replied: "I know some people, but everyone says *heiren* are not to be trusted." Eventually, after living in Kenya for several years, many expatriates branched out and made more local connections. This was easier, of course, for highly educated English-speaking Chinese expatriates, particularly from wealthier urban backgrounds, who already felt themselves to be a part of Nairobi's "cosmopolitan enclave" (Rey et al. 2021). Some even embarked on interracial relationships and business partnerships, joined churches, enrolled in Kenyan university programs, and otherwise integrated themselves into the larger Kenyan society.

Many Kenyans, however, described feeling kept at arm's length even after long periods of contact with Chinese coworkers and acquaintances. For example, Mary—the potential Wajackoyah voter from the introduction—was a Maasai woman from Ngong who had lived in

China for several years and could speak Chinese. Despite her familiarity with Chinese culture, she often felt distrusted in her working relationships in Nairobi. She had held several jobs within Kilimani's Chinese community, including in a restaurant where I first met her, then later as a translator at a roofing company. After being let go from this job, Mary told me, " I won't work as a translator or interpreter again. When I've had those jobs, they never lasted long." She had begun to suspect that they didn't trust her precisely *because* she could speak Chinese, and her employers did not want to be overheard. This was a complaint I repeatedly heard from Chinese-speaking Kenyans, who often found it paradoxically difficult to find and keep a good job. One Kenyan man who had spent over a decade in China described coworkers speaking their local dialect in front of him instead of Mandarin. Bernard, the Kenyan manager of the *Zhonghua Jie* shopping complex, told me the same thing: "Chinese prefer for their employees not to speak Chinese, so that they do not know about the illegal activities they are up to." Bernard went on to describe issues in *Zhonghua Jie* with money laundering, visa and license fraud, illegal sex work, and many other illicit practices that he often found himself caught in the middle of, relying on Google Translate to mediate between Chinese migrants and the Kenyan police.

While Bernard linked this distrust to the prevalence of corruption and other illegal activities, Mary linked it to *guanxi* (though she did not use that word). "They only need a translator to help them settle [when they first arrive in Kenya]," she told me, "to get them a house, get them papers, but then they are finished and don't contact you again." In Mary's experience, it was "hard to break in" to the Chinese networks that had developed in Nairobi in which "they buy cakes from Chinese bakeries, vegetables from Chinese farms; if they want to buy a house they go through Chinese."

In China as well as in the diasporic context of Nairobi, corruption and *guanxi* are ambiguously intertwined concepts. Which behaviors are interpreted as corrupt depends on perceptions of "local protectionism" (Priest 2006) and whether or not one values "transparency" (Mu 2024). Corruption is also multidirectional, and the instrumental favors permitted by *guanxi* often found purchase within the informal practices of exchange and patrimonialism that are quite common in Kenya.

African Informalities and Corruption

Like corruption and *guanxi*, corruption and the "informal" social networks and marketplaces common throughout Africa are entangled in ambiguous ways. These are spaces of tenuous legitimacy, where the prevailing norms often predate the imposition of state regulation, and where informal workers often vastly outnumber those engaged in formal employment (Rosaldo 2021).[39] Scholars have questioned the notion of the informal as a "sector" at all, as in Roitman's (1990) analysis of the "false dichotomy" between informal markets and the state which in fact interpenetrate and co-produce one another. Thieme (2018) and Siegmann and Schiphorst (2016) further question the relegation of the informal to the Global South, pointing to the precarity of the underemployed and the growing gig economy as evidence that unregulated, unrecorded, and unpredictable economic structures are all around us. Nevertheless, the fact that a majority of Africans across the continent make their living through "informal" means (Agbiboa 2022) suggests the need to take informality seriously, rather than discarding the category altogether. As Mary Njeri Kinyanjui (2019) argues, informal African markets follow their own

[39] As of 2023, approximately 85% of working Kenyans were employed in the so-called informal sector (Cowling 2024).

logics and should be understood on their own terms, not merely as aberrations of how the economy is supposed to work.

Many studies of on-the-ground informality in Global South cities like Nairobi have focused on how informal workers conceptualize themselves and make sense of their own roles within broader social formations. Since the 1980s, the term *jua kali* ("hot sun") has been used to describe skilled artisans in Kenya without formal employment, including carpenters, metalworkers, and mechanics (King 1996). The term has since come to encompass a wide range of work from side-of-the-road labor to "microenterprises," and is often associated with skill, "propriety" (Fontein 2023) and "decent work" (Momanyi 2024). In contrast, the term "hustler" arose more recently in Nairobi to describe an orientation to work that prioritizes "opportunism, playfulness and fierce persistence" (Thieme et al. 2021) over the appeals of a steady job. "Hustler" or "hustling," referred to as such in both Kenyan English and Sheng (the mixed slang language of Nairobi's youth), has emerged as a potent descriptor and symbol of a particular kind of 21st century way of making a living that transcends social class to encompass everything from informal labor to the platform gig economy. Tracing its roots to 20th century American pool halls and the hip-hop rhetoric of urban Black Americans, hustling came to represent a politicized narrative of making do in conditions of violence, disenfranchisement, and blurred lines between the legal and the illegal (Thieme 2018 538). The term has since been taken up and redeployed in postcolonial African cities like Nairobi, as well as in London, Paris, and beyond. It has found resonance in other local conceptions of urban making-do, including *jugaad* in India, *la débrouille* in Cameroon, and *kukiya-kiya* in Zimbabwe (540). It also evokes the spirit of *shanzhai* in China, which I will return to later. As a form of "traveling theory" (Said 1983, in Thieme 2018 539), hustling resonates across urban contexts while speaking evocatively to particularities of

place and time, including a recent interest in the "hustle culture" of start-ups, gig workers, and underemployment in the United States (e.g. Ravenelle 2019).

In Nairobi, almost every Kenyan I met "hustled" in some form or another. Lucas, the "cultural consultant" to Nairobi's Chinese community, was always on his feet and on his phone, negotiating and mediating and networking. He would switch seamlessly between Swahili, English, and Chinese, greeting people left and right, always adding new contacts to his phone and looking for new gigs. Aaron, the vegetable broker and aspiring duck farmer, always had a new side project to tell me about each time we met, including growing mushrooms to sell to the Chinese, raising geese and guinea fowl, and building a prototype solar oven. He had held a number of full-time formal jobs throughout his life as well, from working in hotels and casinos to running the front desk of a microfinance lender in Marikiti. "In Kenya we don't just have one career," my Naivasha-based research assistant Bloom explained to me patiently the first time we worked together. He had identified himself to me as a tour guide, but had also worked before as a research assistant, community organizer, and general fixer and liaison for a variety of people across a variety of sectors.

Not everyone who works in the informal economy identifies as a hustler, however, and Fontein (2023) cautions against its blanket use as theory outside the contexts where it is emically embraced. He points particularly to its recent co-option by Kenyan politicians as a perverse articulation of class solidarity, or what he calls "the inverse snobbery of Nairobi's wealthier classes seeking streetwise acumen" (74). In particular, current President William Ruto adopted the term during his 2022 campaign, which he positioned as a battle of "hustlers vs. dynasties" in order to disparage his opponent, Raila Odinga. Despite his enormous wealth and previous position as vice president under Uhuru Kenyatta, Ruto emphasized his modest upbringing in

order to portray himself as a self-made man and highlight Odinga's famous father, Kenya's first vice president (under Jomo Kenyatta) Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. During my fieldwork in Kilimani at the height of this campaign, my interlocutors seemed more likely to use the term "hustle" in a negative light, such as when *Zhonghua Jie'*s Kenyan manager Bernard quipped dismissively about "Ruto's hustlers," or when Grace of Duck Express told me that she did not want to "hustle and make so much money that I can't enjoy life, just making money for the sake of making money."

The ambivalence of "hustle" in Nairobi speaks to a central feature of scholarship on informality: the oppositional and sometimes paradoxical roles of elite state actors in perpetuating uneven and unregulated flows of capital. As both opposition and enabler, the state fetishizes the law (Comaroff and Comaroff 2007) and the formal (Owens et al. 2018), even as enforcement is uneven and preferential. Corruption arises from the nodes of intersection between the formal and the informal, in which the individual people that comprise the regulatory state—police officers, border agents, tax collectors—choose to "bend the law for personal gain" (Huang 2024, 229). These small instances of everyday corruption "protect" (Dua 2019) the precarious livelihoods of informal workers and enable them to keep going, but they also add up into regimes of systemic corruption that implicate every scale of society, from someone giving a clerk *kitu kidogo* (a little something) at the passport office to complex structural regimes of fraud and nepotism.

I witnessed this intertwining of state and street-level corruption myself when Aaron, the duck farmer and vegetable broker mentioned above, took me for a tour of Nairobi's central produce market Marikiti. He and his wife Ruth accompanied me closely as we walked through the street just outside the main market. Aaron insisted on carrying my bags so that nobody would "bother me," as he put it. Sellers greeted us and Aaron told me who had good garlic, who was

new, and who trusted him enough to sell on credit. Suddenly, groups of uniformed *askaris* (security guards) came through the street and a commotion erupted. Some of the men—*kanjo*, Aaron told me, referring to city councilors—drove prisoner transport vehicles. Others were on foot, wielding batons and knocking over piles of vegetables that spilled into the street. They confiscated huge sacks of goods. People scattered. Aaron pulled me away to wait with some brokers he knew until they had passed. Later, Aaron told me that these were the head brokers and functioned like a gang. They would have bothered me, maybe even robbed me, if he hadn't been there and told them that he was already brokering for me. Still, Aaron told me, the market was much safer than it used to be. Crime was down under a new chairman who his wife Ruth called "a hero." Even the *kanjo* were better now, Aaron said, "though they still require bribes." He went on to describe their usual process: "They come through about once a week. Those who have bribed them receive advance warning or aren't touched when they come through. They used to attack with knives and daggers, and even killed people, but they have stopped and those people were imprisoned. So it's better than it was."

I relay this market scene to demonstrate how informal livelihoods in and near the market become embroiled not only in the brokers' networks of payment and protection, but also in the larger structure of city council enforcement procedures, in which favored bribe-payers escaped the rule of law. Aaron's stance towards all of this was one of ambivalence. On one hand, he felt disgusted and exhausted by the corruption and violence he saw all around him, the extra money "recorded wrong in the books," as he put it when describing a colleague at Marikiti. On the other hand, he was building his career around the margins of the formal economy, filling gaps and jumping nimbly between jobs and deals. The presence of Chinese food industries in Nairobi was

nothing radically new for people like Aaron, but merely represented another opportunity to make deals, another network to penetrate, and another site for corruption to manifest.

From the Chinese perspective, a similar sense of ambivalence characterized many migrants' experiences with informality in Nairobi. To the well resourced and multilingual, the loose regulatory state enabled freedom from the minutiae of legal compliance. For example, a Chinese factory owner and hobby pig farmer who went by the English name Michael told me nonchalantly about his desire to remain unvaccinated against Covid-19.[40] At the time, Kenyan border agents were strictly checking vaccine records at customs checkpoints. After returning from a business trip to Rwanda, however, Michael simply paid the agent 5000 Kenya shillings (about $40 USD) and "it was okay" (*jiu hao le*). As Michael put it, "There are lots of opportunities here because the economy is still developing; even though it is corrupt [*fubai*], it is still a good place to live." Coming from a rural peasant (*nongmin*) background, Michael had been empowered to grow his business in Kenya, and even to begin raising pigs "haphazardly" (*ou'er*), without any prior experience. His target customer for his pork was the upscale Chinese expatriate who "doesn't really care about prices" (*bu tai kan jiage*), and with whom he could exchange meat for Renminbi via mobile app, thereby bypassing both taxes and exchange rates. Michael's experience, along with the experiences of many Chinese entrepreneurs in Kenya, fits into what Edwin Lin (2014) calls "small pond migration," a strategy of moving to a less developed place in order to advance one's relative socioeconomic status and "maximize the effectiveness of their existing capital" (189).

[40] Both Chinese and Kenyan interlocutors expressed widespread distrust of Covid-19 vaccines throughout my fieldwork. This reflects a broader hermeneutics of suspicion in which substances like medications that are mandated by the government (especially when developed abroad) are considered malevolent. Many other cases of medical suspicion have been examined by anthropologists (e.g. Renne 1996, Grimen 2009, Mkhwanazi 2016, Ali and Rose 2022).

At the same time, however, Chinese migrants with weaker English skills and fewer resources often felt victimized by the informalities of governance in Kenya. As Zhao, a Chinese seafood seller explained to me, "I do not dare to go out at night; I never walk past eight o'clock. The police especially target Chinese people, they are so corrupt; they will ask for 300 USD or else arrest you and take you to the police station, and Chinese people would rather do anything to avoid going there." Due process under the law, not to mention protection from crime, could not be guaranteed without payment, particularly in the case of Chinese people who did not speak English and simply wanted to avoid trouble. I heard stories of Chinese people arrested and taken to a "black box" from which they could be summarily deported. Chinese residents in Nairobi circulated these stories, which helped to close the ranks of *guanxi* along the racial-national line.

Several scholars have pointed to how the effects of corruption ripple ambivalently throughout society, from Agbiboa's characterization of "A culture for/against corruption" in Nigeria (2022, 19), to Wiegratz's descriptions of Ugandan traders who "adjusted, switched off or (temporarily) dropped some of their moral beliefs and commitments due to the severe economic difficulties they were facing, and acted in ways that they and others actually regarded as improper" (2010, 131-132). Embedded within a multi-scalar system of corruption, actors like Aaron and many Chinese migrants come to view everyone around them, from traders to government officials, with suspicion. Such "generalized suspicion, even total discredit" (Mbembe 2001, 165) has spread beyond the informal marketplace, and has emerged as a dominant mode to describe many facets of lived experience across scales of power in postcolonial societies, particularly in Africa.

Empty Signifiers and the Rhetoric of Fakeness

Under the structural adjustment policies of the 1990s, neoliberal reforms ostensibly sought to curb corruption and reduce poverty by mandating multiparty elections, instituting transparency measures, and promoting widespread privatization and deregulation policies. Instead, true to the slippery and "unruly" nature of corruption (Muir and Gupta 2018), many scholars have analyzed how structural adjustment policies merely shifted the parameters, opening new avenues through which foreign and domestic elites could enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary citizens (e.g. Ferguson 2006, Chalfin 2010, Wiegratz 2019). These processes occur worldwide and are hardly unique to Africa, of course (Comaroff and Comaroff 2007). Nevertheless, Achille Mbembe (2001) points to the propensity for the postcolonial state, in particular, to "mask[] the power of its own arbitrariness, its own potential for opacity, simulacrum, and distortion" (142).

In many African countries, as neoliberal policies penetrated but did not entirely replace older networks of patronage and clientelism, new systems emerged that appeared unpredictable and incomprehensible to the general public. A facade of transparency, privatization, and reduced state power increasingly hid a reality in which large-scale corruption continued unabated. As Robert Blunt (2004) writes, these changes "produced a widespread condition of epistemological murk" (297). While "transparency" was being publicly celebrated, the economy became more complex and difficult to decipher. As foreign donors announced poverty reduction schemes, people only seemed to become poorer. The old logics of the "politics of the belly" (Bayart 1993, in Blunt 2004, 303) seemed no longer clearly linked to the patronage networks of the past; instead, "bellies got bigger as the value of Kenya's money got smaller" (303). This "fatal split" (Blunt 2004, 300) between the signifier and the signified, the surface and underneath,

undermines the public's trust in the governing bodies of the state to the point of eroding the "form[s] of reason that would make everyday existence readable" (Mbembe 2001, 143).

To fill the gaps between the seen and the unseen, rumors flourish in Nairobi and elsewhere about the existence of nefarious conspiracies, devil worship, and other grotesque and occult practices (Blunt 2004, Smith 2001, 2008).[41] In general, the genre of the rumor is recognized as a powerful way for people to articulate their resistance against a system that renders them powerless (Renne 1996, Kirsch 2002). Even among those not swept up in the Pentecostal satanic paranoia[42] that Blunt (2004) analyzes, throughout my fieldwork plenty of Kenyans found themselves at a loss to explain why life seemed so hard, why so many systems seemed broken, and why the wealth inequality gap seemed to grow ever wider, especially while watching their political leaders buy mansions and helicopters. This decoupling of "meaning and value" (Blunt 2004) has recurred again and again as a theme in Nairobi and other African cities through crises over fake currency (Blunt 2004), fake knowledge production (Kingori 2021), fake medications (Quet 2021), and fake relationships (Schmidt 2024). These crises require citizens to cultivate "discernment" (Smith 2020), to practice an active and alert hermeneutics of suspicion in order to protect themselves from harm. To identify and declare something as fake is to demonstrate a new kind of social capital—not unlike "wokeness" in the United States, I'd argue—and thereby to regain some power. During my fieldwork, I heard over and over again not to buy honey on the street because it might be fake, not to believe that the beggars were actually

[41] This is not to say that all rumors of the occult can be reduced to political-economic shifts, nor that they are mere metaphors. As Adam Ashforth wrote, "Please note: when people gather at a borehole in rural Malawi and talk of bloodsuckers, they are not, unbeknownst to themselves, engaging in a critique of neoliberalism" (2014, 856; in Dingley 2022).

[42] Narratives of satanic corruption still abound in Kenya today. Aaron, the vegetable broker/duck farmer described above, once told me in great detail about having escaped a church that engaged in devil worship. This was evidenced by several suspicious miscarriages and recent deaths of babies among the congregation, as well as a wholesale onion deal gone wrong.

poor, and never to trust local alcohol because it might be poisonous. This discourse adds up into what Comaroff and Comaroff (2007) call "a counterfeit modernity," in which anything and everything not only can be, but *should be* a cause for suspicion.

Constance Smith (2020, 2023), for example, describes the proliferation of "fake" architectural structures in Nairobi's rapidly growing working and lower-class neighborhoods like Pipeline. Hastily constructed, aesthetically sleek, and materially fragile, these new high-rise apartment blocks blur the lines between informal and formal construction in a process she terms "gray development." While older *mabati* (corrugated iron) dwellings look and feel precarious, these new concrete housing blocks resemble the expensive balconied condos of neighborhoods like Kilimani, even as they crumble and collapse. Describing these structures as "fake," Nairobi residents articulate their discomfort with the hidden faults in their material environment, the unknown corners cut beneath "the veneer of formal correctness" (Smith 2020, 15). Throughout my fieldwork, I heard similar fears articulated with regard to Chinese-financed high-rise construction in Kilimani. Soon after arriving in Nairobi in the summer of 2021, a crane collapsed onto a partially built tower, killing seven Kenyan and two Chinese workers (Orinde 2021). This incident sparked many criticisms among my interlocutors of shoddy construction practices under Chinese management. The massive size of these buildings, their location in wealthy Kilimani, and their official permitting through government contacts only exacerbated the suspicious nature of these projects in comparison to the "gray development" of Pipeline. If even foreign-funded luxury towers could collapse, nothing at all was safe, real, or trustworthy.

Suspicion of Chinese material things, like suspicion of anything with "the veneer of formal correctness" (Smith 2020, 15), was often verbalized as a way to reflect back on the untrustworthiness of Kenyan society and the Kenyan government (Plummer 2022). When

chatting with another duck farmer named Simon, for example, the topic of Chinese people eating dogs quickly morphed into a long and detailed description of food scandals in Kenya, including the sneaking of dog and cat meat into samosas, and an alleged case of an overturned motorbike found to have been transporting aborted cow fetuses to sell as meat.

Another prominent example concerned the controversial opening, closing, and re-opening of a Chinese imported goods store called China Square after my fieldwork had ended in 2023. The store was enormously successful, selling a reported Sh20 million (approximately $142,000 USD) worth of goods in its first two weeks (Ciuri 2023) and attracting long lines of customers to a previously desolate shopping complex near Kenyatta University. Products could be purchased for about half the price of those available—also imported from China—in Nairobi's local markets. The face of China Square was part-owner Lei Cheng, a suave young businessman who declared confidently in a newspaper interview that Kenyans were being "exploited" by the high prices demanded in the local markets (Ciuri 2023). Soon, local traders began staging protests outside China Square and in Nairobi's Central Business District, claiming they were being undercut. Signs proclaimed slogans like "We are not a Chinese colony," and "Stop China invasion." Traders threatened to strike in Gikomba, one of Nairobi's main wholesale markets. In mid February, 2023, the Anti-Counterfeit Authority (ACA) seized Ksh50 million worth of goods from China Square due to suspected intellectual property infringement. The shop closed down indefinitely.

Interestingly, a week after China Square closed, the Anti-Counterfeit Authority announced that it had found no evidence of piracy and returned all of the seized goods. Perhaps money changed hands to enable this return; I cannot know for certain. In any case, China Square

reopened for business shortly thereafter.[43] Whether or not the goods were actually counterfeit, the rhetoric online and among people I knew overwhelmingly focused on *Kenyan* corruption rather than Chinese missteps. Netizens on Facebook[44] celebrated the variety of affordable products available at China Square and lamented that it only closed because "elites *wanasema* [say] China is bad." Another netizen said that instead of protesting, Kenyan traders "should borrow notes from this Chinese guy [Lei Cheng] and get us quality goods at affordable prices." An article about the protests on Facebook attracted comments warning against "xenophobia" and referencing the popular political rhetoric of the "hustler" as the common man working against a system created by the elite. A common thread throughout such posts and comments was a deep suspicion of local and national leadership, who were seen as serving elite ethnic interests over the Kenyan people as a whole. Comments frequently referenced the Kikuyu political "cabal" that controls Nyamakima Market, for example, which was a key site of trader protests.

I offer this example to demonstrate commenters' widespread lack of confidence in their fellow Kenyans—traders and leaders alike—to act in the best interest of the people. Those in power seemed to want to push an anti-Chinese narrative of xenophobia in order to win the citizenry over to the side of the local traders, but too many Kenyans saw through this attempt. They aimed their shrewd suspicion not at the Chinese imported goods for their alleged fakeness, but at the deeper entanglements of power and corruption within their own society.

The fact that these were *Chinese* goods that were seized as "counterfeit," however, is not arbitrary to the story. Unlike imports from other countries especially in the Global North, Chinese imports carry a particularly "sticky" (Ahmed 2004, Puar 2008, Huang 2019) reputation

[43] Since 2023, China Square has expanded to multiple Nairobi locations, plus stores in Mombasa and Kisumu.
[44] Source for all quoted posts: https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/chinasquare.

for forgery and fakeness (Katiambo 2019). This reputation resonates all over the world and is likely familiar to readers in the United States. Much of this reputation has come from Chinese people themselves, from their own rapid industrial development and its associated innovations and suspicions. As the next section will explore, these concerns then enter the suspicious consumer landscape in Kenya, amplifying multidirectional fears and refracting into rumors and stereotypes.

Shanzhai and Plastic Fish

After embarking on economic reforms in 1978, China experienced a rapid rise in international information exchange, as well as an explosion of manufacturing capability as Chinese goods began to enter the global marketplace. The whirlwind pace of development through the 2000s and 2010s favored innovation and flexibility, resulting in a flourishing of production that pushed the bounds of formal market regulations and skirted international laws protecting intellectual property (IP). Counterfeit, knock-off, pirated, and plagiarized products quickly began to proliferate within China and beyond. The term *shanzhai*, literally "mountain fortress," emerged as a descriptor of counterfeit goods, the informal market, and their associated ethos of unbridled creation.

Shanzhai in contemporary Chinese usage is often traced to the 14th century novel *Shuihu Zhuan* (known in English by the titles *Water Margin* or *All Men Are Brothers*), attributed to writer Shi Nai'an. The "mountain fortress" was a cave providing sanctuary to a band of heroic outlaws, who, like Robin Hood, attacked the wealthy and powerful in order to rid the realm of corruption. Although technically illegal, therefore, *shanzhai* is associated with a counterculture that is ultimately morally good (Hennessey 2018). In the 2000s, a cultural craze around *shanzhai*

emerged through online discourse to celebrate an ethos of freedom and creativity. Many of the products highlighted within this discourse played with the genre of counterfeit "hybridity" (Chubb 2015) by using tongue-in-cheek humor like "Okay" hair products (instead of Olay) (Chubb 2015) or a "Nokia" phone showing intertwined feet instead of the brand's iconic intertwined hands (Mu 2024). Other products innovated new features beyond what the "originals" offered, like knock-off smartphones with dual sim cards and apps to detect counterfeit currency (Mu 2024). Writer Xiaowei Wang describes *shanzhai* as "open source on hyperspeed, an unapologetic confrontation with Western ideas of intellectual property" (2020, 133). Western-style innovation is proprietary and gate-kept by venture capitalists, while *shanzhai* is decentralized, unfettered, and endlessly customizable. *Shanzhai* has been interpreted as an ethic of "pluriversal design" (Mu 2024), building from the Chinese values of relationality over essence and change over origin (Han 2017, in Mu 2024). This challenges the hegemony of a Western-centric IP regime that only seeks to protect its own brands in new markets (Martin 2022, in Mu 2024), and thus carries "vaguely anti-colonial undertones" (Beshty 2012).

A Kenyan interlocutor of mine, Njeri, picked up on these anti-colonial undertones in her interpretation of Chinese goods circulating in Kenya. Njeri was a tea blender operating a small business in Nairobi; her story will be further explored in Chapter 6. Although Njeri complained about many Chinese goods being "fake" or of poor quality, she also appreciated their accessibility to even the poorest Kenyans. As she told me, "Even in the [Kenyan] villages, people can sell small chargers and things from China. They are not as bad as the whites are trying to portray them. There's been a big rise in the number of people coming from low income…the influence of Chinese allows them to move into middle income." Njeri's reference to how "whites" perceived China recognized the subversive nature of low-cost goods within a

global hegemonic system of rules and regulations that never seemed to serve the needs of the poorest people.

Shanzhai also has a dark side, however. Sometimes translated as "fake," *shanzhai* resonates not only with the empowering potential of "hustling" in Kenya, but also with its anxious suspicion and moral ambivalence. Like hustling, *shanzhai* is embedded within a larger system in which informality and legal regulations are preferentially enabled and enforced through networks that might be described as "corrupt." When quality cannot be guaranteed, and when the appearance of a product may or may not index its materiality, everything is a potential danger and a cause for suspicion. Like Kenyan crises over fake currency and buildings (Blunt 2004, Smith 2020), Chinese citizens too have suffered from the apparent decoupling of signifiers and signified, in which profit-seeking and *guanxi* seem to predominate over material safety and reliability. These anxieties have emerged particularly around the products that most intimately affect the body, including food.[45]

Several very real food adulteration incidents in China's recent history loom large in public memory. Chief among these was an incident disclosed in 2008 in which powdered milk products including infant formula were found to have been intentionally contaminated with melamine to boost its apparent protein content. Over 300,000 infants and young children were affected, with at least six reported deaths (Gossner et al. 2009). Other real incidents I remember from my time living in China include the use of recycled "gutter" cooking oil and rat meat being passed off as lamb, both of which were substantiated and led to arrests of the perpetrators (Li et al. 2017, Nelson 2013). These scandals have given rise to unfounded accusations of food adulteration in China that circulate online through rumors. Examples include waves of paranoia

[45] Medicines and beauty products have also been the target of scandals, scares, and paranoias in China.

about plastic seaweed, grapes contaminated with birth control medication, and seafood contaminated with radiation from the Fukushima nuclear plant; none of these have been substantiated (Huang 2017, Hawkins and McCurry 2023).

Chinese people carry these anxieties with them abroad, and I suggest that this adds both to their own reputation for untrusting insularity, and to the reputation of Chinese food and other products as unwholesome. To return to the duck meat industry, for example, one Kenyan farmer by the name of Abdul had managed to find success with the Chinese market. He was one of the earliest and largest duck farmers in the Nairobi area and supplied many other local farmers (including Aaron) with eggs and ducklings to start their own enterprises. Abdul had discovered that a change in his slaughtering procedure helped to win over Chinese customers. He explained to me:

> In China there was a famine, which is why they eat lots of stuff. Now in China they don't trust each other, so they want the head [of the duck] to be intact. So you slaughter it so the blood can pour, but you want the head to still be attached so they can see what it is. Same with rabbits, they want the head to be on the body. Otherwise they can sell a cat and lie to them that it's a rabbit. They want the head to be joined to that body to make sure what you're saying is what you're selling. I don't mind selling the head joined to the body because the head adds weight and they normally buy by weight. So to me, I'm happy saving the head and feet and everything.

Figure 10. An employee tends to ducks and chickens at Abdul's farm outside Nairobi (2022).

For Abdul, Chinese food suspicion proved helpful to his business since he was able to adapt his practices in mutually beneficial ways. For many other people in Kenya, however, internationally circulating rumors about adulterated or fraudulent Chinese food only serve to stir up controversy and a widespread lack of trust. Aaron, for example, told me that he assumed that most Chinese imported goods were "GMOs" (genetically modified organisms—a subject of much suspicion in Kenya, e.g. Rahier 2023). Perhaps stemming from anxieties articulated by his Chinese clients themselves, Aaron told me had heard that most food in China was genetically modified, which would explain why so many imported Chinese food items were larger than their Kenyan equivalents. "They have this idea that bigger is better, that size equals quality," Aaron told me,

with specific reference to Chinese imported garlic which had come to dominate locally grown garlic in Marikiti. Chinese garlic was larger and whiter, easier to peel, but tasteless compared to the smaller, purplish Kenyan variety.

Another example concerned the recent (and ongoing) suspicion of fish imported from China. Over the past decade, fish stocks in Lake Victoria, Kenya's largest freshwater lake, have declined while Kenya's human population has grown. As the next chapter will explore in depth, fish stocks in Kenya's second largest freshwater lake, Lake Naivasha, have also been highly volatile. To fill this rising gap between supply and demand, Kenya has increasingly relied on imported fish from China, particularly tilapia, several species of which are native to the African Great Lakes and are beloved in local cuisines.

Tilapia are farmed in mass aquaculture schemes in China primarily for export to Africa, the United States, and elsewhere; they are not usually eaten by Chinese people. My Chinese interlocutor Ying, a highly adventurous eater, had never eaten tilapia until she lived in Kenya. My research suggests that tilapia are not only rarely eaten in China, but are actively disliked by many people. Scientifically called *luofeiyu*, the fish are also called *Feizhou jiyu* (African crucian carp) or simply *lajiyu*, meaning "garbage fish." This latter moniker comes from the fish's propensity to escape aquaculture ponds and enter local waterways, including sewers (Ye 2024), often becoming an invasive pest (Yongo et al. 2023). At least one blogger in China claims that "even Guangdong people who eat everything are afraid to eat it" (Ye 2024). Although I never heard Chinese people in Nairobi express outright disgust at tilapia, many people told me that they preferred to eat carp, which they deemed tastier. I find it ironic that tilapia's reputation in China so closely mirrors the disgust associated with ducks in Kenya. Both animals' material-

semiotic edibility, rooted in associations with dirty water, come to structure both their aesthetic culinary appeal, and their political-economic supply chains on the ground.

Regardless of the fish's reputation in China, frozen tilapia have made their way to the fish markets of Kisumu, near Lake Victoria, where they were met with ambivalence and suspicion. On one hand, the tilapia were more affordable for consumers and provided valuable nutrition to low-income people. On the other hand, they have been the source of political and popular controversy for many years. Chinese tilapia have often been called "fake fish" or "plastic fish" (Plummer 2022). What does it mean for a flesh-and-bones tilapia, a once-living fish, to be "fake" or "real?" Why is the word "plastic," usually[46] used metaphorically and not literally, so readily understood among the Kenyan public to index Chineseness? Chinese tilapia are often portrayed as something monstrous or poisonous in opposition to the wholesomeness of local fish; however, I have not found convincing evidence to suggest that Chinese tilapia are any less healthy to consumers than those from Lake Victoria.[47]

The problem, I would argue, is that it is nearly impossible to trace where a given tilapia came from. At the fish markets near Lake Victoria, Chinese imports are mixed into the local stocks and passed off as fresh (Olander 2022). All of these fish eventually end up for sale at markets and restaurants across Kenya, and become virtually impossible to trace. When I asked Kenyans whether they could tell the difference between local and Chinese tilapia, they always said yes. They claimed that the local tilapia were tastier and sturdier, making comparisons to

[46] At least one tweet on the topic of "plastic fish" seems to claim that the fish actually contains plastic particles: https://twitter.com/alfredarapketer/status/1178767481189462016

[47] A 2019 study commissioned by the Kenyan newspaper the *Nation* measured the levels of toxic heavy metals in Chinese imported tilapia, and identified high levels of lead, mercury, and other pollutants (Olingo 2019); the study, however, did not compare the Chinese fish to local Lake Victoria fish. The next year, the *Nation* conducted a separate investigation into Lake Victoria's declining water quality and identified many of these same pollutants in levels far beyond what is considered safe for consumption (Wafula 2020); this study likewise did not mention Chinese fish. To readers of the *Nation*, the toxicity of Chinese tilapia, therefore, can remain a source of fear and disgust that is unaffected by new information about the wider context of toxicity in freshwater fish.

"*kuku kienyeji"* (organic/free range chicken) vs. "broilers" (factory-farmed chicken). However, several online articles and videos attempting to instruct customers on the differences between "original" and "fake" fish come to the conclusion that the distinction is subtle, if not impossible to perceive (e.g. Oudia 2021). The desire for discernment, even when the physical properties of Chinese fish are indiscernible, fosters anxiety and suspicion that extends beyond the fish markets and resonates with larger political anxieties about the influx of Chinese goods in Kenya.

Since the early 2000s, Chinese imported consumer products have become widespread in Kenya and throughout Africa (Bristow 2007).[48] As in the rest of the world, the "made-in-China" label that proliferated under the *shanzhai* ethos of Chinese economic reforms in the late 20th century has been met with ambivalence. In Kenya as well as in the United States, we simultaneously distrust the quality and authenticity of Chinese goods, even as we are enticed by their affordability and ubiquity. Low quality and actual infringements upon protected intellectual property are separate but conflated accusations that can be difficult to disentangle (Plummer 2022). Even if most Chinese imports in Kenya are legitimate, the stigma of counterfeit ("fake") goods is a "sticky" one (Ahmed 2004, Puar 2008, Huang 2019); every time an incident occurs in which a Chinese counterfeit good is discovered, it reiterates and strengthens a dominant stereotype associating the Chinese with fakeness. Known as *chinkuu* in Sheng, the urban language of Nairobi's youth, Chinese goods—counterfeit or not—are widely regarded as cheap, dishonest, and subversive (Zhu 2022). The descriptor of "plastic," meanwhile, indexes not only

[48] Today, China is Kenya's largest single trading partner, accounting for over 16% of Kenya's international trade; as of 2020, Chinese imports to Kenya were worth around 3.5 billion USD (Usman and Abayo 2022). This trade is highly imbalanced; Kenya's trade deficit to China accounts for nearly this full amount at approximately 3.3 billion USD, which constitutes one third of Kenya's total international deficits (Usman and Abayo 2022). While Kenya exports a few products to China (mainly agricultural goods such as tea, coffee, fruits, and leather), China exports a much wider variety of goods to Kenya: electrical machinery, appliances and parts, agrochemicals, iron and steel, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and household goods of all kinds.

the cheap and flimsy material with which many made-in-China goods are constructed, but also a wider discourse of all things foreign, unassimilable, and morally suspect (Meiu 2020).

In the case of imported tilapia, "plastic" fish evoke food scandals within China as well as longstanding rumors that have echoed across Africa and the world, from unsubstantiated accounts of imported "plastic rice" (Subedar 2017, Deepalakshmi 2017) to debunked myths of Chinese tinned meat containing human flesh (Taylor 2016). The tilapia story has been reiterated across international news outlets, including an article in *Le Monde* that referred to Chinese tilapia as "grotesque" (Hochet-Bodin 2022) This further reinforces the "stickiness" of fear and scandal around Chinese imports. These anxieties have had political repercussions. In 2018, in response to outcry from Kenyan fishers and distributors, then-president Uhuru Kenyatta proposed a ban on all imported tilapia. In response, China threatened to withhold future funding for the Standard Gauge Railway, Kenya's largest Chinese-financed infrastructure project to date. The fish ban was reversed soon thereafter (Plummer 2022, 65). In 2021, another ban was proposed to limit Chinese tilapia, only to be rescinded again upon the realization that demand for fish far exceeded the current supply (Atieno 2021). As of 2024, after other attempts to bar Chinese imports (Mutai 2023), tilapia imports have been significantly slashed, although imports of other fish like mackerel and sardines continue (The EastAfrican 2024).

Rumors about the materiality of indiscernible products come to fill in the gaps between what is known and what is unknown. In the case of "plastic" tilapia in Kenya, exaggerated rumors and grotesque rhetoric surrounding their proliferation became a way to articulate a widespread but diffuse fear that the Kenyan government was betraying its people by allowing China to dominate and sabotage the local food system. Even though fish do not have brands and patents, the very label of "Chinese" all too readily conjures notions of amoral economic practices

and calls upon globally circulating stereotypes of Chinese goods as "fake" (Pang 2008, Katiambo 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how notions of informality, relationality, and corruption come to shape a widespread hermeneutics of suspicion among Kenyans and Chinese people living and working together in Nairobi's food industries. During my fieldwork, for Chinese and Kenyans alike, corruption was both a frequent talking point and a source of moral ambivalence. Rumors and scandals about illicit and illegitimate economic affairs were commonplace, from plastic fish to larger accusations of wrongdoing, like the Standard Gauge Railway agreements and their many delays, inflated costs, and high-profile handshakes between Chinese and Kenyan officials. Many people expressed ambivalence about the realities of corruption, lamenting its injustices while admitting that it provided opportunities for personal enrichment that would have been closed off by a tightly regulated system. A successful Chinese restaurant owner, for example, explained to me that "Corruption [*fubai*] is a necessary stage of development, a process that countries must go through in order to become rich." Even among those with fewer resources than this restaurant owner, informal and flexible economies could prove beneficial. Lucas, Aaron, and many others relied wholly or in part on norms of informality to earn their livings.

For many Kenyans, however, these open secrets of corruption only fueled a sense of resentment that Chinese people were able to exploit the system in ways unattainable to ordinary Kenyans, to profit from Kenyan labor while serving their own interests. For Grace of Duck Express, the chef seemed to embody these unfair advantages. "The chef is not learned," Grace told me, "I heard he only finished Class Three." Whether substantiated or merely a rumor, this

assertion made the chef's higher salary and good favor with the owner seem corrupt. It reflected a broader notion, drawing from racialized and classed stereotypes, that Chinese people saw themselves as better than Kenyans. As Grace put it, "If you meet a petty Chinese and you followed him to China, you'll see that he has nothing. Poverty." Grace thus displayed a shrewd sense of suspicion at Chinese trappings of wealth, superiority, and what she called "pettiness" (usually meaning the stringent enforcement of trivial workplace rules). Like Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness" (1903), this suspicion was rooted in how she saw Chinese people viewing her, thereby casting them as suspect in her own eyes.

Chinese people, too, displayed versions of this redoubled suspicion. I once met a Chinese man at a noodle shop in Kilimani, a white-collar financial worker, who phrased it this way to me in English: "[Kenyans] are racist to Chinese…They say 'China is controlling us,' but I am not controlling anyone, I am just living my life, letting [everyone] be free." Like Grace, this man saw how Kenyans viewed him with suspicion, and turned his own suspicious gaze back upon them. Unlike Grace's resentment of Chinese privileges in Kenya, however, his own suspicion was rooted in a racialized and classed belief that Kenyans should be "grateful" (*gan'en*), as he put it to me, for Chinese development, rather than suspicious or critical of Chinese people.

While the hermeneutics of suspicion was pervasive throughout many aspects of social life in Kilimani, therefore, it was neither uniform nor equalizing. The contrast between upwards and downwards suspicion reflects broader patterns of postcolonial inequities that ripple through Nairobi's foodways. I will examine these at the global scale in Chapter 6. But first, in the following chapter, I will dive deeper into the dynamics of a specific food supply chain in Kenya—crayfish—to examine how suspicions of Chinese corruption feed into widespread stereotypes about wildlife exploitation and inappropriate appetites. Underlying every step of the

crayfish supply chain are the logics and contradictions of *guanxi*, informality, and the "hustler." Zooming out beyond the urban restaurants of Kilimani and Nairobi, I will examine how racialized stereotypes reverberate through nonhuman ecosystems and create lasting changes in rural landscapes.

CHAPTER V

The Racial-Ecological Politics of the Chinese Crayfish Trade in Kenya

On the shores of Lake Naivasha, a freshwater lake located northwest of Nairobi in Nakuru County, a Chinese eatery called Jiangsu Restaurant specialized in carp, tilapia, and especially, crayfish.[49] Located less than two hours away from Nairobi by car, Lake Naivasha was a popular weekend getaway destination for people of all ethnicities and nationalities living in the city. Many middle-class Nairobians saw "#Vasha" as a trendy party destination, while international tourists were drawn to the lake's birdwatching, hotsprings, and nearby wildlife reserves. For Chinese weekenders, Jiangsu Restaurant was an essential stop for lunch or early dinner after a day of sightseeing. Meanwhile, the town of Naivasha and other settlements around the lake were home to approximately 200,000 people, many of whom relocated from other areas of Kenya to work on the region's commercial flower farms.

In October, 2021, I ate at Jiangsu Restaurant with some Nairobi-based Chinese friends at the end of a weekend of camping and cycling near the lake. We tucked into a steaming platter of spicy crayfish in a private dining room overlooking the water. These small freshwater crustaceans, lobster-like in appearance, were extremely popular among Kenya's growing Chinese expatriate community, as well as back home in China. My companions remarked on

[49] Some notes on terms: "Crawfish" and "crayfish" refer to the same thing in the United States. In Kenya, "crayfish" was the most common word for *P. clarkii*. A Kikuyu trapper offered a folk etymology explaining that they are called "clay fish" because they burrow in the mud (there is no /l/ phoneme in Kikuyu). *P. clarkii* are different from the "crayfish" of Nigerian and other West African cuisines, which are actually ocean prawns. Nor should they be confused with "crayfish" in South Africa, referring to Cape rock lobsters.

how fresh they were, coming "right from the lake." As my friend Ouyang expressed to me: "Naivasha is the only place of production (*shengchan di*) [for crayfish] in Kenya; nowhere else has them."

This declaration, I would later discover, was simply not true. By the time I met Ouyang in 2021, crayfish had been nearly absent from Lake Naivasha for several years. In Nairobi and its surrounding areas, however, Chinese markets and restaurants continue to stock a seemingly steady supply, of which the stated source was almost always Naivasha. This particular lake's symbolic importance within the Chinese crayfish industry, I would eventually learn, belied a more complex and secretive supply chain extending into central Kenya's remote waterways. My interest in Kenya's crayfish began with a simple question: where were the crayfish really coming from, if not Lake Naivasha? As I began to untangle their elusive supply chain over the course of my fieldwork, this question evolved into a more complex set of questions concerning invasive species, the perceived threat of Chinese incursions into Africa, and the politics of ecological knowledge.

Originally introduced to Kenya by Europeans in the 1960s, nonnative Louisiana red swamp crayfish (*Procambarus clarkii*) are rarely eaten by Kenyans and have often been regarded as an invasive nuisance. Their primary market in recent years has been Chinese consumers, both for export and to supply Nairobi's resident Chinese community. In 2018, however, Chinese trappers were explicitly banned from Lake Naivasha for ostensibly—paradoxically—*depleting* the lake's crayfish. Crayfish are nearly absent from Lake Naivasha today, yet locals do not celebrate their demise. Instead, they are largely regarded with nostalgia and a wish for their return. Why did the narrative shift from one of crayfish invasion to one of regretful protection? How have Kenya-China relations, in particular, shaped this narrative? And what does this

narrative reveal about the politics of species diversity and limits of official ecological knowledge?

This chapter traces my investigation of the crayfish supply chain through the Kenyan countryside, alongside my research assistant Bloom. As we uncover the complex story of Kenya's crayfish, I analyze the politics of freshwater ecology within the context of a wider geopolitical discourse about growing Chinese investment and migration in Africa. I explore the narrative shift from invasion to protection in relation to the unexpected persistence of the crayfish trade beyond Naivasha—this time outside the purview of the scientific and political authorities. Resonating with larger geopolitical anxieties around Chinese infrastructure and investment in Kenya, I examine how narratives about Chinese exploitation and appetites become ways to articulate discomfort with the precarity and unpredictability of Kenya's freshwater fisheries. I hope this chapter will illustrate why human narratives of racial and culinary difference matter as much to the lifeways of the crayfish as water quality, predation, and plant cover. Likewise, the material affordances of freshwater ecosystems matter to how processes of racialization can manifest as hate and exclusion against vulnerable people. In shifting from invasive species management towards strategies of conservation, the policies governing crayfish in Kenya draw attention to the inextricability of the semiotic from the material, while highlighting the ultimate futility of regulatory control over complex multispecies assemblages.

Allodiversity and Edibility in Lake Naivasha

No crayfish species is indigenous to the African continent. *Procambarus clarkii* was first introduced to Kenya in 1966 by the Kenyan Fisheries Department as a biocontrol to eat snails

carrying the parasitic disease schistosomiasis.[50] After this initial introduction, crayfish quickly spread beyond the control of government officials. Today, *P. clarkii* can be found throughout many freshwater systems in Kenya. Its greatest site of proliferation, commercial exploitation, and scientific study has been in Lake Naivasha, a shallow freshwater lake situated northwest of Nairobi in Nakuru County, about 139km^2 in area (give or take considerable seasonal fluctuation). Anecdotal sources suggest that crayfish first appeared in Lake Naivasha in 1970 after a European couple introduced a bucketful to feed largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), a nonnative sportfishing species popular among foreign tourists.

P. clarkii are omnivorous, resilient, and highly opportunistic. They can survive varying levels of water salinity and turbidity and can live for weeks to months out of water (Thomas et al. 2019). They can walk for miles on land, alter their diets according to food availability, and even alter their breeding cycles according to temperature and other conditions to maximize reproduction (Oluoch 1990).

My initial research on crayfish suggested that they were an invasive species in Kenya. Internet searches turned up fiery, militaristic titles: "Freshwater crayfish: the forgotten invaders wreaking havoc across Africa" (Nunes 2016), or "Cajun Crayfish Invading Africa, Eating Native Species" (Ogodo 2012). One of the first people I asked about crayfish was a white Kenyan landowner living not far from Naivasha. In reference to the Chinese market for crayfish, she said: "We did hear about a crayfish farm coming in, which is really bad for the local ecosystem, because crayfish are bad for the local flora and fauna." I next approached Bloom, a Naivasha-based guide (not yet my research assistant) and asked him if crayfish were a problem in

[50] Schistosomiasis, also known as bilharzia or snail fever, is a disease caused by parasitic flatworms. The disease affects the urinary tract and intestines, and if left untreated, can create lifelong health and cognitive difficulties, particularly in children. The disease is most common in developing countries where contact with contaminated water is prevalent.

Naivasha. His answer over Whatsapp was an emphatic no: “That is a lie. Very nice meal and good for lakes ecology [sic].” Bloom’s message intrigued me: were crayfish ecologically helpful or harmful? On what basis do we decide?

This chapter grows out of a rich body of scholarship on unruly and invasive species that seeks to untangle the classificatory heuristics by which we determine who belongs in a given landscape (Subramaniam 2001, Helmreich 2005, Shani 2024). Political notions of nature, culture, and belonging, rather than anything essential to the nonhuman organism, are what classify lionfish as an edible “fish” in the Bahamas (Moore 2012), help goats transform from food source to invasive threat in the Galapagos (Bocci 2017), or shift farmed salmon from alien to native in Norway (Lien and Law 2011). As Chao (2021) observed in the context of marginalized people and marginalized microorganisms in oil palm plantations, “Whether the parasite is a ‘friend’ or ‘enemy’ depends on who it befriends or antagonizes.”

Crayfish, too, have shifted over time from biocontrol to invasive species, then to food source, and finally to absent presence. The crayfish has not been passive through these shifts—indeed, its agentive tendency to breach boundaries and walk over land in search of new breeding grounds has contributed to its reputation for unruliness (Tsing 2013, Chao et al. 2022). And yet, these shifts do not emerge from the crayfish alone, but through a confluence of political, culinary, and racializing shifts among Lake Naivasha’s resident humans, as well as ecological affordances. Small freshwater fisheries like Lake Naivasha are different from tightly controlled aquaculture schemes with their totalizing plantation logics (Lien and Law 2011, Delpero and Volpato 2022). Neither are they like wild marine fisheries (Helmreich 2009, Moore 2012, Knudsen 2014, Dua 2024), in which human involvement is seen as intruding upon preexisting biodiversity. Operating somewhere in between, Lake Naivasha draws attention to the social

construction of the boundary between the wild and the farm, the prize and the pest. The ecosystem's "feral dynamics" (Bubandt and Tsing 2018) evade human control and highlight how belonging and exclusion are always "malleable and dynamic relationalities" (Chao 2021).

Definitions of invasiveness usually hinge on the ability of a newly arrived species to outcompete preexisting species or cause new levels of environmental harm. While species have always been mobile, human introductions—both intentional and accidental—are often held responsible for accelerating environmental harm in the Anthropocene (Paredes 2021, Bubandt and Tsing 2018). How "harm" is defined, of course, depends as much on the species' usefulness to human beings as on its ability to modify the surrounding ecosystem. Why else would monocrops, livestock, and pets rarely count among invasive species? Like Mary Douglas' "matter out of place" (1966), creatures like crayfish can shift from desirable delicacy to unwanted invader simply by crossing sociopolitical borders, or by running afoul of changing human tastes.

The social construction of invasiveness is especially apparent in a lake like Naivasha, where *all* of its currently dominant aquatic animals (and many of its plants too) have been introduced from elsewhere, either intentionally or unintentionally. An extensive scientific literature from the 1980s through the 2000s analyzes in great detail the ecological role of the crayfish within the larger Naivasha system. Much of this work was funded by the lab of British zoologist David Harper of Leicester University, in conjunction with the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute. Naivasha's only recorded endemic fish,[51] *Aplocheilichthyes antinorii*, died out by the 1950s following unusually low water levels (Harper et al. 1990). The

[51] Although it sounds unlikely, the biological literature confirms only *one* native fish. According to local Maasai oral history, the lake dried up completely sometime in the 19th century (Harper et al. 1990). This event is assumed to have destroyed any other fish species that might have once existed in the lake.

term “allodiversity” refers to an ecosystem in which a high proportion of species are nonnative. This is an unusual word, even in the ecological literature, although it tends to appear in papers about Naivasha (e.g. Gherardi et al. 2011, Oyugi et al. 2011). The term nicely collapses the nature-culture binary onto itself. “Allo,” meaning “other,” calls attention to the human hand that has brought geographically disparate species together. Meanwhile, “diversity” recognizes that species will interact, adapt, and coexist in complex and unpredictable ways beyond human control.

Soon after their initial introduction, crayfish numbers exploded in Lake Naivasha. Their proliferation was met with ambivalence among the region’s human inhabitants. On one hand, local white-owned country clubs and restaurants provided demand for the crustaceans, while an export industry to Europe produced steady employment opportunities for Kenyan trappers. At its peak in the early 1980s, up to 500 metric tons of crayfish—around 19 million individuals—were exported per year, mostly to Sweden[52] and other western European countries (Gherardi et al. 2011).

On the other hand, the crayfish began to cause trouble for the lake’s other (also nonnative) fishing industries. The crustaceans entangled themselves in the nets and chewed holes through the bodies of more commercially viable tilapia and bass. They feasted on native aquatic plants to the point of decimation, which allowed accidentally introduced plants including the water hyacinth (*Pontederia crassipes*) to take over, clogging the water and impeding boats (Smart et al. 2002, Gherardi et al. 2011). In a cascade of ecological ill effects, the clogging mats of vegetation plus the crayfish’s burrowing behavior released suspended matter and nutrients from the lakebed (see Figure 11). This instigated a process called eutrophication, in which

[52] Sweden has a strong culture of eating crayfish with ritualized crayfish festivals to celebrate the end of summer. Indigenous Swedish crayfish species are rare; Sweden mostly imports them from China, the US, and other countries.

excessive nutrients in the water began to support an overgrowth of algae, reducing light and oxygen in the water, and harming both aquatic organisms and the birds that fed on them.

Figure 11. The edges of Lake Naivasha are often clogged with water hyacinths and other nonnative vegetation, as shown here (2022).

Overall, Naivasha's water quality and ecosystem health declined rapidly throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Other factors also contributed to this decline as well, including nutrient runoff from surrounding floriculture and small-scale farms, as well as rapid regional population growth. Despite recognizing these, however, many scientists have focused their efforts on establishing causal links between the crayfish population and Naivasha's poor ecological health (e.g. Smart et al. 2002, Mironga 2006, and personal communications 2022).

Compounding these problems, in 1983, several European countries banned the import of live animals, singling out crayfish due to their potential to become invasive (Souty-Grosset et al. 2016). This resulted in a significant decline in Kenya's crayfish export industry (Gherardi et al.

2011). Kenya's domestic market for crayfish, fed primarily by European-owned restaurants in Nairobi and Naivasha, could not keep up with the exploding population. Some Kenyan trappers learned from their white employers how to eat crayfish. Abraham, for example, moved to Naivasha in the 1980s from his home village near Kakamega to work as a trapper for foreign crayfish companies. He had never even considered eating a crayfish himself. Finally, around 1997, his *mzungu* (white) boss showed him how to eat one and he recalled his surprise at peeling open the tail and realizing, "*Hii kitu ni nyama!*" (Swahili: "This thing is meat!"). He eventually convinced his wife and daughters to try them too, and began cooking them often at home. Mwangi, a retired fisher near Naivasha's bustling Kamere Beach, told me, "I raised my kids on crayfish. Even now, if I can get some, I'll call them and say, 'dinner at my house!'" He particularly liked to fry the tail meat with eggs and eat them with ugali. As Mwangi explained to me, he had never had the opportunity to try crabs, prawns, or other marine seafood. "That was the nice thing about having crayfish in the lake," he said. "People could afford to eat these nice things."

This pragmatic taste for crayfish never spread far beyond trappers' family networks, however, and most Kenyans today have never tried one. With their short history in the country, crayfish are frequently compared to more familiar undesirable species including snails, scorpions, and insects. These comparisons are often accompanied by an expression of disgust or disdain. "We Africans don't eat things with that shape," a Naivasha fisher told me, "We eat fish with a head; you [must] see where the head is. Not those funny funny things." Multiple interlocutors mentioned the occult, worrying that if neighbors saw them eating things like crayfish, they might be accused of practicing witchcraft. Crayfish were frequently likened to crabs, which appear as a common symbol and companion of witches across many parts of Africa

(e.g. Asamoah-Gyadu 2007). Crabs are associated with demons and the devil, I was told, due to their sideways gait.

Furthermore, within communities in which the crayfish is known, the crustacean is considered a powerful aphrodisiac. Only men ever mentioned this to me, and always with some awkwardness[53]. An interlocutor in central Kenya laughed and hesitated when he told me that he liked crayfish both because they are "sweet," and because they are "good for men." Joseph, an ethnic Maasai tour guide in Naivasha, told me about this effect while carefully excluding himself by specifying that "Kikuyus," rather than his own ethnic community, were the ones who liked eating crayfish "because it is good for the male libido." James, a young trapper in rural central Kenya with the rare experience of having grown up eating crayfish because of his trapper relatives, was similarly wary of their alleged potent effects. He told us that he only cooked them "*kienyeji*, *na mafuta*" (natural,[54] with oil). When he heard that Bloom planned to cook them with eggs—a Naivasha specialty—he laughed that this combination would be way too sexually powerful, even dangerous.[55] A hotel manager named Solomon laughed at the reputation of crayfish broth in "sexology" and wondered aloud, "If the soup is that powerful, what about the meat?" Solomon refused to ever taste a crayfish. I will return to this sexual stigma later, but introduce it here to demonstrate how the mingled fear and disgust people felt about crayfish overwhelmed the pragmatism of this overabundantly available food source.

Even a species as resilient as crayfish, however, cannot reproduce indefinitely. In Lake Naivasha, the crayfish population fluctuated as it overconsumed its food sources, exploded again through the 1990s, and eventually crashed as a result of the lake's dynamic allodiversity. First

[53] My presence as a foreign female anthropologist no doubt contributed to this awkwardness.
[54] "Kienyeji" is usually translated as "indigenous." Applied to food, however, it often takes on a meaning of traditional, natural, or organic.
[55] He included other off-color jokes about rape, that Bloom translated for me later (from Kikuyu).

came the introduction of the hyacinth weevil as a biocontrol to destroy the hyacinth mats which protected the crayfish; this was soon followed by the accidental introduction of the common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*),[56] which preyed on crayfish (Gherardi et al. 2011). Unlike crayfish, carp were "fish with a head," and therefore a desirable food source for most local Kenyans. The carp's appearance, behavior, and culinary forms were recognizably analogous to those of tilapia, native to East Africa, of which several species had been introduced to Lake Naivasha as early as the 1960s (Morara et al. 2022). Despite reputations for invasiveness in other parts of the world, carp have widely been credited with having "a very positive impact on the catches in the commercial fishery" of Lake Naivasha (Britton et al. 2007). The carp soon replaced the crayfish as the lake's dominant species and by 2009, crayfish numbers dwindled and have never recovered (Walton 2010, Morara et al. 2022).

In the 2010s, local policy towards Naivasha's crayfish shifted from benign neglect to incentivized depletion. This shift was enabled by a new tool: the Chinese crayfish trap. These traps first appeared in Naivasha around 2015, brought with Chinese business interests aiming to export crayfish to China. Their arrival coincided with the growth of Chinese state- and private-sponsored infrastructure projects in Kenya, particularly the construction of the Standard Gauge Railway linking Naivasha with Mombasa on the coast. The new traps were five to eight meters long and multi-chambered (see Figure 12), capable of holding many times more crayfish than the older single- or tri-chambered traps they replaced.

[56] The common carp most likely entered Lake Naivasha in 1999 when an aquaculture project in the upper Gilgil river flooded during El Niño (Gherardi et al. 2011).

Figure 12. A Chinese crayfish trap is unfurled outside a fisher's home in a neighborhood near Lake Naivasha (2022).

Technically, these extra-long crayfish traps are illegal to use in lake Naivasha according to Kenya's 2012 Fisheries Act. The mesh is too fine, which risks prematurely trapping juvenile crayfish and other species, preventing population replenishment. When these traps first appeared around 2015, however, the Nakuru County government *encouraged* their use. Local officials, I was told, began distributing free traps, donated by Chinese companies, to local fishers who had complained about crayfish tangling up their nets. The depletion of crayfish, therefore, was actively incentivized. Kenya's growing Chinese expatriate community, as well as export demand

in China, provided ready markets as trappers harvested the lake's remaining crayfish in large numbers. According to a Naivasha fisher and local politician named Juma, no records were taken of crayfish catches during this period of incentives. Unlike other fish which were always meticulously counted, weighed, and recorded, crayfish were "never of interest and not considered a serious fishery," Juma told me. Seen as depletable, the scientific literature on crayfish becomes scantier after about 2011. By 2017, interlocutors told me that crayfish had all but disappeared.

The Chinese market for Kenyan crayfish

Why did the Chinese community provide such a ready market for Naivasha's crayfish? China today consumes an estimated 90% of the world's crayfish (Yi 2019). *P. clarkii* first appeared in China during the Second World War, introduced by the Japanese perhaps as pets[57] (Cheung 2015). For a long time, Chinese people associated crayfish with atrocities committed by Japanese during the war. They became the subject of conspiracy theories involving Japanese plots to damage China's rice crops, or to have crayfish eat the corpses of those who were killed.[58]

In China, as would later happen in Kenya, *P. clarkii* quickly proliferated and became a nuisance.[59] Although people sometimes caught and ate crayfish from rivers and ponds, the

[57] The United States had previously introduced *P. clarkii* to Japan during the 1920s as bait for the edible American bullfrog. Few Japanese today regard crayfish as a food species, and they are largely considered to be an invasive pest (Martín-Torrijos et al. 2018).

[58] These conspiracy theories survive today, sometimes taking new forms. In Nairobi, the Chinese owner of a small crayfish restaurant told me an interesting version of this theory: Knowing that *P. clarkii* is originally from Louisiana, he told me that it was the *Americans* who introduced crayfish in order to "ruin China's environment" (*pohuai Zhongguo de huanjing*). "But the Chinese had no food at that time," he told me, " and were willing to eat anything." The Chinese discovered how tasty crayfish were, he claimed, so they started eating them and prevented the intended environmental destruction, thereby foiling the Americans' plan!

[59] Some species of crayfish are indigenous to China. These never grew in great numbers like the Louisiana red swamp crayfish, however, and were never particularly popular to eat.

crayfish only gained widespread popularity in the late 1990s, when a local dish called "Nanjing little lobster" appeared in the city of Nanjing, in Jiangsu Province. From there, the crayfish increased in popularity throughout Jiangsu and beyond. Because of their appearance, crayfish in Chinese have mostly been called "little lobsters" (*xiaolongxia*). According to anthropologist Sydney Cheung, the rapid "culinary upward mobility" of the crayfish was bolstered by the social prestige already afforded to the marine lobster (2015, 217). Even among other prized luxury seafoods, lobsters are especially valued due to their lucky red color and association with the dragon (the Chinese word for lobster, *longxia*, literally means "dragon prawn"). Some Chinese people today do not differentiate between lobsters and crayfish. One of my Chinese interlocutors in Nairobi once mentioned to another that he liked eating lobsters on the Kenyan coast. The second interlocutor assumed that he meant crayfish; she did not understand the difference. He corrected her, and she told him that since she was from inland China, she had little exposure to coastal seafood. Crayfish, however, are farmed in rice paddies across large swathes of inland China. They are often simply called *longxia* (see Figure 13 below for an example of this conflation from a crayfish restaurant in Nairobi).

Figure 13. A poster in a crayfish restaurant in Nairobi advertises "delicious lobsters" (*mei wei long xia*). The imagery features a mix of lobsters and crayfish, while the text extols a long list of obscure health benefits supposedly associated with lobsters. (2022).

Today, crayfish continue to boom in popularity across China. A famous dish from the town of Xuyi near Nanjing, "Xuyi thirteen-fragrance crayfish" (*Xuyi shisan xiang xiaolongxia*), has proliferated into thirteen-fragrance-crayfish-flavored potato chips, instant noodles, and other products. Xuyi is home to a "lobster" museum and hosts an annual crayfish festival; it even took place during the period of 2020-2022, despite tight COVID-19 restrictions (Xinhua 2022).[60]

Even with large-scale crayfish farming schemes across many provinces in China, Kenya (and other countries) still export crayfish to China to satisfy a seemingly insatiable demand. Recent data on this export is difficult to acquire due to the unregulated nature of Kenya's crayfish industry, as I will explain in more detail later in this chapter. For now, the key point is that crayfish are enormously popular in China across regions and social classes. As journalist Lia

[60] Recently, Hubei Province has overtaken Jiangsu in crayfish farming and utilizes widespread double-cropping of rice and crayfish.

Yi pointed out in a 2019 article about the popularity of crayfish in China, eating crayfish with both hands makes for a slow, multi-sensory experience: "There's no way for people to check their phones, making the focus of the experience eating and chatting with friends." (Yi 2019). This is an activity associated with summer: good weather, cold beer, and conviviality.

Figure 14. A platter of Thirteen-Fragrance crayfish is served at a Chinese restaurant in Nairobi (2022).

Chinese workers and expatriates living in Kenya, steeped in the culinary culture of crayfish, therefore revel in its widespread availability and perceived affordability.[61] While few Kenyans know or desire to eat them, crayfish are ubiquitous in Nairobi's Chinese restaurants and Chinese markets. It would be difficult to walk through Kilimani's Chinatown shopping complexes without noticing the crates of live crayfish stacked outside several of the restaurant and grocery stalls. At least one restaurant in Chinatown was dedicated entirely to crayfish.

[61] The price of crayfish spiked in China around 2018, which was the reference point for many of my Chinese interlocutors in Kenya who have not been back home since before the Covid-19 pandemic. I heard stories of a single crayfish selling for $20 USD! At the time of writing, however, crayfish prices in China have come down to match or even drop below Kenyan prices.

Several Chinese grocery stores received near daily shipments of live crayfish, and were usually sold out by early afternoon. Crayfish have been featured at many Chinese banquets I have attended since my first visit to Nairobi in 2016.

Notably, Kenyan crayfish are often perceived as fresher and healthier than Chinese crayfish. The social construction of freshness in Chinese cuisine has been well documented by scholars, especially in the context of the wet market (e.g. Zhong et al. 2020, Fabinyi and Liu 2016). The understanding of freshness as a function of "immediacy"—i.e. recently killed or harvested (Zhong et al. 2020) —is also apparent to anyone who has entered a Chinese restaurant and been greeted by displays of live seafood, fish, birds, and other animals on the menu. Many Chinese customers are wary of crayfish in China, assuming them to come from polluted farms via murky cold-chain supply networks. This reflects a broader Chinese suspicion of food systems in their own country, as explored in the previous chapter (Chapter 4). Kenyan crayfish, in contrast, are assumed to come from beautiful Lake Naivasha with its scenic islands and world-class birdwatching. Located not far from Nairobi, the delivery by motorbike of a crate of live, wriggling crayfish is assumed to be fresh and healthy. My Chinese friend Ouyang, mentioned at the start of the chapter, was convinced that Kenyan crayfish were better than Chinese crayfish. As he explained in a Wechat message, "Kenyan crayfish are very clean (*qingjie*), naturally produced, they haven't been polluted so they are relatively healthy."

For Nairobi's Chinese population, Lake Naivasha (*Naiwasha Hu*) is central to this perception of freshness and cleanliness. Reflecting a common belief among Nairobi's Chinese population, Ouyang understood Naivasha to be Kenya's primary or exclusive source of crayfish. This consideration is linked to Naivasha's reputation as an ecotourism destination famous for its migratory birds, hippos, and peaceful lakeside accommodations.

Since crayfish have been mostly absent from Naivasha in recent years, it is extraordinary that this lakeside image has been strong enough to obscure the wide diversity of sources from which crayfish are actually extracted. Wherever they came from, the intense instability and seasonality of the crayfish industry was rendered invisible by supply chain dynamics. This supply chain is a "patchy" one in which, to borrow from Anna Tsing's discussion of matsutake mushrooms, "production is left to the riotous diversity of nonscalability, with its relationally particular dreams and schemes" (2015, 64). By the time the crayfish reach Chinese restaurant patrons at Jiangsu Restaurant or in Nairobi, these supply chains become invisible. They appear plentiful and always available. As I asked more questions and learned more about the industry, I began to see that the supply was not so steady after all. Sometimes grocery stores would be out of stock, blaming the season or claiming they were "finished" or had "just sold out." Some restaurants admitted to primarily cooking frozen, rather than living crayfish. Still, I was impressed by this apparently nimble crayfish supply chain. It was time to track them to their source.

Tracking the crayfish supply chain

I got my first lead from Bloom, whose contacts in Naivasha knew all about the comings and goings of the owner of Jiangsu Restaurant, Mr. Lu. Mr. Lu's business loomed large over Naivasha both during and after the crayfish proliferation, since he dealt not only in crayfish but also in carp and tilapia. He was particularly known as one of the single largest purchasers of carp, a favorite within Chinese cuisine. He sourced fish for his own restaurant as well as for many Chinese businesses in Nairobi. Fishers I met sorting and selling their catches on Naivasha's commercial beach preferred, whenever possible, to sell their fish to Mr. Lu, who paid

a premium. The fishers would return to shore after the morning's catch with the bottoms of their boats filled with water so that the largest and best fish could swim around and stay alive until Mr. Lu's Kenyan associates arrived with his special van. The back of the van was filled with tanks of oxygenated water fitted with pumps. In this bubbly water, the fish could stay alive for days (see Figure 15). This setup was a source of amusement for Kenyan fish buyers and sellers, for whom dead fish are the norm.

Figure 15. Carp are weighed and placed in oxygenated tanks to be transported from Naivasha's commercial beach to Jiangsu Restaurant (2022).

Bloom learned from one of these associates that regardless of what Mr. Lu's Chinese customers might say about the source of crayfish, Mr. Lu was not getting them from Naivasha. He was getting them from several sources, including a small lake in Nyandarua County.

I only met Mr. Lu once, when I ran into him at Jiangsu Restaurant near closing time. As often happened throughout my fieldwork, he was initially surprised and pleased to hear me speak Chinese, and happily engaged in small talk on the topic of crayfish. He showed me photos of the lake in Nyandarua county where he sometimes procured crayfish. He also told me he had tried to

farm crayfish himself, but hadn't succeeded.[62] Although he rushed away soon after, our brief exchange helped me understand Naivasha as an important distributive node in Nairobi's freshwater fish industry, including crayfish sourced from elsewhere. Mr. Lu also confirmed Bloom's information that crayfish had spread far beyond Naivasha and were making homes in other water bodies throughout central Kenya.

Since their depletion from Naivasha, the exact dispersal of crayfish in Kenya remains undocumented in any official account. Charles, a government fisheries scientist based near Naivasha, lamented to me multiple times the fact that he and his colleagues were "the ones who *should* know where the crayfish are," yet they needed to rely on the knowledge of "the community" to actually find them. Most crayfish harvesting was technically illegal since it took place without official permission and licensing. Crayfish locations were always in flux as one population was depleted, and another spread or was introduced somewhere else. For example, I met a wealthy white landowner near Naivasha who was planning on introducing crayfish to his own privately owned reservoir (invasiveness did not seem to be a concern). I also visited a small reservoir said to contain crayfish, only to find it completely dried up with cows grazing on top of the packed mud. I heard of crayfish being trapped in various locations around Kiambu county closer to Nairobi, although I was never able to locate them exactly. In some of the water bodies I investigated, nobody seemed to know exactly how the crayfish arrived, or for what purpose. "Maybe they walked in the night," one trapper mused, attributing their presence to the crayfish's

[62]This may have been the rumored crayfish farm on p. Xx Another person also told me that Mr. Lu might have a crayfish farm, but this was never confirmed. The person who told me this, a Kikuyu hotel owner in central Kenya, also said that "The Chinese have a scorched earth policy; he [Mr. Lu] will harvest all other places before his own," implying that Lr. Lu would keep his farm a secret as long as possible. I have no reason to believe this person over Mr. Lu, and neither of them had any particular reason to be forthcoming with me. This discrepancy reflects a recurring theme throughout this dissertation: the centrality of secrecy, suspicion, and rumor throughout encounters between Chinese and Kenyans.

own agency. This is entirely possible, given the crayfish's ability to walk several miles on land. Such extreme mobility and variability left the scientists and authorities always scrambling to catch up.

Bloom and I drove north from Naivasha to visit the lake that Mr. Lu had mentioned. When we arrived, the lake landscape was stark and empty. Far from the hustle and bustle of Naivasha's commercial beaches, only a single farmer could be seen grazing his sheep by the shore, and a single fisher was visible far in the distance paddling a small wooden boat. Bloom spoke with the elderly farmer in Kikuyu, and translated for me that there had been an abnormally high number of crayfish a few months ago, so many that they washed up on shore and could be picked up by hand. At that time, however, it was the breeding season for the crayfish, and they had burrowed too deep in the mud to be caught by traps. We spoke with a fisher who said that he had worked for Mr. Lu trapping crayfish for "nine good years." Unprompted, he told us in English, "I love Mr. Lu." For the past several months, however, business had completely dried up. At the moment, this was not the source of Chinatown's crayfish.

Bloom and I got our next lead from a second Chinese restaurant in Naivasha, newer and less prominent than Jiangsu Restaurant. The Kenyan chef gave us the phone number of one of his crayfish suppliers, John. The chef insisted that John would bring us crayfish directly from Lake Naivasha, even though Bloom and I already knew that this couldn't be true. Bloom decided to call John and speak to him in his native language, Kikuyu, in an attempt to earn his trust.[63] Just as Bloom suspected, John was cagey on the phone, unwilling to say much besides the fact that he could provide crayfish if needed. Eventually he agreed to meet Bloom for a drink, and the two

[63] Bloom, an ethnic Kamba, spoke fluent Kikuyu (along with Kikamba, English, and Swahili) and possessed a useable knowledge of many other languages too. Bloom quickly switched into Kikuyu after calling John and hearing his accent.

struck up a cautious friendship. One day, Bloom called me in Nairobi to tell me that he had the name of a dam with crayfish near the mountains of central Kenya.

Security at the dam proved tight; we needed a signed permission letter from the office's Nairobi headquarters to enter the premises. Once inside, our official tour guides were unforthcoming. In an attempt to avoid leading questions that might bias their response, I explained my research in vague terms related to freshwater ecology and asked open-ended questions about the species found in the reservoir. Eventually, an employee revealed that there were crayfish in the reservoir, which had accidentally arrived during the late 1990s from a nearby lake. This employee knew that illegal trapping of crayfish was happening within the wide catchment area of the dam: "Naivasha is just around here," he said, "with so many [white] visitors…So many Chinese. They sell to the big hotels there." He further suggested that the crayfish were kept around on purpose; due to their sensitivity to chemical pollutants, they can be used in the reservoir as a bioindicator.[64] When I pressed for more details during a follow-up call, however, he told me to go to Naivasha if I was interested in crayfish.

Bloom and I set out for the nearby village to learn more. The reservoir extended into a lake with multiple inlets, flanked by bucolic hills and forests. Like Naivasha, this was an allodiverse ecosystem with a short, human-constructed history. In this case, whatever river life might have existed prior to the construction of the dam in the 1950s had been flooded and irrevocably altered. All three aquatic animals that I knew about—trout, mudfish, and crayfish—were nonnative and had been introduced in the ensuing decades.

[64] While crayfish may be sensitive to toxic chemical pollutants, they can tolerate (and cause) high water turbidity composed of organic matter. The salient definition of "water quality" matters, if crayfish are to be used as bioindicators.

Although most people in this region were not involved in the crayfish trade—if they had heard of crayfish at all, they mostly considered them inedible—a small number of trappers had discovered a livelihood in this niche industry. James, for example, collaborated with his older brother to employ three groups of men working at different locations around the body of water to trap crayfish for Chinese buyers (Figure 16). The family operates over 100 traps, mostly smaller, cube or rectangle-shaped traps that can be emptied every thirty minutes to two hours, depending on the season. James had worked in this industry since 2011, and his brother since about 2001. Initially they supplied to European hotels and restaurants in Naivasha; nowadays they relied almost exclusively on Chinese buyers in Nairobi. The fact that they once supplied to Naivasha supports the fact that Naivasha's supply of crayfish was unstable and in need of supplementation long before the arrival of the Chinese, even during the relative boom years of the early 2000s.

Figure 16. James shows off one of his single-chambered crayfish traps (2022).

Another trapper we met avoided detection by the authorities by catching crayfish in a small tributary, both to "sell to the Chinese in Nairobi," and to eat for himself and his family. He also caught trout, another nonnative species found in this region that appealed to local tastes. David, another trapper, told us that enforcement of the fishing ban was lax since dam officials were easily mollified with small payments every few weeks. Unlike the others, David used long, multi-chambered Chinese traps that he was given by his Chinese buyers. These were the same traps now banned in Lake Naivasha. David would set about twenty of these traps along the stretch of lakeside owned by his father, on which several members of the extended family lived and farmed.

Both James and David supplied off and on to Mr. Lu in Naivasha, but in recent years had started to prefer other brokers based in Nairobi. They mentioned a Chinese lady whose name they could neither remember nor pronounce, as well as a Kenyan man named Jimmy. Jimmy aggregated all the crayfish from this area and paid each trapper according to his contribution. Jimmy was described as "good at talking" to the Chinese, even though he couldn't speak the Chinese language.[65] He was also considered more consistent and easier to work with than Mr. Lu, especially because he was less scrupulous about crayfish size. James told me Mr. Lu would request large volumes of crayfish, only to select a small percentage of the biggest ones, at which point it was too late to sell the rest. James claimed that nowadays, Mr. Lu struggled to find sellers. He personally won't go back to Mr. Lu "because of how I was treated." No further elaboration was offered. This contrasted with the sentiment expressed by the fisher in Nyandarua who "loves Mr. Lu," indicating a lack of uniformity across trappers in their experiences and

[65] Bloom and I tried to contact Jimmy in Nairobi, but were unsuccessful.

opinions of working with Chinese buyers. Clearly, the micropolitics of this supply chain were fraught with the same issues of miscommunication and trust that I have examined elsewhere in this dissertation.

The crayfish themselves ebb and flow over the course of their seasonal breeding cycle. A single trapper in this region might get anywhere between 10 and 50 kg per day. During an especially prolific season, James told us he could catch up to 100kg in a single day. As in Naivasha, higher water during the period after the rainy season meant lower yields, because the crayfish burrowed deep into the mud to breed. The crayfish were dispersed throughout several small reservoirs around the region, although the largest quantity and best quality seemed to be found in this particular lake. Because of this ebb and flow, the trappers I met usually could not rely solely on crayfish to make a living. Many of them engaged in other "hustles" on the side such as farming, trout fishing, and odd jobs.

Unlike in Lake Naivasha, invasiveness was less of a concern in this rural area. Due to the tight security of the dam, as well as the lower human population density, this lake never saw the many intentional species introductions that have enriched and complicated Naivasha's allodiversity. To even complain about crayfish would be to admit one's participation in illegal trout fishing. Additionally, no population data on crayfish existed to support or negate its invasive status. Without data, the ebbs and flows of the crayfish population over the years have passed by unaccounted for in any records. All ecological knowledge of this body of water and its inhabitants was in the hands of the local community, outside the bounds of official "experts."

This means that official accounts do not capture the importance of crayfish to local rural economies at this reservoir and beyond. Ever since the incentivized depletion of crayfish from Naivasha in the 2010s, little to no new data have been collected about this now largely informal

and Chinese-driven industry. This fact leaves several blanks in public knowledge of how the crayfish industry operates today. My Chinese friend Ouyang, for example, told me that the owner of one of Naivasha's Chinese restaurants exports live crayfish to China, but no data exist to corroborate or quantify this assertion. Likewise, we cannot accurately quantify how many trappers are employed in this industry across Kenya, or how much revenue their activities generate.

I do not call attention to these gaps to argue that we need better or more accurate data. Following the work of scholars including Scott (1998), Mathews (2008), and Anand (2015), the very "illegibility" of the crayfish industry opens up new possibilities even as it forecloses others, offering flexible and lucrative livelihoods for trappers in rural areas with few options of formal employment. Neither am I trying to claim that the Kenyan state is incompetent or uniquely corrupt. Rather, I see the proliferation of informal and extralegal crayfish knowledge as indicative of the kinds of "leakages" (Anand 2015) that undermine official records of all kinds, all over the world.

I call attention to the limits of official knowledge in this case for the simple but intriguing reason that officials and scientists, particularly in Naivasha, *expressed regret* about losing control over crayfish data. When I accompanied Charles, the Naivasha-based government scientist, on a research trip to a remote lake, he and his colleagues repeatedly complained that "the fisheries agencies don't even know where these things are located," forcing a reliance on knowledge held by "the community." He and his team were trying to rectify this by engaging more with stakeholders, attempting (unsuccessfully) to obtain crayfish samples, and planning future research experiments on crayfish diseases and other topics. They hoped to bring Naivasha's crayfish back, convinced that as long as they could stay in balance with other species, they would

represent a net positive for the local community. Many of their efforts, however, were stymied by trappers' lack of trust and desire to keep their business a secret.[66] The boundaries between official and unofficial knowledge were reified every time the scientists complained about this divide, pushed a stakeholder too hard, or soured a relationship with a trapper. Bloom, my research assistant, astutely observed that wealthier parties like the scientists too often failed to "operate in a relatable way with" poorer fishers and trappers, pushing deeper the gap between legal control and extralegal crayfish trading with the Chinese, for whom crayfish supplies have remained plentiful.

I often wondered whether the continuation of the crayfish industry in remote and unmonitored regions fueled a sense of regret among fisheries stakeholders in Naivasha. By the time I arrived to do fieldwork in 2021, Naivasha's crayfish were gone. Nevertheless, they remained an iconic symbol of the lake, perhaps because of the lake's large number of international residents and tourists. Crayfish were still served in Chinese restaurants like Jiangsu Restaurant, transported to the lake from unknown sources. At non-Chinese restaurants, crayfish were often still written on the menus, even if they were actually unavailable in the kitchen. A lakeside tourist campsite called Crayfish Camp was popular among Kenyans and foreigners alike. For many Nairobians, this camp was their primary reference point for what "crayfish" meant.[67] All of these reminders prevented Naivasha fishers and scientists from forgetting about the lucrative resource they once undervalued and allowed to disappear. This sense of regret, I

[66] When I met Charles, he had been trying and failing for weeks to collect samples of crayfish to study in the lab; his most recent attempt ended up being a scam, when a supposed trapper ran off with his money and never produced any samples. Meanwhile, the only "stakeholders" he introduced me to were not working fishers, but rather wealthy, well-connected individuals with an expressed interest in ecotourism and western-style biodiversity conservation. *I* was actually the one who introduced *them* to a Naivasha fisher, Evans, who was able to successfully provide those samples. I saw little evidence that Charles and his team would protect trappers' interests, and trappers consequently had no reason to trust them or cooperate with them.

[67] Several times, when I mentioned to Nairobians that I was studying crayfish in Naivasha, they assumed I was talking about the campsite, not the animal.

suggest, is specifically structured by the dominant narratives in Kenya surrounding Chinese migration, Chinese culture, and Chinese business practices. I explore these specificities in the following section.

The Rise of Anti-Chinese Sentiments

Speaking with fishers on Naivasha's busy commercial beach, memories of crayfish were still fresh. I sat outside a beverage kiosk with a middle-aged fisher named Evans, sipping bottled water while people bustled around us buying, weighing, cooking, and eating fish, usually tilapia or carp served fried with white maize *ugali* and a side of *kachumbari* salad. Unequivocally, Evans blamed the Chinese for the loss of the crayfish. As he put it, "They are dangerous because of what they did to the crayfish." Evans was not alone in this opinion. The dominant narrative at the lake among fishers, scientists, and local politicians was that overexploitation by Chinese trappers had decimated the crayfish population, tipping the ecological balance of the lake and inflaming simmering anti-Chinese sentiments in the process. Mr. Kamau, head of the Beach Management Unit at one of Naivasha's fishing beaches, explained to me that "the loss of crayfish really disturbed the ecology of the lake because the bass used to eat them. Now the bass are less, and are eating other fish instead." Another Naivasha-based scientist told me that the arrival of Chinese people to Naivasha introduced a "human factor" to the preexisting cycle of crayfish growth and decline. This explanation denies the centrality of the human throughout the entire history of the crayfish's presence in Kenya.

These reactions defied expectations about the depletion of an invasive species. Efforts to curb invasive species by advocating for their consumption as food are not uncommon around the world (e.g. Moore 2012, Colón 2014). Culinary ideologies of taste in Kenya, however, precluded

this strategy for crayfish without the substantial involvement of foreign outsiders. I suggest that the particularities of racialized ambivalence about the Chinese have helped to reframe the depletion of the crayfish from a sustainability success story to a cause for worry.

In 2021-2022, fishing in Lake Naivasha had become a militarized and sometimes violent industry. The national guard was employed to enforce fishing regulations, while bands of unpermitted fishers were rumored to be armed, territorial, and eager to pick a fight. After the use of the multi-chambered Chinese crayfish traps became widespread in 2015, fish stocks across many different species began to decline. People were baiting their Chinese traps with tilapia-attracting ugali instead of crayfish-attracting meat. The Nakuru County government eventually cracked down on the use of Chinese traps, but only after Naivasha fishers began repurposing them to catch other species. This "abuse" of the equipment, to use the phrasing of local politician Juma, led to the banning of Chinese traps and a harsh crackdown on fishing in Lake Naivasha without a permit.

In 2018, this crackdown took a new turn: Chinese *people* were explicitly banned from fishing in Naivasha; their use of illegal equipment was blamed (Gitonga 2018). As one Kenyan newspaper article phrased it, Chinese trappers had "exhausted the [crayfish] stock, and are now targeting other species" (Murage 2018). Kenyan news widely reported a speech given by Nakuru County Governor Lee Kinyanjui that referenced the imbalanced power relations between China and Kenya: "No Kenyan can be licensed to fish in China," the governor said, "and we shall also not allow these foreigners to continue fishing in Naivasha" (Gitonga 2018). Kinyanjui went on to accuse Chinese fishers of taking jobs away from local youth. As one Naivasha fisher phrased it to me, "The Chinese are tricky…they work with you until they learn how to do it themselves, then they buy their own boat."

These familiar arguments invoke longstanding resentments in Kenya and other African countries over Chinese people allegedly undercutting the local labor force by working as laborers and petty traders (Sheridan 2018, Yan et al. 2019). The power of this resentment can sometimes exceed the severity of the offending events themselves. Also in 2018, for example, rumors began circulating that Chinese traders were hawking roasted maize on the street in Kenya; this inspired outrage in the midst of high unemployment. The same two or three photos have appeared repeatedly in connection to this story, dating back to about 2012 when they seem to have first appeared in Zambia. I could find no evidence of an actual Chinese maize seller in Kenya, and certainly none from 2018. Years later, President William Ruto would invoke the proverbial maize seller again as he made pre-election campaign promises to protect Kenyans from the Chinese threat: "We have agreements with different countries on what level of business or work is to be done by [foreigners]...And that level is not selling in kiosks, retail or roasting maize," Ruto said (Kiprop 2023). The power of myths like the Chinese maize-seller, as scholars like Sheridan (2018) and White (2000) have argued, lies not merely in their obfuscation of the truth, but in their ability to index widespread worries otherwise difficult to articulate such as the unsettling but unknowable long-term effects of rising debt to China and Chinese influence in Kenya.

In the case of Chinese fishers in Naivasha, their reputation likely exceeded their actual number. While a few Chinese people no doubt did start fishing and trapping in their own boats, most employed local Kenyans to fish and trap for them. The fishers I spoke to on Naivasha's beaches recalled being employed by, or selling crayfish to, Chinese business owners like Mr. Lu. Furthermore, even if Chinese people were catching crayfish and other fish themselves, this was never construed as problematic until the crackdown in 2018. Prior to this, the local government

in Naivasha was working on friendly terms with Chinese and anyone else willing to use a multi-chambered trap to catch crayfish. It wasn't the new presence of Chinese people on the lake that caused the crackdown, in other words—it was the desired depletion of the crayfish coming to fruition. When fishers of all nationalities inevitably started using their best equipment to catch more widely marketable species, local governance turned on them.

It was in this context that Evans, an experienced Naivasha fisher, told me that the Chinese were "dangerous" for having wiped out the lake's crayfish. As we sipped our bottled water on the bustling commercial beach, Evans leaned forward conspiratorially to tell me more about the Chinese: "They eat snakes! They were caught with one in Hell's Gate three or so years ago. While they were building Thika Road it was bad, [they] would bring all sorts of different guests here to [the beach] to buy ducks, dogs, donkeys…"

This pronouncement resonates with one of the most enduring and widespread stereotypes leveled against the Chinese diaspora. The relative expansiveness of Chinese cuisine, with its lack of outright species taboos, often recurs as fodder for racialized assumptions about Chinese people as cruel and voracious consumers of disgusting, endangered, or otherwise inappropriate animals (Yan and Sautman 2024, Chang and Corman 2021, Kim 2015). These stereotypes were whispered and reinforced throughout my fieldwork every time someone joked about dogs disappearing around Chinese construction sites or expressed doubt about what a Chinese dish might *actually* contain. Crayfish, too, became associated with a stereotypical Chinese diet that stood in direct opposition to all that was wholesome and delicious about Kenyan cuisine. As a young woman working at a Chinese tea shop in Nairobi told me, "Chinese mainly eat seafood, they do not eat beef or those things," echoing another interlocutor who once told me that the Chinese "don't even know how to eat big animals like cows."

When Evans leapt from Chinese consumption of crayfish to Chinese consumption of snakes and other animals, he implicitly communicated a more generalized judgment against the perceived insatiability of the Chinese people. Seen through such a frame, the disappearance of crayfish from Naivasha soon after the arrival of Chinese trappers can be seen as a bad thing, the latest instance proving a larger pattern of environmental destruction. Even if few people care about the crayfish per se, its disappearance might thus be regarded as "dangerous": a harbinger of future species exterminations to come.

Here, it becomes impossible to ignore the persistent link in the Kenyan imagination between crayfish and male virility. I must note that nobody ever directly connected this purported effect with Chinese consumption—at least not in my presence. Nevertheless, the widely acknowledged facts that crayfish aid sexual potency and that Chinese demand drives the Kenyan crayfish industry cannot, in my opinion, be separated. These two facts converge on a familiar sexual facet of anti-Chinese stereotypes about food and animals. Chinese consumption of endangered or uncommon species is often explained by the species' aphrodisiac properties within Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). As explored by scholars of anti-Asian racism such as Kim (2015) and Cheng (1999), this consumption has been linked for centuries to stereotypes of sexual deviancy, rapaciousness, and male inadequacy. The aphrodisiac properties of the plants and animals in question, meanwhile, are often exaggerated or fallacious.

Wildlife conservation advocates, for example, frequently attribute the illegal trade in rhino horn to the horn's male performance-enhancing properties (for example, see Branson 2016 and Mwadzaya 2018). In TCM, however, rhino horn has no such property; it is instead associated primarily with fever alleviation, infection clearing, and joint pain (Hsu 2017). Similarly, Chinese demand for aphrodisiacs is often cited as the sole driver of the illegal trade in

endangered tiger parts (e.g. Watts 2018). However, TCM in fact associates tiger parts with hundreds of uses from pain relief to bone strengthening (Ding 2018).

Crayfish, similarly, do not hold explicitly aphrodisiac properties in Chinese cuisine, except perhaps insofar as crayfish (and lobsters) are understood to boost *yang* in the body.[68] Although members of Kenya's Chinese community provided many reasons for eating crayfish—the conviviality of peeling them with friends, their freshness, their famously spicy "Thirteen-Fragrance" seasonings—sexual performance was never among these. This is not necessarily because of embarrassment on the part of my Chinese interlocutors; a Chinese friend and I once giggled our way through a dinner that included barbecued lamb penises, of which the aphrodisiac properties were made very clear. Outside Chinese communities, however, the exaggerated sexual nature of rhino horn and other products have been repeatedly pushed by international conservation movements in what Eric Dinerstein calls "a kind of anti-Chinese hysteria" (Dinerstein 2003, quoted in Ellis 2005, 123).

In Kenya, a similar hysteria manifests in political and popular anti-Chinese rhetoric. Before the 2022 presidential election, third-party candidate George Wajackoyah made media headlines for his outrageous proposals to sell wildlife products to China: "We should get what we want from wild animals. Rhino horns are very lucrative in the aphrodisiac industry. We can keep many of them and sell some to alleviate poverty," he said in a 2022 interview (Wainaina 2022). Wajackoyah further suggested that hyenas—particularly their testicles—could be sold to China. Despite no known mention of hyena parts of any kind in TCM, commenters easily jumped from Wajackoyah's speech to the assumption that, to quote a *Standard* article, hyena testicles would be exported "to China *as an aphrodisiac*" (Kimani 2023, my italics).

[68] *Yang* is a bodily principle in TCM associated with male energies, light, and heat. Its contrast, *yin*, is associated with female energies, darkness, and coolness.

Against such discourse, I argue that Chinese consumption of crayfish cannot be considered in isolation from Kenyan beliefs in its aphrodisiac properties. Seen as the latest iteration of a wider pattern of sexualized species depletion, the large-scale Chinese consumption of crayfish from Naivasha can easily be understood as a deviant and nefarious act. Perhaps if it were Scandinavians rather than Chinese who returned in 2015 to begin harvesting large quantities of crayfish, a different narrative would have emerged. As it happened, the particularities of anti-Chinese discourse intersected with the collapsing crayfish population in Lake Naivasha to produce the racializing narrative of the Chinese as "dangerous."

Since Chinese trappers were banned in 2018, Kenya's crayfish industry has largely gone underground. Crayfish were still being bought, sold, and transited through Naivasha's Chinese restaurants like an open secret, in full view of the lake's scientists, officials, and local fishers. Perhaps the persistence of this industry, now beyond the oversight of scientific and political authorities, perpetuates the sense of longing and regret people feel about the absence of crayfish from Naivasha. Had the crayfish industry died out completely, its absence might be more quickly forgotten as focus shifted to the sustainable management of tilapia, carp, and the other more widely marketable fisheries. If the local community cared seriously about bringing crayfish back, meanwhile, I might have expected to hear about proposals to implement a restocking and management scheme similar to those that exist for tilapia and other fish. Such proposals, however, do not seem to be underway. In hindsight, crayfish have occupied a highly ambiguous role within Naivasha's ecological history. Neither indisputably invasive nor conclusively benevolent, crayfish highlight the instability of Kenya's allodiverse freshwater fisheries as they continue to evade human control. Rather than seriously reflecting on how crayfish have been managed or mismanaged in the past, Chinese consumption becomes an easy and convenient way

to articulate discomfort not only with crayfish depletion, but with Chinese presence more broadly.

Conclusion

Given the widespread agreement around Lake Naivasha that crayfish were a destructive presence during the 1970s-2000s, I might have expected scientists and other knowledgeable stakeholders to celebrate their depletion. Instead, the dominant narrative at the lake was just the opposite. The scientists I spoke to all lamented the loss of the crayfish and emphasized that as long as it could stay in balance with other species, they would represent a net positive for the Naivasha community. Charles, the scientist mentioned above, described the current state of crayfish as "in a catastrophe," and expressed the hope that they might be replenished. Several fishers, reiterating what I learned from the dam officials in the mountains, mentioned the crayfish's ability to act as a bioindicator as evidence of ecological value in the region. "If you see a dead crayfish floating in a dam," one told me, "you know that the water is not safe for human consumption because they are sensitive to chemicals."

Some Naivasha fishers, it should be noted, *were* happy that the crayfish had disappeared. One young fisher named Tony did not know anything about the Chinese, and instead attributed the loss of the crayfish to the desirable introduction of new species: "Crayfish are gone because fishermen asked for carp and catfish [to be introduced]...[crayfish] got tangled in the gill nets. People are happy they are gone," he said. When I reported this to the retired fisher Mwangi, however, the older man shook his head: "These [young fishers] are thinking only about one thing," he lamented. "They want to get rich quick…Yes they'd have to untangle the crayfish

from their nets, but then they would get to keep them." When I asked Mwangi if he wished the crayfish would return to Naivasha, his answer was an unequivocal "yes."

With the exception of Tony, the more experienced Naivasha scientists, fishers, and other stakeholders I spoke to all blamed Chinese overconsumption for the loss of the crayfish, and all saw this loss as a bad thing. Resonating with deep-seated anxieties about illegitimate and exploitative Chinese behavior in Africa, the opaque networks of the crayfish supply chain further reinforce stereotypes about Chinese people as untrustworthy and the Kenyan government as incapable of protecting the interests of its people. Regardless of the truths or untruths behind these anxieties, their prominence overshadows and simplifies the complexity of human-crayfish assemblages. It justifies racialized discrimination against the Chinese, with their aberrant dietary practices, and closes off more nuanced approaches to crayfish management.

Sitting in a Chinese restaurant in Nairobi, where platters were piled high with spicy crayfish, it was difficult to imagine them as anything but a plentiful commodity. The fickle breeding grounds of the crayfish and the precarious livelihoods of the trappers were rendered invisible by supply chain dynamics. In tracing the crayfish from Naivasha to remote reservoirs and streams, this chapter has explored how Chinese involvement with freshwater fisheries is inextricable from larger geopolitical patterns of suspicion and racialization. Sentiments around Lake Naivasha linger in ambivalence, simultaneously wary both of Chinese exploitation of crayfish, and of the crayfish themselves.

As consummate boundary crossers, crayfish have aroused both desire and disgust as they proliferated across continents, becoming recognizable as an invasive species throughout many regions of the world. Differences in perceived edibility across various culinary traditions reveal that the moral and political valences of creatures like crayfish are "neither fixed or bounded

entities, but rather malleable and dynamic relationalities" (Chao 2022). This malleability is especially apparent in Kenya, where the nonnative status of the crayfish is compared not against a preexisting "natural fishy order" (Moore 2012, 675), but against the other nonnative species that constitute the allodiverse ecosystems of Lake Naivasha and beyond. Neither wild nor cultivated, unrestricted nor wholly manageable, these fisheries expose the discursive narratives that vilify or valorize creatures like crayfish. Both the material and the semiotic are of equal importance in co-constructing the racialized and sexualized political ecology of a given species. Crayfish, as "odd boundary creatures" (Haraway 1991, 2), draw attention to these co-constructions while inviting us to reflect on the importance of culinary tastes in structuring human-nonhuman entanglements.

CHAPTER VI

The National and Global Aspirations of Kenyan Purple Tea

One facet of Chinese foodways enjoys a very different reputation in Kenya from the suspicions and anxieties analyzed thus far. That facet is tea, the brewed beverage enjoyed daily by millions of Chinese and Kenyans alike. A young Kikuyu tea seller in Nairobi named Njeri told me that "the only thing I like about Chinese is their tea." She was referring specifically to whole-leaf tea processed using ancient Chinese techniques to produce green, oolong, and other varieties. The global tea industry terms such teas "orthodox," distinguishing them from mechanically processed crush-tear-curl (CTC) tea. Njeri had gone on a business trip to China many years ago, before she started her tea company, and was shocked and impressed to see ordinary people—traders, laborers, drivers—all drinking plain, unsweetened orthodox tea all day long. In Kenya, orthodox teas are a rarity. Most Kenyans drink strong black CTC tea with milk and sugar. According to Njeri, however, a Kenyan market for orthodox tea is beginning to open up, driven by a rising interest in wellness and weight loss. Njeri hoped to tap into this market with her own brand of orthodox teas and herbal blends manufactured according to Chinese traditions. By the time I met her, Njeri's business was small, but her outlook seemed optimistic.

Associations between Chinese tea and health—particularly weight loss—have at least several decades of history in East Africa. One of my interlocutors in Nairobi, a Chinese tea seller named John Chen, first came to Kenya in the early 1990s to sell imported traditional Chinese medicines. He told me that one of his top sellers was a "slimming tea" made from a mix of green

tea and herbal medicine. Elisabeth Hsu (2009) reports similar products in widespread circulation up and down the East African coast during her fieldwork in the early 2000s. Njeri's business built upon this history, but with a unique twist: all of her teas were grown and processed in Kenya. Nothing was imported from China. She sold a "Green Tea for Weight Loss," a blend called "Flat Tummy Tea" containing oolong tea and herbs, and a variety of other blends promising to support immune function, allergy relief, relaxation, and many other health benefits. Among Njeri's most unique products was a type of tea called purple tea. Purple tea is a purple-leafed variety of the commercial tea plant *Camellia sinensis*.[69] On her website, Njeri's product descriptions seek to educate buyers about this obscure ingredient. She lists not only its usefulness for weight loss, but also its high antioxidant content and associated lower risks of cancer, high blood pressure, and other lifestyle and age-related conditions. Her descriptions also emphasize purple tea's Kenyan identity—its "organic" cultivation in the "volcanic soils" "at the base of Mount Kenya."

This chapter examines how Kenyan tea manufacturing and traditional Chinese tea culture become entangled with postcolonial imaginings of health and national identity. These entanglements coalesce in purple tea, which comprises the central focus of the chapter. As a niche but promising entrant into Kenya's small but growing orthodox tea sector, purple tea has benefitted from Chinese investments at every step of its supply chain. At the same time, however, among its loyal devotees, purple tea is emerging as a potent symbol of *Kenyan* innovation and postcolonial national identity. Purple tea is regarded not only as an agricultural

[69] Cultivated tea all belongs to a single species, *Camellia sinensis*. Several variations and cousin species exist, but only two cultivars are used in the commercial tea industry: *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis*, originally cultivated in southern China, and *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*, originally cultivated across parts of northeast India and southwest China.

commodity, but also as a biotechnological accomplishment, a medical miracle, and a source of African pride.

Since independence, the Kenyan government has struggled to reform the "imperial debris" (Stoler 2008) of its tea industry. Tea was first planted by a British settler in Kenya in 1903 and soon grew under colonial rule into one of Kenya's largest industries. This legacy persists into the present; Kenyan tea currently accounts for approximately 23% of the country's total foreign exchange and contributes over 20% of all global tea exports (Nderitu 2020). Like other cash crops worldwide (e.g. Mintz 1985, Paredes 2023), Kenyan tea perpetuates many of the logics and structures of last century's plantation economies. These include, as Besky (2020) elaborates in the similar case of tea in India, the exploitation of marginalized workers, the dependence on foreign tastemakers and buyers, and the hegemony of the monoculture at the expense of biodiversity and native food crops. After independence, Kenya and other newly formed nations needed to determine the place of these legacy industries within the new political and social order (Rappaport 2017, 353). Should Kenyan tea be marketed inwards or outwards? Should it be privatized, rebranded, outsourced, or abandoned?

As this chapter explores, Kenyan tea stakeholders have increasingly turned to China, with its ancient tea culture, traditional processing methods, and large population of eager consumers, for answers to these questions. Both at the government level and among individuals like Njeri, China has provided assistance in tea training, research, market development, and inspiration for what Kenya's postcolonial tea industry might become. These collaborations situate Chinese-style orthodox tea—especially purple tea—as the answer to the intertwined problems of plummeting tea prices on the global market, enduring colonial patterns of injustice in Kenya's tea industry, and a recent rise in lifestyle diseases among Kenyans. I argue that by

treating Chinese-style teas as a panacea, industry stakeholders allow this sector to perpetuate many of the same patterns that have kept Kenyan smallholders impoverished and subordinated since the colonial era. At the same time, however, the complex entanglements of Chinese tea culture with Kenyan notions of health and wellness as decolonization serve to challenge any totalizing narratives of China as a neocolonizer. Instead, Kenyan orthodox tea offers a glimpse into an Afrocentric but globally interconnected postcolonial future.

I first came across purple tea—usually called *zicha* in Standard Mandarin— in a Chinese grocery store in Nairobi in 2021. This grocery store served the growing community of Chinese residents in Nairobi's Kilimani neighborhood, offering a wide range of imported Chinese food and household goods as well as locally sourced fresh meat and produce. A bright purple packet of tea stood out to me from the shelf of imported and local teas. It was distinguished not only by the color of the packaging, but also by its labeling in three languages: English, Chinese, and Swahili (Figure 17). Curious, I bought the 100g package for 1000 Kenyan shillings (about $7 USD)—nearly ten times the price of ordinary Kenyan black tea—and brewed a cup at home. The liquid (called "liquor" by expert tea tasters) was a soft purple-gray color (Figure 18). It tasted similar to ordinary green tea, mildly vegetal, with a lingering astringency that was not unpleasant.

Figure 17. A packet of purple tea for sale in Nairobi.

Figure 18. Purple tea leaves (left) and brewed tea liquor (right).

I soon learned that with purple tea, taste was not the point. Many of the tea sellers I met during fieldwork were surprisingly ambivalent about their most unique and expensive product. "Purple tea is hard to sell because it's not as palatable," Njeri admitted to me. A processor described it as "more astringent and less lovely in the mouth." "You should try the purple-red blend," a teahouse employee told me, "it tastes better than the plain purple." Despite this ambivalence, purple tea does not seem to be fading away like other "superfood" trends that have come and gone. On the contrary, Kenyan scientists continue to research its health benefits, Chinese companies, banks, and universities continue to invest in its processing, and Kenyan farmers continue to risk their livelihoods to grow it. These actors remain poised, waiting for the rest of the world to become equally captivated by the promises of purple tea to revolutionize not just the tea industry, but perhaps Kenya's national identity more broadly.

My research into the story of purple tea started in Nairobi's Kilimani neighborhood, where two Chinese companies sold tea. Both sourced their tea from Kenyan farmers and primarily targeted local Chinese expatriates as customers. Both carried purple tea as well as other orthodox varieties. The first company belonged to John Chen, the Chinese expatriate who had sold Chinese medicines in the 1990s. He had converted to Christianity after arriving in Kenya, and his religiosity imbued many aspects of his business from its name to its marketing imagery. He operated an office out of a rented flat and sold his products in local Chinese and Kenyan grocery stores. The second company, managed by a more recently arrived Chinese expatriate named Liang, had two teahouses in Kilimani. With a Kenyan employee always on hand to brew free samples for guests, Liang's teahouses functioned as informal gathering places in Kilimani, particularly among older Chinese businessmen. Both of these Chinese tea sellers relied on

diverse sources of income beyond tea, including real estate and other investments. Some of the fieldwork that informs this chapter was conducted in Liang's teahouses, where the tea and conversation were always flowing. Additional information was gathered from interviews with Chinese and Kenyan tea drinkers, sellers, packers, engineers, and farmers, as well as from Kenyan and international media sources.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the colonial legacies of Kenya's tea industry, which developed to specialize in low-cost mechanically processed black tea for export. I then explore how purple tea was developed through government-sponsored research—aided by China at numerous steps along the way—to add value and increase Kenya's name recognition on the global market. Next, I discuss how purple tea holds promise for its stakeholders as something uniquely "Kenyan." Finally, I examine how these stakeholders use elements from traditional Chinese tea culture to promote purple tea as a health product. I specifically explore how both Kenyan and Chinese tea sellers make claims to the decolonization of modern diets by embracing purple tea. Altogether, the chapter uses purple tea to explore the challenges and ambivalences of postcolonial nation-building in contemporary Kenya.

The Kenyan Tea Industry: "Colonizers Who Never Left"

Kenya's reliance on China to support its burgeoning orthodox tea industry raises the specter of a neocolonial power imbalance, as many observers have claimed about various Chinese investments in Africa (e.g. Zhang 2022, Rapanyane 2021, Lumumba-Kasongo 2011). Kenya's orthodox tea industry, particularly purple tea, is both new and not new. As older tea cultivars are uprooted to make way for novel ones, the original landscape and its structuring logics remain foundational in many ways. In their reconfiguration of tea's "imperial debris"

(Stoler 2008), today's Chinese and Kenyan orthodox tea supporters risk re-entrenching old hierarchies by couching their reforms in the language of progress, technological innovation, and South-South camaraderie (see Adunbi and Butt 2019). Kimari and Ernstson (2020) critique similar patterns that emerged through the recent construction of Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, a monumental infrastructural investment financed and constructed by China. The train, which has been a source of both public controversy and massive national debt, follows both literally and figuratively in the tracks of the old British-built Uganda Railway. Kimari and Ernstson argue that the Kenyan government, in its appeals to postcolonial reform, chose to issue an "imperial invitation" to China, which the authors define as "a situation where African states assert a postcoloniality through the pursuit of, for example, infrastructure development, but then invite other states (or corporations who represent them) to control these projects upheld as engines of modernity" (836). The concept of "imperial invitations" implies a betrayal of the Kenyan people on the part of the Kenyan government, a selling out of the nation's postcolonial autonomy in favor of short-term financial and political rewards for those in power. This is certainly a critique leveled by many Kenyan citizens against their own government, as Anita Plummer (2022) examines in detail.

In her account of Chinese mobile data proliferation in Kenya, however, Pollio (2024) examines the limits of such neocolonialist critiques. By focusing only on enduring inequalities, she argues, we risk overlooking whole realms of "competition and agency, domination and refusal, experimentation and failure" (4). The complexity of how new technologies are taken up—whether mobile phones or purple tea—belies simplistic narratives of neocolonialism that portray Africans as "passive receptacles, devoid of agency" (Roitman 2023, 5). Instead, Pollio

examines the "ordinary and aspirational" (Pollio 2024, 5) ways in which urban Kenyans use, twist, and shape technology to fit their own purposes.

Likewise, the slow rise of orthodox tea in Kenya reveals how ordinary tea sellers and farmers are twisting their industry's old colonial logics around. Their passion for these strange new products, especially purple tea, cannot be reduced to the mere desire to emulate the wealth of foreign nations, but instead reflects a desire for Afrocentric health and wealth in their own communities. Unlike large infrastructure projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway, which many Kenyans view as deeply corrupt and hierarchical, entanglements with China in the tea sector are not only top-down, but also bottom-up and lateral. Chinese sellers partner with independent factories, and small-scale Kenyan producers seek out their own Chinese training. The habit of Chinese-style tea consumption spreads not through official edicts, but through coworkers sharing meals, through friends trading gifts, and through social media posts about healthy antioxidants, When it comes to tea, therefore, instead of "imperial invitations," I might instead term Kenyan overtures to China something like "invitations of cautious optimism." These overtures aspire to a globally interconnected form of Afrocentric sovereignty, even as they continually run up against barriers established under colonialism. Like Mingwei Huang's (2024) metaphor of the palimpsest, the tea plantation is a site of "multiple erasures, inscriptions, and time scales that coexist within a social formation or place" (3).

To make sense of how past and present intermingle in Kenya's tea industry today, let us first turn to its colonial roots. After tea was first planted in Kenya in the early twentieth century, the industry quickly became dominated by white-owned firms like James Finlay & Company and Brooke Bond Kenya (now Unilever). The tea bushes were mostly of the *assamica* variety of the tea plant *Camellia sinensis*, brought from British plantations in India and Sri Lanka (Kamunya et

al. 2012). These firms established large plantations in western Kenya, especially Kericho county, where the growing environment was favorable and where local people forcibly displaced by British settlement provided plenty of cheap labor (Swainson 1986). Despite changing names and changing hands over the years, these same plantations in western Kenya continue to dominate the Kenyan tea industry with their economies of scale and outsized political influence.

In the words of Njeri, the young Kikuyu tea blender in Nairobi, "The tea industry in Kenya is like a cartel…we think of these companies as colonizers who never left." I met with Njeri in her small office in bustling downtown Nairobi, where she packaged her products to sell online and to local shops. Born into a tea-growing family in central Kenya, Njeri told me, "It's tied to a passion inherited from my parents, part of my DNA is just into tea." Without this passion, Njeri never would have quit her lucrative banking job to open a tea company. Her struggles against the tea industry's deeply embedded power structures speak to widespread discontent among small and independent tea stakeholders in Kenya.

Reflecting patterns dating back to the colonial era, over 90% of Kenyan tea is exported abroad, of which over 98% consists of generic, inexpensive black tea of the type drunk everyday by millions of people around the world. The top export markets include the UK and several of its former colonies and protectorates, especially Pakistan (Kenya's top tea buyer), Egypt, UAE, and Yemen (Nderitu 2020). Such tea is produced with the crush-tear-curl (CTC) method, using machinery invented by Sir William McKercher in India in 1930 (Sarkar et al. 2016). Unlike older orthodox (whole-leaf) processing methods, CTC allows for tea, usually black i.e. fully oxidized tea, to be processed quickly into tiny pellets in mass quantities. After passing through an international auction located in Mombasa, this tea is blended with other teas from around the

world to produce the strong, consistently flavored black tea we associate with mass-market brands like Lipton and Twinings.

Beginning in the 1950s and 60s, tea production was gradually opened up to African smallholders. After independence in 1963, the new Kenyatta government continued the British legacy of prioritizing agrarianism over other industries (Saeteurn 2019). The multinational firms retained their large plantations, while smallholder farmers began uprooting food crops to plant tea. In her 2006 memoir *Unbowed*, Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai recalls smooth, shadeless fields of tea gradually replacing the forested gardens of her youth as farmers rushed to produce cash crops for the global market (121). Soon, smallholder farmers were outproducing the large firms. Smallholders continue to dominate the industry today, accounting for over 60% of Kenyan tea production (Nderitu 2020).

These smallholders wield some power within the industry by belonging to the Kenyan Tea Development Agency (KTDA), a farmer-owned private company. KTDA was a twice-renamed continuation of the old Special Crop Development Authority, established by the late colonial government to manage tea production. Both before and after independence, smallholders were required to sell their tea leaves to this management body, which set prices and determined industry "standards" that were often prohibitively restrictive (Saeteurn 2019). After decades of contestation, KTDA privatized in 2000. Today, KTDA is one of the largest private tea companies in the world. It is often held up as a rare example of a successful, financially viable smallholder-controlled enterprise in Africa (Ochieng 2009).

Despite its apparent success, however, smallholder farmers and other tea industry workers like Njeri express disappointment with KTDA's ability to protect their interests. Over the past decade in particular, falling tea prices and a glut of low quality tea have left many

stakeholders and workers destitute. Some problems are global, including climate change, international financial crises, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Other problems, however, are unique to Kenya. KTDA is deeply entangled with Kenya's ethno-regional political power struggles. The valuation of tea quality (and therefore price)—a highly subjective and politicized process—often pits the two primary growing regions east and west of the Great Rift against each other (Tanui 2017, Elliot and Skrydstrup 2021).[70] Meanwhile, KTDA has been accused of corrupt practices such as conflicts of interest, financial misappropriation, and price manipulations (Korir 2018). The leaders of KTDA have been directly linked to elite Kenyan interests who assumed power after independence, thereby perpetuating a "colonial mentality" of power and capital accumulation at the expense of ordinary tea workers (2018, 60).

To succeed in Kenya's tea industry requires either joining or outcompeting the politically and economically powerful KTDA. Economies of scale and the crushingly low price of tea on the global market favor both KTDA and the multinational tea firms with deep roots in Kenya, all of which operate to perpetuate geopolitical inequalities set in motion by colonial regimes of resource extraction. Reiterating old patterns of colonial and postcolonial economics (e.g. Rodney 1972, Oritsejafor and Cooper 2021) Kenya's tea industry specializes in the export of a cheap and essentially raw material—nameless and brandless CTC tea. Only after passing through the Mombasa auction and leaving the country does this tea acquire value and brand recognition.

[70] The first British tea was planted in the Mount Kenya region east of the Rift Valley, which to this day produces the "best" quality tea. This region, primarily Kikuyu-speaking, is dominated by smallholder farmers. The climate is cooler and wetter, leading to better growing conditions for higher quality tea cultivars (Tanui 2017). The majority of Kenya's tea, however, is grown in the region west of the Rift Valley, including Kericho county. Most of the large, multinational plantations are located here, as is the Tea Research Institute of Kenya. Primarily Kalenjin-speaking, this region is known for mass production of lower quality tea. Ethnic clientelist politics often play a role in the valuation of tea, as brokers and other industry players show favoritism to their co-ethnics (Elliot and Skrydstrup 2021).

Market Diversification and the Rise of Purple Tea:

How can a single tea entrepreneur compete against such powerful political-economic interests and vast economies of scale? For Njeri, the tea blender in Nairobi, the answer has been to eschew CTC black tea altogether. "You have to come up with your own voice in tea," she told me poetically. "It's like music, and I've realized that my voice is in value addition, blending with more and more herbs." She now specializes in orthodox purple, green, and oolong teas as well as her own unique blends of herbal and medicinal teas. She markets primarily online through social media and her website, taking advantage of Nairobi's small-scale on-demand delivery services (Sitas et al. 2022).

Njeri is not alone in seeing diversification and value addition as her solution to the longstanding problems of low prices and volatile global markets. For many decades, these goals have been identified by the Kenyan government as key areas of focus for the tea industry. Particularly since 2007, when President Mwai Kibaki announced his "Vision 2030" economic plan, government efforts have gone into improving the valuation of Kenyan tea, from developing new tea cultivars to promoting the creation of flavored teas, tea-based products, and other value-added goods. As this section will describe, purple tea emerged through these efforts with the promise of greater profits and name recognition on the international market than CTC black tea. By ironically embracing international (particularly Chinese) support, purple tea has been able to market itself as something uniquely "Kenyan," and therefore valuable.

National identity has been central to these efforts, both at the government level and among small business owners like Njeri. "No one comes to protect the name 'Kenya' for [tea,]" Njeri told me, as she recounted a disappointing trip to an international tea expo in Germany at which Kenya was underrepresented and underrecognized. Other small tea companies agree with

her, including one which writes on its website: “Kenya is a country known for exporting large volumes of this priceless treasure, once exported it generally loses its identity. [Our] vision is to offer that missing essence and quality of tea to the local shelves of Kenya and globally.” These sentiments are reflected at the national level too. For example, former Tea Board of Kenya president D.M. Ngumo stated,“[Tea to Kenya] is what wine is to Spain, oil to the Middle East, gold to South Africa and sheep to Australia. It is Kenya’s green gold” (Ngumo 2015). These comparisons emphasize not only economic valuation, but also metonymic reputation, *terroir*, and the material foundations of thriving national identities. They speak to a widespread desire to remake the tea industry, a clunky colonial legacy that keeps Kenyan growers and packers in poverty, into a source of wealth and pride for a new era.

As a result of these sentiments, KTDA has begun helping its farmers with value-addition, while the Kenyan government has invested in a variety of tea research and development activities (Mbadi and Owuor 2008). In particular, the Tea Research Institute (TRI), a department of the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization, has been working to improve tea genetics to maximize qualities like flavor, climate resilience, and antioxidant content. Purple tea, TRFK 306/1, was a result of these efforts (Figure 19). The purple leaves of this cultivar are high in anthocyanins, a class of flavonoid molecule found in the purple skins of grapes and blueberries, which have been associated with beneficial antioxidant effects in the human body (e.g. Rashid et al. 2014). TRFK 306/1 is also drought and pest resistant, with a high yield similar to control plants (Kamunya 2009).

Figure 19. Purple tea leaves shown next to green leaves (left) and in the hands of a worker (2023).

Officially released to the public in 2011, purple tea represented the culmination of over twenty-five years of research. It is subject to Plant Variety Protections (PVP), a form of intellectual property rights administered by the Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service. This means that farmers must be licensed to grow any of these protected varieties. Although other purple teas exist worldwide, particularly in the borderlands between China and Myanmar, TRFK 306/1 is unique in its commercialization, availability, and explicit support by the Kenyan government.

Its health benefits hold particular promise for the global market. Since 2011, research into purple tea's health benefits has been copious and ongoing. Many publications, including many conducted by the TRI research team headed by Samson Kamunya, investigate detailed aspects of

purple tea's anthocyanin content and its clinical effects. The Kenyan government has clearly invested substantial funding and resources into this agenda, indicating its hope in the crop's ability to reverse the downward spiral of the tea industry.

The exact origins of TRFK 306/1 trace to a hybrid of local "unknown" tea varieties with a non-commercial tea species called *Camellia irrawadiensis* (Kamunya et al. 2009). *Camellia irrawadiensis* is a wild cousin of the commercial tea plant found near the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar and in neighboring Yunnan, China. Perhaps referencing this fact, John Chen, the Chinese tea seller in Nairobi, told me confidently that purple tea originally came from "a Yunnan cultivar (*pinzhong*) and was brought to Kenya and grafted (*jiajie*) to a local rootstock (*zhenmu*)." This seems to match another publication by Kamunya and his colleagues at TRI identifying material transfer agreements with China and Japan in the early 2000s to obtain new tea genetic resources (Kamuya et al. 2012: 185). Genetic material was therefore likely brought from China to help create purple tea.

China has also played a variety of roles in purple tea's processing, which has focused on orthodox (whole leaf) methods rather than CTC. This is to maximize purple tea's value on the global market; in general, orthodox teas are considered to be of higher quality and are priced higher than CTC teas. Research has also suggested that antioxidant health benefits are higher in orthodox tea compared to CTC tea, and in less oxidized green and oolong teas compared to more oxidized black teas (Carloni et al. 2013, Deo et al. 2024). For these reasons, purple tea is usually processed into orthodox green (and occasionally oolong) tea. Kenya's tea industry, however, has been fine-tuned for over a century toward the mass production of CTC black tea. Diversification has required substantial investments in training, equipment, and market development, all of which have been aided by China.

Ancient Chinese methods of processing whole-leaf black, oolong, green, white, and yellow teas remain paramount in orthodox tea manufacturing around the world. In private arrangements (Sitole 2019) and official trade agreements focused on purple tea (Xinhua 2019b, Xinhua 2023), Chinese experts have offered machinery, warehousing, and other services to help prepare small-scale farmers to produce tea according to the taste and quality standards of Chinese drinkers. Since 2009, Chinese colleges and institutes have hosted advanced training courses for African tea processors, including Kenyans, to learn new techniques and gain an appreciation of Chinese tea culture. Many of the purple tea processors I met had gone to China or knew someone who had. As one processor told me, "I went to Guangzhou, saw the machines used to dry tea, the processing and the current machines. The processing is the same [as in Kenya], but the market is different there." Many Kenyans were inspired to see orthodox teas, rare and expensive in Kenya, consumed daily by ordinary people in China.

Skill and knowledge transfer is often a point of contention in discussions of Africa-China relations. A recurring criticism of Chinese development projects in Africa has been an over-reliance on Chinese expertise while employing Africans in lower-skilled positions (Park and Tang 2021). This seems not to be the case in tea production, however. Njeri, the Nairobi-based tea blender, told me that KTDA "used to send someone to China to learn about tea making. But now they would just send you to a factory that already has the knowledge. Nobody needs to go to China." A tea factory engineer named Sam, similarly, told me that he received training by KTDA but has never been to China or interacted directly with Chinese experts. Nevertheless, Sam was deeply knowledgeable about all types of tea, even the varieties rarely manufactured in Kenya such as oolong and white tea.

Still, China continues to propel Kenya's purple tea production in other ways. The Chinese Academy of Sciences has hosted tea conferences (Xinhua 2019a), and Chinese universities have published edited volumes featuring Kenyan tea research (e.g. Chen et al. 2012). Since 2015, the Chinese Development Bank has financed tea factories looking to diversify away from CTC tea (Liu 2015). Perhaps most importantly, Chinese drinkers have provided an early market for this new product. Liang's and John Chen's customers in Kilimani have provided some of the most consistent and reliable revenue for purple tea farmers who initially struggled to find a market. At the time of writing, China has entered into larger-scale purchase agreements with Kenya to obtain both CTC black tea and orthodox tea—including purple— for the Chinese market (Omulo 2024).

Why would China, a nation already saturated with world-class tea varieties, wish to import expensive tea from abroad? I suggest that Kenyan purple tea holds value within a consumer market that favors trustworthiness, as well as uniqueness and rarity. Previous chapters have explored Chinese food adulteration scandals and preoccupations with the counterfeit, the toxic, and the corrupt. Similar to the distrust many Chinese people held toward crayfish in China, making Kenyan crayfish seem better by comparison, many Chinese people distrusted the safety of Chinese tea. John Chen explained to me that Kenya's higher-altitude tea growing regions did not need to use pesticides (*nongyao*), whereas China's lower-altitude tea mountains relied on higher and higher levels of chemicals. Kenyan tea was therefore perceived to be healthier. This applied even to the cheapest Kenyan CTC black tea, which multiple Chinese interlocutors told me was "purer" (*geng chun*) than Chinese tea. For orthodox teas like purple, which sellers like Liang and John Chen sourced from a small number of farms located near Nairobi, the sense of purity was even stronger. An article about purple tea on China's *Zhihu* internet platform extolled

Kenya's tea-growing areas as "vast uninhabited lands with practically no human activity…where the most primeval ecology has been preserved, with the purest piece of pure land…it is fortunate that purple tea can thrive" (Youranpincha 2021). Playing on stereotypes of Africa as an untouched wilderness, this article emphasizes the purity, freshness, and wildness of Kenyan tea, all of which resonate with Chinese gustemologies.

Furthermore, I suggest that the "Kenyanness" of purple tea, in particular, is appealing to many Chinese customers. Similar to the concept of *terroir* in Europe, most regions and even villages in China are known for a particular *techan* (specialty product) which is touted by local government, served to newcomers, and sought by tourists. Many regions are known for a particular variety of tea unique to that place, such as Hangzhou's *Longjing* green tea, or *Da Hong Pao* oolong tea from the Wuyi mountains in Fujian. Tea is widely seen as a valuable gift, traditionally given to leaders and dignitaries (called *gongcha*, tribute tea), as a betrothal gift, and for many other occasions. Today, teas are often sold as *lipincha* (gift tea) in elaborate and beautiful packaging intended for gifting. Both of the Chinese tea companies in Kilimani, John Chen's and Liang's, sold purple tea this way. Both told me that most of their sales came from Chinese expats buying gifts for business partners in Kenya, or to send to friends and relatives back home. As a souvenir, purple tea comes to embody not only the freshness and other material qualities of the tea itself, but also the abstract qualities of Kenya as a place, not to mention the hard work and sacrifice of the giver to have traveled all the way to Africa.

Purple Tea's Kenyan Identity

If purple tea developed through a hybridization of "unknown" Kenyan tea cultivars and material transfers from China, many tea farmers in central Kenya have their own theory about

the indigenous origins of TRFK 306/1. The local understanding is that scientists produced purple tea by interbreeding tea plants with an indigenous plant known in Kikuyu as *mukoe* (possibly referring to *Syzygium guineense* or *Syzygium cordatum*, see Maundu et al. 1999). The fruit of *mukoe*, called *ngoe*, is purple, astringent, and rich in anthocyanins. Kikuyu people steeped the leaves as a medicinal drink long before the British introduced tea to the region. Four industry experts corroborated this story to me at a tea farm in central Kenya. Whether literally true or not,[71] the existence of this origin story indicates the extent to which purple tea is seen as a truly Kenyan invention, a technology that could fuel a postcolonial future in which Afrocentrism and global cosmopolitanism are not mutually exclusive.

When I asked Njeri, the small-scale tea blender, how she wished purple tea could be marketed, she answered without hesitation: "Like vibranium in Wakanda." This reference to the 2018 and 2023 *Black Panther* movies, which depict an Afrofuturistic fantasy nation and have proved popular among African viewers (e.g. Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022), suggests a belief in purple tea's potential to become a raw material for invention.[72] "It's only in a specific part of Africa," Njeri continued, "So we should market it as a rare jewel found only on the slopes of Mount Kenya."

Njeri went on to describe its healing properties, its growing popularity among Kenyan customers anxious about the COVID-19 pandemic, and its wide-ranging usefulness in skincare and other products. "People sell it with conviction that it cures everything," Njeri told me, "everything apart from death…there are a whole lot of stories, which *I think is not a hype*. It

[71] A genetic cross between *mukoe* and the tea plant seems unlikely since the two species belong to different genera and families. However, I am not a botanist and cannot verify the impossibility of such a hybrid.
[72] Thank you to Anita Plummer for helping me see the Wakanda reference in this light.

needs to reach more people" (my italics). Njeri believes wholeheartedly in this product and in its ability to improve public health while promoting the name and identity of Kenya.

She is not alone in this passion. One of her suppliers, a purple tea farmer named Richard, spoke about purple tea with intensity and enthusiasm. As a long-time tea farmer in central Kenya, Richard was one of the first adopters of purple tea when it was released to the public in 2011. "Even in China it was not there, this was a Kenyan discovery," Richard told me proudly after explaining the story of *mukoe*. Along with a group of seven or eight other farmers who he called "founders," Richard received purple tea seedlings from TRI and embarked on a risky agricultural journey that would nearly cost him his livelihood and his family. He uprooted three acres of mature tea bushes to plant the new seedlings, causing "outcry in the community and rebellion in the family." With his finances and his relationships stretched to the breaking point, Richard "missed by inches being taken to a mental hospital." He recounted many years of poor rainfall and no income. Without anywhere to process his orthodox teas, he undertook the arduous licensing process to become a cottage processor himself. Once finally licensed in 2019, he found he had no buyers. He learned the hard way that the Kenyan government had released purple tea seedlings long before the market was ready.

This problem is now widely recognized among purple tea supporters. As Njeri explained to me, when KTDA began focusing on diversification, they "outsourced" the risks onto their smallholders. Instead of buying leaves from their members to process in their own factories, they began licensing small cottage factories like Richard's to fulfill this role for them. Unsurprisingly, the burdens of licensing and overhead required to open a processing facility have favored larger-scale, wealthier tea enterprises that were already equipped with orthodox processing facilities (Kimanthi 2020).

Kenya's tea authorities themselves have even admitted that purple tea was overhyped before the market was ready. Featured on the front page of the Tea Research Institute's website is an embedded YouTube video from 2016 touting the rise of purple tea. In it, a KTDA spokesman says: "It's an upmarket product, it is not a mass market product, so it is never really going to replace the CTC or orthodox teas that you see in the global market" ("Tea Research Institute" n.d.). Who is the intended consumer of purple tea? Certainly not the average tea drinker in Pakistan (Kenya's top export market), never mind local Kenyans with their limited spending power. If even the product's spokespeople cannot envision a widespread consumer base for this product, how could farmers be expected to find buyers on their own? In 2020, KTDA issued a warning that farmers should stop planting purple tea until the agency could set up more factories and establish more markets (Mwangi 2020).

In 2023, KTDA finally opened its first factory to process orthodox tea and has begun buying purple tea leaves from its smallholder members (Andae 2023). Although some Western and European buyers exist, this progress has been largely reliant on the Chinese market. There is always the danger of industry capture by the same large multinational firms that have dominated the tea industry for over a century. At the time of writing, most international brands do not offer purple tea, although Kenya's largest domestic brands, Kericho Gold (owned by the UK-based multinational firm Gold Crown) and Ketepa (owned by KTDA) offer both orthodox purple tea and CTC purple tea bags. Nevertheless, small producers remain the preferred sources for most Chinese buyers due to their ability to conform to Chinese taste and quality preferences. Meanwhile, for producers hoping to target non-Chinese customers, KTDA has finally stepped in as a viable agent.

Why did Richard persevere through so many years of hardship? When I asked him, his voice became thick with emotion. He recounted a training session given by TRI when he was first learning about purple tea:

> It was a small factory, almost like this room, processing purple tea. We drank it and they told us the health benefits like cancer, diabetes, blood pressure, it rejuvenates…when I heard it I almost wept because in 1966, when I was joining Form One, my brother died of heart failure. He was the only one who was educating me. I was raised by a single parent. In 1991 my mother died of cancer. And then in 2010 I'm told that if purple tea was there probably she would have survived.

Although the curative clinical effects of purple tea might not be able to fulfill Richard's expectations,[73] purple tea for him has been a lifeline of hope against a rising health crisis. He lamented to me about an overwhelming prevalence of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and other conditions in his community. His observations are supported by recent evidence chronicling the rise of non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases throughout urban and rural Kenya (e.g. Korir et al. 2023). As Richard told me, "People ask, 'You're old, what are you after, is it money?' No, it's not about money, but about what I can leave to the world, creating a healthy food, for health."

Although Richard would love to access the international market and earn a more comfortable income through purple tea, his passion comes from his desire to help his fellow Kenyans. The walls of his farm shop are plastered with typed and handwritten posters in English and Kikuyu espousing purple tea's health benefits, including everything from cognitive and heart health to weight-loss and anti-aging (Figure 20). He brings small packets of purple tea to his

[73] Although the anthocyanins found in purple tea have been linked with many health benefits, research is still very limited and has largely been conducted with animals (e.g. Rashid et al. 2014).

local market to sell to his neighbors, often with great success. His love for purple tea is deeply entangled with his love for his family, his community, and his nation.

Figure 20. A sign in Richard's farm shop advertising the health benefits of purple tea (2023).

Stymied by the barriers to exporting their products abroad, sellers like Richard and Njeri can focus on the domestic market instead. After all, Kenyans love to drink tea. In 2021, Kenyans consumed 38.4 million kg of tea (Statista 2022), or about 360 tea bags per person.[74] This habit does not necessarily translate into demand for purple tea and other orthodox or specialty teas, however. Like the British and many of their former colonies throughout Asia and Africa, Kenyans typically drink black tea (*chai*) with large amounts of milk and sugar. Most people claim, however, that the lighter and more delicate flavors of purple tea, green tea, and other specialty and orthodox tea do not taste good with milk and sugar. The higher price of these teas

[74] The domestic market also suffers from what Njeri calls "cartels," or market domination by large companies holding outsized political and economic power. Two companies in particular—KTDA's own Ketepa label (which held a monopoly until 1992) and Gold Crown, the subsidiary of UK-based multinational firm Global Tea Commodities Ltd—make it difficult for small businesses like Njeri's. Most grocery stores, she told me, have refused to stock her tea because they see no room for small companies like hers.

only further harms domestic demand, resulting in very small market shares for purple and other orthodox and specialty teas in Kenya. And yet, I argue that a niche for purple tea is emerging through an interesting entanglement of postcolonial critique, health food consciousness, and the rise of Chinese tea culture (which eschews milk and sugar), especially among Nairobi's middle and upper classes. The next section further explores this entanglement.

Kenya's health food movement and the rise of Chinese tea:

Like much of the contemporary world, many Kenyans are concerned with weight loss. Although food insecurity and malnutrition remain significant problems (Korir et al. 2023), obesity is increasingly seen as both a health risk and an aesthetic flaw (Davies 2022). The weight loss industry is inundated with diets, drugs, and surgeries (Davies 2022). Exercise and gym culture are popular across socioeconomic classes among urban Nairobi men and even, increasingly, women (Spronk 2014, Schmidt 2024). Although many poorer Kenyans still favor larger body sizes (Korir et al. 2023), bodily aesthetics in affluent Nairobi often reflect Eurocentric and globally hegemonic norms of thinness and fitness (Balogun-Mwangi et al. 2023). Unlike diet cultures in much of the world, however, health food in Kenya is often viewed through a distinctly anticolonial lens.

A movement in Kenya towards *kienyeji* (indigenous/natural) foods serves to bridge the health food movement with anticolonial critique. Advocates of *kienyeji* food (e.g. Maundu 2022) point to the colonial roots of the modern Kenyan diet. Across much of Africa, colonial agriculture schemes displaced local farmers in favor of monocrop plantations of imported species; diets have been simplified and homogenized ever since (Ochieng' 1988, Raschke and Cheema 2008). Traditional foods such as indigenous grains, tubers, beans, and vegetables were

uprooted and eventually forgotten. Many of the common foods eaten in Kenya today—white maize, kale (*sukuma wiki*), potatoes—were European imports[75] that have assimilated into everyday Kenyan diets. Kenyans were sometimes forced against their will into adopting these foods. The Imperial British East Africa Company, for example, fed its laborers with the cheapest known food, cornmeal (*posho*), which Kenyans prepared as *ugali*, a traditional category of staple porridge formerly made from sorghum, millets, and other indigenous cereals (Robertson 1997). By 1905, maize had begun to displace other staples in the average Kenyan diet, and the number of acres of planted maize rose almost every year throughout the colonial period (Robertson 1997). Today, white maize ugali is the primary staple food for most Kenyans. Indigenous foods, in contrast, are often disparaged as old-fashioned or associated with poverty, despite their superior nutritional complexity (Maundu 2022).

Against this history, health food advocates in Kenya and across Africa have begun promoting indigenous vegetables (*mboga za kienyeji* in Kiswahili), free-range chickens (*kuku kienyeji*), and other historically traditional foods. *Kienyeji* foods need not be literally indigenous, i.e. endemic to East Africa; amaranth, a plant with edible grains and leaves, is included in most common assortments of *mboga za kienyeji* despite having originated in South America (Muthike et al. 2024). *Kienyeji* offerings cater to a newly health-conscious middle class that is rediscovering the more "natural" diets of their parents and grandparents (Cernansky 2015, Zocchi and Fontefrancesco 2020). Kenyan health officials are even beginning to formally promote a return to indigenous foods of the past (Ayega 2023). In contrast to the opacity of processed foods served in supermarkets and fast food restaurants, which arouse suspicion, the perceived simplicity and wholeness of kienyeji food index bodily health and strength. This might

[75] Originally from the Americas, in the case of maize and potatoes.

look like pure culinary nostalgia; however, as Rahier (2023) argues, Kenya's burgeoning *kienyeji* movement is thoroughly future-oriented. It represents the desire of the *wananchi* (ordinary citizens) to seize control of a toxic, industrialized food system ruled by postcolonial elites (92). In this melding of past and future, it rejects simple "boosterist" (Kimari and Ernstson 2020) narratives of "Africa rising" that take for granted that Africa was worse in the past (Pointer 2023). Instead, it parallels Huang's (2024) metaphor of the palimpsest, in which new foodways "overlay" precolonial and colonial foodways, "not burying or displacing them but building on and interacting with the traces" (4).

This brings us to Chinese tea, a foreign product that nevertheless resonates with the appeals of *kienyeji* food. For several decades now, Chinese tea—especially green tea—has had a reputation in Kenya for weight loss that is natural and healthy. Liang explicitly markets it this way in his shop with boxes packaged and priced for the local market (Figure 21).

Figure 21. A box of green tea for sale in Nairobi.

As Kenya's relationship with China strengthens and more Kenyans come into contact with Chinese culture, Chinese tea's reputation for natural weight loss seems to be growing. Njeri

the tea blender, for example, was inspired by her business trip to China many years ago: "I noticed that it was hard to find someone who is diabetic or overweight. And they don't have a very good diet, a lot of rice, oil, so it must be something about the tea." Taking this insight with her, Njeri tapped into Nairobi's growing weight loss industry with several of her best selling products, including Green Tea for Weight Loss, Flat Tummy Tea, and several blends containing purple tea that list weight loss among their health benefits.

Not all Chinese tea sellers in Kenya agreed with how their products were taken up by the weight loss industry. In 2019, I was conducting preliminary field work in a Chinese bubble tea shop in Kilimani. Over and over, Kenyan customers would come in asking for loose-leaf green tea to help them lose weight. The shop's Chinese proprietor refused to sell it to them. He believed it would be "lying" to tell customers that green tea would make them thin. In the philosophy of Chinese medicine, he explained to me, while tea is considered healthy and good for digestion, it is *not* a weight loss drug. Even in Liang's shop, a Chinese employee expressed doubt when I tried to buy the box shown above in Figure 21. First, he questioned why I wanted to buy this tea at all when (according to him) I did not need to lose weight. After paying, I asked him, "This doesn't really cause weight loss, does it?" He replied, "If you are just eating burgers and drinking coke, it will; but if you are eating a healthy diet, it won't be as obvious (*mingxian*)." This ambivalence about tea's effectiveness reflects a common sentiment among Kenyan consumers as well, who recognize that tea is less a causative agent for weight loss than a low-calorie replacement for other beverages, especially those containing sugar.

A Kenyan acquaintance of mine who worked at a Chinese company in Nairobi expressed her admiration of what she saw as healthy Chinese bodies: "Basically when you look at Chinese as a people…they are not as obese as Kenyans, they look fit, they don't seem to have that much

calories to burn." She then told me about how her Chinese boss introduced her to orthodox tea. "It was a new way [to drink tea], and I was like, 'Oh no, we are used to having sugar.' But with time I got to realize the benefits of the tea without the sugar and milk. Burning calories and keeping my immune high." In a later interview, she told me that she and her husband have started drinking Chinese tea at home because "it helps with the discipline of avoiding sugar." A 2021 article in *The Standard* laments Kenya's low tea consumption in comparison to other tea-growing nations like India and China. The reason for falling consumption, the author declares, is the rising price of sugar and milk. Citing the British origin of Kenyans' fondness for milky, sugary tea, the author proposes a solution: to drink tea, particularly purple tea, in the tradition of "Chinese and other Asians like the Japanese," without sugar (Kajilwa 2021).

This focus on sugar evokes sugar's colonial legacy in Kenya, which is inextricably linked to that of tea. Both arrived in Kenya in the early 1900s through British cultivation schemes. Unlike tea, Kenyan sugar was never intended primarily for export; indeed, Kenya's sugar supply "has never come close to meeting demand," with Kenya today importing approximately one quarter of its total sugar consumption (Wanga-Odhiambo 2016, xviii). The British were incentivized to increase sugar consumption throughout their colonies as a way to keep sugar prices high against a rising global supply (Morgan 1927, 367). British authorities sought to increase sugar consumption in Kenya, in particular, because of trade deals they had made to secure wheat from Uganda in exchange for dumping large quantities of Ugandan sugar into Kenya (Wanga-Odhiambo 2016, xvii). Furthermore, faced with a perceived meat shortage, the British coveted pastoralists' large herds and needed a commodity desirable enough to induce them to sell off their livestock (Holtzman 2003).This resulted in various efforts to encourage or

even coerce local people to consume more sugar. An interlocutor in Nairobi, an urban farmer and social activist, told me:

> In colonial times, like my great grandfather's time, the British forced grown adults to try eating sugar for the first time. They had to really use force, because the people didn't like it at first. But of course they grew to like it…Nowadays Kenyans consume so much sugar, instead of taking traditional breakfast they have black tea with lots of sugar and *mandazis* [fried dough].

The primary vehicle through which the British pushed sugar, as my interlocutor knew, was tea. The two commodities are so tightly linked throughout British domestic and imperial history as to semiotically index one another. In the UK and its former colonies in Asia and Africa, tea is taken with sugar, and sugar is largely consumed through tea. Sugar was the element that enabled the proliferation of tea throughout Britain's working and lower classes, fueling imperial expansions and Transatlantic slavery, as well as the industrial revolution (Mintz 1985). Tea drinking likely first spread among Kenyans during the early 1900s through the dual influences of British colonists and workers from the Indian Subcontinent.[76] Tea had only recently become widespread in British India through the deliberate "colonial creation" of local demand (Arora 2022). In Kenya too, direct British interventions such as the pushing of sugar helped disseminate daily *chai* as a habitual norm and aesthetic taste throughout the country.

In Holtzman's study of tea among the Samburu people of northern Kenya (2003), he uses tea and sugar almost interchangeably to describe the new item that had come to constitute a significant source of calories in the Samburu diet. Holtzman describes how "rituals [involving

[76] Tea may have existed earlier on the Swahili Coast, where cities like Mombasa have served as multinational trading hubs for many centuries. While many written accounts of pre-1900s Swahili diets include references to coffee, however, I did not find similar references to tea until later in the colonial period.

tea] may not be held if there is inadequate sugar," and how the exchange of sacks of sugar at weddings is what enables the host "to serve tea to all the people who gather as guests" (144).

As is common in Britain and its former colonies, Kenyans regularly take tea not only with sugar, but also with milk. Tea without milk, while sometimes associated with poverty (e.g. Holtzman 2003, 143), is nevertheless a known beverage, even preferred by some people. It can go by local names like *trungi* or *turungi* (from English "true tea"), or sometimes *strungi* (from "strong tea"). Sugar, however, is always implied by unmarked "tea" (*chai*). Tea without sugar has no local names; beyond being unpalatable, it is nearly unthinkable.

Sugar, tea, decolonization, and China all came together in the office of John Chen, the Chinese tea seller in Kilimani who sold the first purple tea I bought at the beginning of this chapter. John had lived in Kenya for nearly twenty years, converted to Christianity, and slowly made a name for himself with a number of business ventures including a tourism company, real estate investments, and a restaurant. His start, however, was in tea, having sold Chinese "slimming teas" back in the 1990s. He noticed early on how much sugar and milk Kenyans put in their tea, and how body sizes tended to be bigger than in China. He told me: "One mistake (*cuowu*) in the Western diet was adding sugar to tea; this has led to so many problems. It came from the British, where at least the climate is cold, so I can understand why a culture of adding sugar developed over generations there. But here, it causes problems." Today, alongside his other business ventures, John sells high quality Kenyan tea processed according to Chinese traditions. His top products include purple tea and oolong. He sells these primarily to Chinese expatriates and tourists as *lipin* (gifts/souvenirs), but he also hopes to win over the Kenyan market.

Drawing from his particular combination of traditional Chinese medical knowledge and Christian paternalism, John has declared a "goal/purpose" (*mudi*) in his tea business: "To change the habits of Kenyans—and also white people," he said, looking at me, "to consume less sugar and milk by drinking Chinese tea." He writes on all of his promotional materials and tea packages, "Brew with clean hot water" and "Don't add sugar." In a poster hanging on the wall of a nearby Chinese grocery store (Figure 22), he portrays Chinese-style tea as a source of *Kenyan* national pride, a marker of postcolonial identity that does not exclude foreign influence and reliance on external export markets. Despite the paternalistic tone to his messaging, John's tea campaign resonates with the slowly emerging movement to decolonize the Kenyan food system in a way that is globally connected rather than purely inward facing.

Figure 22. A poster created by John Chen advertising his oolong and purple teas to Kenyans.

Among Kenyans who have come into contact with Chinese tea culture, sugar and tea are being slowly decoupled. Sitting in Liang's tea shop in Kilimani, a Kenyan man arrived and began to drink the tea he was given. "I used to have a big stomach before I met this guy," he told

me, motioning at Liang. “Now I can drink Chinese tea all day. I even prefer it to Kenyan tea with milk and sugar.” When I asked, he said his favorite kind of tea was purple tea. “Most Kenyas like lots of sugar,” he said, “and you can't put sugar in purple tea.” Everyone else in the shop, both Kenyan and Chinese, expressed their agreement. Sugar was simply not acceptable in this context.

Rather than hiding purple tea’s Chinese funding and development influence, purple tea proponents instead seem to celebrate Chinese expertise and the healthfulness of Chinese tea culture. As Kenya’s health movement gains momentum, it is not impossible to imagine a place for purple tea within it. Purple tea is known to be organic; its whole leaves are easily discernible, unlike the mysteriously grainy substance of CTC tea. Its proclaimed health benefits resonate with the shifting diets and lifestyles of Kenya’s urbanizing population. Although still a niche product unattainable to most Kenyans, the slow rise of purple tea suggests a vision of a future food system that is both anti-colonial and global, in which Kenya no longer supplies a raw resource to the rest of the world, but instead wields control over a valuable food technology. In this imagined future, although such a technology would be desirable worldwide, it would exist first and foremost to benefit the health and wealth of Kenyans at home.

Conclusion

Orthodox tea—particularly purple tea— remains marginalized within Kenya’s overall market by all but the richest and most globally connected consumers. The vast majority of tea farmers continue to grow conventional green leaves that they sell to KTDA to be processed into CTC black tea for export. Nevertheless, purple tea inspires hopes of prosperity and national pride, while speaking to rising anxieties in Kenya around food toxicity, obesity, and lifestyle

diseases. Its proponents remain passionately committed to the latent promises of purple tea, even as they struggle against the barriers of export, not to mention consumer affordability and taste preferences at home.

Creative marketing strategies navigate these challenges, from John Chen's harnessing of Chinese medicine and anti-imperialism to Njeri's product descriptions that emphasize purple tea's rootedness in the rich volcanic soils of Mount Kenya. Purple tea even has potential beyond hot beverages. Njeri is experimenting with purple tea in other wellness contexts such as skincare. "I sell it as a beauty thing," she told me, "I show people how to use it to wash your face."At the government scale too, purple tea has been discussed as a potential source of industrial anthocyanins for use in supplements, colorants, and pharmaceuticals (Kamunya et al. 2009). Others have begun experimenting with lotions and hair products, bottled drinks, flavored yogurt, and other inventions (Mugo 2022). Although these inventions are still in their infancy and are yet to significantly boost the Kenyan economy, they show purple tea's promise as a foundational technology, not unlike Njeri's reference to vibranium in Wakanda.

This chapter has illustrated how Kenya's re-configuring of the tea industry has been an ongoing process of negotiating domestic and global interests, tastes, and demands. Analyzing the assemblages of taste and meaning that are emerging around purple tea reveals how Kenya's postcolonial national identity is embedded within the larger story of 21st-century Chinese investments and business dealings in Africa. Caught between two historical tea empires, British and Chinese, the identity of purple tea is still in flux. Diplomatic and popular rhetoric often depicts a binary trope of China as either a neo-colonizer in Africa or as a benevolent partner acting without the West's baggage of neoliberal imperialism. Purple tea reveals a messier middle ground. The purple tea industry remains reliant today on Chinese markets, investments, and

tastes in ways that mimic older colonial and postcolonial cash crop power structures. At the same time, however, entanglements in Kenya of anti-colonial sentiments with a growing focus on health and wellness resonate with Chinese tea culture in surprising ways. These complexities point to Kenya's postcolonial aspirations of global interconnectedness, as laid out in Kenya's Vision 2030 plan. In pursuit of scientific progress, technological advancement, and value addition, this vision of Kenya derives national identity from international engagement, even while historical structures of inequality persist into the present.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusion

The big question that seemed to hover over Kilimani's Chinatown concerned the effects that Chinese presence might have on the Kenyan nation as a whole. Was this a reiteration of colonialism, a new era of prosperity through international cooperation, or something else entirely? The opacity of China-Kenya relations—both at the governmental level, with closed-door meetings and rumors of corruption, and on the interpersonal level, with language barriers and clashing workplace norms—only seemed to intensify the issue's controversy and sensitivity. Both Kenyan and Chinese interlocutors expressed ambivalence about their entangled futures. On one hand, jobs were jobs and money was money; for everyone involved, from Chinese restaurant owners to Kenyan translators and employees, economic opportunities were not to be taken for granted. On the other hand, the power asymmetries between Kenyans and Chinese were often too stark to ignore, fueling resentment and the mobilization of racial stereotypes. Chinese racial stereotypes about Kenyans, often concerning thievery, poverty, and unsophisticated sensibilities (including those related to food), helped to justify the need for Chinese development projects, while also justifying the high walls behind which many Chinese people lived segregated lives. Kenyan racial stereotypes about Chinese people, often concerning food, animals, and fakeness, helped to soften the threats of Chinese presence through disgust, absurdity, and even humor.

Njeri, the tea blender, perfectly put this ambivalence into words. While we sat in her office in downtown Nairobi, I asked her about Chinese food. She described a business trip she

had taken to China, where she was the only one in the group brave enough to try local food. "I ordered chicken, and I was like 'What is this small chicken? I think it's just a bird!' They also eat some funny worms that are alive…That's what's in a lot of people's minds when it comes to Chinese food. People associate Chinese with low quality," Njeri said. She pointed at a hole puncher on the windowsill. "For example," she told me, "that thing is from China and it only worked for two months." She pointed to another piece of office equipment: "That one I've had to fix ten times."

Then, Njeri articulated a complex and highly ambivalent notion of the "fake:" "Oh, 'Chinese are colonizing Kenyans,' there's that way of thinking, but it won't work. We know the Chinese for what they are: just fake. Not like when the British came. With white people, we envied what they had. They [the Chinese] built our roads and everyday there is a new pothole to fix."

Like the Comaroffs' notion of a "counterfeit modernity," (2007), the Chinese for Njeri represented a "fake" colonialism. As she saw it, Chinese presence in Kenya was full of holes, from literal potholes to the empty signifiers of flimsy office supplies and tiny chickens. Whereas the British came with armies and missionaries, the Chinese came with cheap smartphones and highway fixes that seemed slapdash. Rather than inspiring "envy" and a sense of African inadequacy as under British colonization, for Njeri these holes seemed to inspire a pragmatic, even subversive sense of local empowerment. As she put it, "the British brought education so that we can communicate with *them*, but the Chinese brought phones so that we can do business with *each other*. Speaking good English is good, but you can just speak your own language and be well fed" (my italics). The phones may be shoddy, in other words, but they were nevertheless useful, and their very shoddiness undermined any real threat of Chinese incursion. Where British

wealth prompted feelings of inferiority and envy, Chinese wealth seemed attainable. Faced with "fake colonialism," Kenyan suspicion, discernment, and pragmatism could emerge victorious.

Far away from Njeri's office in bustling downtown Nairobi, in the mountains of rural central Kenya, the crayfish trapper David and his friend Edwin articulated similar sentiments. We were walking along the banks of a lake, chatting while David checked his crayfish traps. Unprompted, Edwin said to me that the United States seemed to be "ahead of Africa," that "Africa has always been behind," but that now China was helping by supplying Africa with much needed technology. "But Chinese hate Africans," Edwin said, while "white people like us. For the Chinese, it's just business [*ni biashara tu*]." He interpreted this perceived hatred and its accompanying cold capitalist logic with ambivalence—unpleasant, and yet preferable to the empty kindliness of white people who withheld practical support even as they spoke nice words. Perhaps to lighten the mood, David mused, "I could date a Chinese girl, but what if she eats frogs? Or snakes?" After debating the differences between snakes and fish (and clarifying that he was happily married), Edwin agreed that he too could never eat a snake. The idiom of food became a way to articulate the complexities of Chinese presence in Kenya. Quite different from feeling subordinated beneath a white gaze, the absurdities of Chinese food seemed to turn the tables, letting Kenyans feel a measure of superiority through their disgust.

Njeri reiterated this point when she described a lack of social prestige accorded to Chinese food in Nairobi. "I can't even smell it! I'd rather have KFC or something. Their fish is weird…There's nothing fancy about saying you ate in a Chinese restaurant; young people talk about eating at KFC or Chicken Inn. The notion we have is eating frogs and snails." While other Kenyans might have disagreed with Njeri about Chinese restaurants (see Chapter 2), her point would likely ring true for all but the most cosmopolitan and omnivorous of Nairobi's middle and

upper classes. Chinese presence in Kenya "triggers the collective trauma of European colonialism" (Huang 2024, 18), but its aesthetic differences and stark mercenariness defang those older fears. What emerged were often feelings of ambivalent mirth, tinged with resentment but also with contempt.

Even as Kenyans sneered at Chinese food, of course, Chinese people also looked down on Kenyan food. Many Chinese people in Kenya expressed to me a deep pride in their nation's rich culinary heritage with its complexity of local traditions and rare ingredients. This pride in food is what laid the groundwork for this dissertation, inspiring dozens of chefs in Nairobi to open restaurants and catalyzing new supply chains for everything from imported sauces and frozen ducks to locally sourced vegetables, tea, and crayfish. The aesthetic and philosophical complexity of Chinese cuisine, and its central importance in Chinese daily life, has meant that Chinese diasporas have sparked new, flourishing foodways all over the world. In Nairobi, Chinese people rarely embraced local Kenyan food, relying instead on a dynamic web of Kenyan and Chinese suppliers and cooks to recreate and innovate the beloved tastes of home. It would be difficult to understand the new Chinese migration to Africa, this dissertation argues, without at least mentioning food. In Nairobi, deals were made and partnerships formed around the lavish banquet table. Racial-ethnic boundaries were probed and reinforced over lunch in the workplace dining hall. Larger patterns of cross-linguistic sociality materialized through the everyday transactions in Chinese restaurants between chefs, cashiers, servers, and customers. By following supply chains from Kilimani out to their sources, the material-semiotic entanglements of desirable ingredients with local politics, tastes, and non-human ecosystems came into full focus.

This dissertation has demonstrated how Chinese food accrues mystique and intrigue over time as its material affordances and semiotic meanings circulate. Every time a rumor about

eating frogs and snakes is repeated, every time a Kenyan diner balks at the "weirdness" of a Chinese dish, and every time a Chinese chef seeks out an unusual ingredient from Kenyan suppliers, power and meaning accrue to "Chinese food" as a concept. In this way, Chinese food becomes "animated" (Huang 2019) by the larger anxieties Kenyans feel about Chinese presence in their country. It becomes what Jasbir Puar (2008) calls "a perverse fetish object," a "centripetal force, a strange attractor" that gains momentum as it draws in and amasses meaning over time (66). This material-semiotic notion of "stickiness" (Ahmed 2004, Puar 2008, Huang 2019), I argue, helps explain why Chinese food has become a butt of jokes across Kenya, a metonym for Chinese presence that disarms through absurdity and disgust. This rhetoric resonates across scales of daily life, even reaching some of the nation's loudest megaphones: those of Kenya's presidential candidates in 2022, whose words reverberated across newspapers, radios, and social media feeds. This rhetoric in turn shapes what foodways look like on the ground, influencing everything from fisheries management policies to priorities in tea research.

Chinese people were not insulated from this rhetoric, of course. They defended their own culinary omnivorousness, citing the role of unusual species in Chinese cuisine as evidence of Chinese resourcefulness and creativity. When my friend Ying commented on a Facebook post about invasive apple snails in central Kenya, for example, offering to collect them to eat, the humorous tone of her messages revealed her "double-consciousness" (Du Bois 1903). She knew that most Kenyans were disgusted by eating snails, so she leaned into the unusualness of her request: "Since I'm helping you with your problem, how much would you like to pay for the Pest Control Service?" she wrote, using a well-placed smiley face emoji to highlight her good humor. Such explicit play with the motifs of anti-Chinese stereotypes were rare, however. More often, when faced with the knowledge that Kenyans disparaged Chinese food, Chinese people spun this

into stereotyped rhetoric of their own, often linking with the racialized and classed tropes of Kenyans as aesthetically unsophisticated and unable to comprehend the complexities of Chinese bodily philosophies.

With so many multidirectional stereotypes in everyday usage, it is no wonder that a hermeneutics of suspicion has arisen in Kilimani along Chinese-Kenyan lines. Between the tense political rhetoric and the everyday reality of the language barrier, deep and lasting cross-cultural relationships were highly uncommon in Kilimani's Chinatown. Instead, interactions relied on a minimal consensus of communication, often taking creative linguistic forms, that allowed for business to continue as usual. Conflicts were frequent as tempers overflowed and intentions were misunderstood. All of this added up into an atmosphere of mutual and multidirectional distrust, fueled by Chinese and Kenyan preoccupations with corruption, counterfeits, and the fake. From Chinese desires to escape food adulteration scandals back home, to Njeri's notion of "fake" colonialism, China-Kenya encounters were overdetermined by suspicion, discretion, discernment, and ambivalence.

Moving forward, I hope this dissertation offers insights for examining foodways as sites of the production of social difference. I particularly hope it will encourage research that takes food's sensory and aesthetic qualities seriously in the study of complex geopolitical encounters and the mobilization of stereotypes. I am intrigued by the themes of health and toxicity that have woven through the chapters, from Chinese preoccupations with adulterated foodways back home in China, to the Kenyan fascination with *kienyeji* (indigenous/natural) and growing trends towards food sovereignty. Building from Elisabeth Hsu's (2022) and Stacey Langwick's (2011) work examining the philosophies and materialities of Chinese medicine in East Africa, I hope in future research to probe how, for example, Chinese foodways and urban gardening projects in

impoverished neighborhoods might converge. Other threads from this dissertation that merit future study include the growth of fusion cuisines in Nairobi and the political ecologies of important supply chains such as pork, coastal seafood, and soy products. Deeper examinations of neo-colonial perceptions, humor, and gender in China-Africa encounters would also be valuable in future study.

Additionally, this dissertation will stand as evidence of Nairobi at a strange point in time, during and after the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021-2022. Although I was not permitted to travel until the summer of 2021 (and therefore spent the earliest and scariest days of the pandemic in the United States), emergency procedures were in full swing when I arrived in Kenya. A 10pm curfew was in effect and masks were required in most indoor establishments. For a time, proof of vaccination was required to enter public buildings, although I never saw this enforced—to the relief, no doubt, of my many interlocutors, both Kenyan and Chinese, who distrusted the vaccine and had no intention of getting it. At many Chinese companies, Covid created an even more insular environment. Newly arrived workers from China were required to quarantine for a minimum of two weeks, sometimes at a Chinese-owned guesthouse in Naivasha that I visited for meals several times while researching crayfish. These quarantining employees were forbidden to even step outside their suites, I was told. I could only imagine their fear and suspicion when they eventually opened their doors and emerged into a foreign African country. Meanwhile, anti-Chinese sentiments flared in Kenya and around the world, incited both by the virus's origin in China and by reports from Guangzhou of discrimination and mistreatment against Africans accused of spreading the virus (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2020). Although formal restrictions gradually lessened throughout my year in Kenya, they left many lasting effects. The pandemic seemed to worsen patterns of segregation in Chinese workplaces, for

example, including at mealtimes. One employee of a Chinese media company told me that ever since the early pandemic, his bosses had taken all of their meals in their rooms so that they never needed to enter the communal dining hall at all.

Additionally, the travel restrictions preventing Chinese people from going home weighed heavily on many minds. China's Zero-Covid policies, in effect from early 2020 through December 2022, tightly restricted flights in and out of China and required extensive testing and quarantine in special facilities at the travelers' expense. At one point in 2021, I remember one-way tickets from Nairobi to Guangzhou costing $7000 USD. This meant that most Chinese people in Kenya were effectively stuck, cut off from their families back home. My friend Ying worried she would never see her elderly grandparents again. One married couple working for an engineering company had left their one-year-old daughter behind with her grandparents, and now hadn't seen her in over a year. A few people even openly critiqued the Chinese government's policies and expressed feelings of betrayal as citizens abroad, barred from returning to their own country.

Among Kenyans, meanwhile, a general feeling of precarity or even hopelessness seemed to permeate everyday life. Most of my interlocutors in Kilimani's Chinatown had been recently hired after losing their previous jobs to the pandemic. Kenya's tourism industry had disappeared overnight, making places like Naivasha feel desolate and sending many Nairobi-area hotels and restaurants out of business. Many interlocutors described facing higher levels of economic hardship than ever before, including the increasing burden of caring for relatives in their rural hometowns. Interestingly, the disease itself seemed to cause less worry for both Kenyans and Chinese than the economic damage and travel restrictions it caused. Kenya indeed suffered fewer fatalities than many other countries, at least according to official records. Furthermore, I only

arrived in Kenya after the worst of the pandemic had already passed; although the Omicron variant made its rounds throughout late 2021 and early 2022—nearly everyone I knew got sick, myself included—it was a milder disease by that point.

I returned to Kenya for a follow-up visit in the summer of 2023 in part to dig deeper into purple tea, but also to gain perspective on how the pandemic had affected daily life in Chinatown after the disease had decreased in salience. Mostly, everyday life seemed to be continuing as usual. China City, the newest Chinatown shopping complex, had sprung up right next to *Zhonghua Jie* and was open for business. Grace, who had worked at Duck Express, had left that job and taken a new one at a hotpot restaurant in China City. Kennedy still worked at Duck Express, however, and seemed happy enough with his job. A Chinese acquaintance of mine from my first research trip to Kenya in 2016, a professional tour guide, had finally returned to Kenya for the first time since the pandemic because the Chinese tourism industry was coming back. The next time I visit Kenya, things will no doubt have changed again, as they always do. Only a snapshot of real life can be captured by ethnography, a historical time period frozen and already obsolete. I hope this one will prove interesting to future readers as testimony to an anomalous moment when the world seemed to, but never actually did, stand still.

Regarding anomalies, I wish to conclude with the hope that this dissertation will offer evidence of the value of studying marginal industries, passionate individuals, peripheral moments, and outliers of all kinds. Why is the story of a single purple tea farmer important, or a niche freshwater crustacean that most Kenyans have never heard of? What do these odd fragments of life matter to the larger issues of Africa-China geopolitics, or global food security, or racism and inequality? I realize that the audience of this anthropology dissertation will already be well versed in the scholarly merit of studying the margins and the marginalized; nevertheless,

writing in the United States in 2025, it feels worthwhile to defend ethnographic research on daily life. Rather than assuming that individuals are homogeneous representatives of a larger cultural whole, the ethnographic gaze sees culture emerging *through* the behaviors, affects, and interactions of individuals. Cultural forms do not exist outside each of our habits and quirks, but are instead constituted (and sometimes refuted and played with) by them. To witness the depth and complexity of these processes, therefore, anthropologists have embraced interlocutors of all kinds, even those on the margins of their own societies, each of whom embodies a unique interplay of structure and agency, norms and idiosyncrasies, restriction and rebellion. Eccentric interlocutors, outliers within the community, and even suspicious interlocutors who twist the truth can offer valuable perspectives that challenge assumptions and reveal structures of power that might otherwise be obscured. Anomalous interlocutors are thus reframed not as obstacles to theory generation, but as valid partners in fieldwork with whom knowledge can be produced about the desires, anxieties, and preoccupations that animate a particular time and place (e.g. Geertz 1968, Shokeid 1988, Tsing 1993, Behar 1993, Marcus 1997). Even beyond the human, the ecological processes of the tiniest and least charismatic of organisms can reveal cultural politics of monumental significance to local and global multispecies lifeways (e.g. Haraway 1991, Chao 2021, Paredes 2023).

In my case, China's semiotic power manifested in a Kenyan diner's refusal to taste chicken, and the effects of racial stereotypes could be glimpsed in the unruly wanderings of freshwater crayfish. China's abstract promises of prosperity materialized in Richard the purple tea farmer, who nearly alienated himself from his family through his unusual passion. A wide-reaching ethos of suspicion was laid bare by my interactions with Lucas, the Kenyan "cultural consultant" who reveled in Kilimani's sordid rumors and seemed to neither trust nor be trusted

by anyone else. Meanwhile, my Chinese friend Ying, with her avocado toast and whimsical handicrafts, embodied the contradictions between social constraints and personal freedom as she navigated the borders between Kilimani's Chinatown and its middle-class cosmopolitan enclave.

Taken together, these moments add up into a story of multi-scalar knowledge production at the interstices of the Kenya-China encounter. The handshakes by government leaders, the political manifestos, the national corruption scandals, the fear-mongering headlines in Western news—all of these come to matter to the everyday lived experiences of Chinese and Kenyan people on the ground in Kilimani and beyond. Likewise, every time a trap full of crayfish is pulled out of a remote lake, or a Kenyan employee tries a new dish with a Chinese colleague, these small moments accrue meaning that resounds around the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adunbi, Omolade. 2022. *Enclaves of exception: Special economic zones and extractive practices in Nigeria*. Indiana University Press.

Adunbi, Omolade and Bilal Butt. 2019. Afro-Chinese engagements: Infrastructure, land, labour and finance Introduction. *Africa*, *89*(4), 633-637.

AFP. 2022. "Ruto vows to deport Chinese traders if elected." *The Citizen*. https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/east-africa-news/ruto-vows-to-deport-chinese-traders-if-elected-3856522.

Agbiboa, Daniel E. 2022. *They Eat Our Sweat: transport labor, corruption, and everyday survival in urban Nigeria*. Oxford University Press.

Agha, Asif. 1998. Stereotypes and registers of honorific language. *Language in society*, *27*(2), 151-193.

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. Affective economies. *Social text*, *22*(2), 117-139.

Aiyar, Sana. 2015. *Indians in Kenya: The politics of diaspora*. Harvard University Press.

Akama, John S. 1998. The evolution of wildlife conservation policies in Kenya. *Journal of Third World Studies*, *15*(2), 103-117.

Al-Fadhat, Faris and Hari Prasetio. 2022. How China's Debt-trap diplomacy works in African countries: evidence from Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Djibouti. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *59*(5), 1463-1483.

Alden, Chris and Daniel Large (Eds.). 2018. *New directions in Africa–China studies*. Routledge.

Ali, S. Harris and Jarrett Robert Rose. 2022. The post-colonialist condition, suspicion, and social resistance during the West African Ebola epidemic: The importance of Frantz Fanon for global health. *Social Science & Medicine*, *305*, 115066.

Anand, Nikhil. 2015. Leaky states: Water audits, ignorance, and the politics of infrastructure. *Public Culture*, *27*(2), 305-330.

Andae, Gerald. 2023. KTDA constructs Sh130m new specialty tea factory. *Business Daily*. https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/markets/commodities/ktda-constructs-sh130m-new-specialty-tea-factory--4234622.

Anderson, Benedict. 2005 [1983]. Imagined communities. *Nations and nationalism: A reader*, 48-60.

Anderson, Jay Allan. 1971. Scholarship on contemporary American folk foodways. *Ethnologia Europaea*, *5*(1), 56-63.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1981. gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia. *American ethnologist*, *8*(3), 494-511.

Arora, Nayantara. 2023. Chai as a Colonial Creation: The British Empire's Cultivation of Tea as a Popular Taste and Habit Among South Asians. *Oregon Undergraduate Research Journal,* 21(1), 9-22.

Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. 2007. 'Broken calabashes and covenants of fruitfulness': cursing

barrenness in contemporary African Christianity. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 37(4), 437-460.
Ashforth, Adam. 2014. When the vampires come for you: A true story of ordinary horror. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, *81*(4), 851-882.
Askew, Kelly M. 2015. 'Eat squid not fish': poetics, aesthetics, and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *27*(3), 255-276.
Atieno, Winnie. 2021. Kenya will not ban fish imports from China, CS Munya says. *Daily Nation*. Accessed 3/4/24 from https://nation.africa/kenya/news/kenya-will-not-ban-fish-imports-from-china-cs-munya-says--3499996.
Ayega, Davis. 2023. 'Not a poor man's cuisine, indigenous foods are good:' agoreconomists. *Capital News*. https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2023/09/not-a-poor-mans-cuisine-indigenous-foods-are-good-agronomists/.
Balaton-Chrimes, Samantha. 2016. The Nubians of Kenya. *Citizenship, Belonging, and Political Community in Africa*, 149.
Balaton-Chrimes, Samantha and Laurence Cooley. 2022. To count or not to count? Insights from Kenya for global debates about enumerating ethnicity in national censuses. *Ethnicities*, *22*(3), 404-424.
Balogun-Mwangi, Oyenike, Tracy L. Robinson-Wood, Nicole R. DeTore, Jessica B. Edwards George, Rachel F. Rodgers, William Sanchez. 2023. Body image and Black African women: A comparative study of Kenya and Nigeria. *Body Image*, *45*, 331-342.
Bartlett, Kate. 2020. Chinese national gets 20-year sentence for torture in Rwanda. Voice of America. Accessed 09/01/2024 from https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-national-gets-20-year-sentence-for-torture-in-rwanda-/6537376.html.
Bateson, Gregory. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind.* Chandler.
Bayart, Jean-François. 1993. *The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly.* Longman.
Behar, Ruth. 1993. *Translated woman: Crossing the border with Esperanza's story*. Beacon Press.
Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha M. and Jemima Pierre. 2020. Anthropology of white supremacy. *American Anthropologist*, *122*(1), 65-75.
Beshty, Walead. 2012. Improvisation and the Agency of the Commons: Notes on Counterfeiting as a Form of Radical Speech. *Reactivation: 9th Shanghai Biennale*, published by Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum. https://www.regenprojects.com/attachment/en/54522d19cfaf3430698b4568/Press/5a9b4df11ec1385f49fab142.
Besky, Sarah. (2020). *Tasting qualities: The past and future of tea*(Vol. 5). University of California Press.
Bhat, Harish. 2024. Heaven in a dumpling: call of the momos. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/catalyst/heaven-in-a-dumpling-call-of-the-momos/article67803758.ece.
Black, Steven P. 2012. Laughing to death: Joking as support amid stigma for Zulu-speaking South Africans living with HIV. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *22*(1), 87-108.
Blunt, Robert. 2004. "Satan is an imitator": Kenya's recent cosmology of corruption. In Brad Weiss (Ed). *Producing African Futures*. Brill, 294-328.
Bocci, Paolo. 2017. Tangles of care: Killing goats to save tortoises on the Galápagos Islands. *Cultural Anthropology*, *32*(3), 424-449.
Boisseron, Benedicte. 2015. Afro-dog. *Transition: An International Review*, (118), 15-31.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.Harvard University Press.
Branson, Richard. 2016. Richard Branson speaks out against rhino horn trade. *WildAid.* https://wildaid.org/richard-branson-speaks-out-against-rhino-horn-trade/.
Brautigam, Deborah. 2009. *The dragon's gift: the real story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
Brautigam, D. 2020. A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': The rise of a meme. *Area Development and Policy*, *5*(1), 1-14.
Brellas, Demetrios and Vanessa Martinez. 2024. 5.0 Foodways. *Shared Voices: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology [Revised Edition]*. Pressbooks.
Bristow, Michael. 2007. China's long march to Africa. *BBC*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7118941.stm.
Britton, J. R., R. R. Boar, J. Grey, J. Foster, J. Lugonzo, D. M. Harper. 2007. From introduction to fishery dominance: the initial impacts of the invasive carp Cyprinus carpio in Lake Naivasha, Kenya, 1999 to 2006. *Journal of Fish Biology*, *71*, 239-257.
Brown, Byron and Ms Goaletsa Rammidi. 2014. Manifestations of service culture among street vendors in Botswana. *International Journal of Business and Management*, *9*(9), 244.
Bubandt, Nils. 1998. The odour of things: Smell and the cultural elaboration of disgust in Eastern Indonesia. *Ethnos*, *63*(1), 48-80.
Bubandt, Nils and Anna Tsing. 2018. Feral dynamics of post-industrial ruin: An introduction. *Journal of Ethnobiology,* 38(1), 1-7.
Buckser, Andrew. 1999. Keeping kosher: eating and social identity among the Jews of Denmark. *Ethnology*, 191-209.
Burke, Timothy. 1996. *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: commodification, consumption, and cleanliness in modern Zimbabwe*. Duke University Press.
Callahan, Laura. 2006. English or Spanish?! Language accommodation in New York City service encounters. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, *3*(1), 29-53.
Carloni, Patricia, Luca Tiano, Lucia Padella, Tiziana Bacchetti, Chisomo Customu, Alexander Kay, Elisabetta Damiani. 2013. Antioxidant activity of white, green and black tea obtained from the same tea cultivar. *Food research international*, *53*(2), 900-908.
Carmody, Pádraig Risteard. 2017. *The new scramble for Africa*. John Wiley & Sons.
Carrier, Neil C. 2017. *Little Mogadishu: Eastleigh, Nairobi's Global Somali Hub*. Oxford University Press, New York.
Castillo, Roberto. 2020. "Race" and "racism" in contemporary Africa-China relations research: approaches, controversies and reflections. Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 21(3), 310-336.
Cernansky, Rachel. 2015. Super vegetables. *Nature*, *522*(7555), 146.
Cerwonka, Allaine and Liisa H. Malkki. 2008. *Improvising theory: Process and temporality in ethnographic fieldwork*. University of Chicago Press.
Chalfin, Brenda. 2010. *Neoliberal Frontiers: an ethnography of sovereignty in West Africa*. University of Chicago Press.
Chao, Sophie. 2021. The beetle or the bug? Multispecies politics in a West Papuan oil palm plantation. *American Anthropologist*, *123*(3), 476-489.
Chao, Sophie, Karin Bolender, and Eben Kirksey (Eds.). 2022. *The promise of multispecies justice*. Duke University Press.
Chason, R. and R. Ombuor. 2022. "Kenyans head to polls in tightly contested, closely watched

election." *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/09/kenya-election-odinga-ruto/
Chege, Kimani. 2023. Kenyan farmers watch as Chinese garlic slowly claims market. *China Global South Project.* https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/kenyan-farmers-watch-as-chinese-garlic-slowly-claims-market/.
Chen, Liang, Zeno Apostolides, Zong-Mao Chen (Eds.). 2012. *Global tea breeding*. Zhejiang University Press.
Cheng, Cliff. 1999. Marginalized masculinities and hegemonic masculinity: An introduction. *The Journal of men's studies*, *7*(3), 295-315.
Cheung, Sydney C. H. 2015. From Cajun Crayfish to Spicy Little Lobster: A Tale of Local Culinary Politics in a Third-Tier City in China. In Farrer, James (Ed). *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines*. Palgrave Macmillan. 209-228.
Chigateri, Shraddha. 2008. 'Glory to the cow': Cultural difference and social justice in the food hierarchy in India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *31*(1), 10-35.
China-Africa Business Council. 2021. Market power and role of the private sector. In *China-Africa Forum*. http://www.focac.org/eng/lhyj_1/yjcg/202108/P020210912686220025483.pdf.
China-Africa Research Initiative. 2024. "Chinese labor data overview." Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-workers-in-africa.
Chingono, Nyasha. 2020. Shooting of Zimbabwe workers by Chinese mine owner shows 'systemic' abuse, watchdog says. CNN. Accessed 09/01/2024 from https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/27/africa/zimbabwe-mine-shooting-intl/index.html.
Chubb, Andrew. 2015. China's Shanzhai Culture:'Grabism'and the politics of hybridity. *Journal of Contemporary China*, *24*(92), 260-279.
Ciuri, Simon. 2023. How chance visit to 'overpriced' Kenyan supermarkets birthed China Square. *Daily Nation*. Accessed 3/4/24 from https://nation.africa/kenya/business/china-square-low-prices-unicity-mall-moses-kuria-4137590.
Colón, Sigma. 2014. Occupying nature: Fishing for meaning in the Asian carp. *Transforming Anthropology*, *22*(1), 24-30.
Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff. 2007. Law and Disorder in the Postcolony. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, *15*(2), 133-152.
Condon, Bernard. 2023. China's loans pushing world's poorest countries to brink of collapse. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/china-debt-banking-loans-financial-developing-countries-collapse-8df6f9fac3e1e758d0e6d8d5dfbd3ed6.
Conklin, Beth A. 2001. *Consuming grief: compassionate cannibalism in an Amazonian society*. University of Texas Press.
Costa, Sérgio. 2019. The neglected nexus between conviviality and inequality. *Novos estudos CEBRAP*, 38, 15-32.
Cousens, Chris. 2024. Catcalls and unwanted conversations. *Hypatia*, 1-17.
Cowling, Natalie. 2024. Informal sector employment in Kenya 2023, by activity. *Statista*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1134287/informal-sector-employment-in-kenya-by-activity/#:~:text=Informal%20sector%20employment%20in%20Kenya%202023%2C%20by%20activity&text=The%20informal%20sector%20in%20Kenya,people%20employed%20in%20the%20country.
Dahniya, M. T. 1994. An overview of cassava in Africa. *African Crop Science Journal*, *2*(4),

337-343.
Davies, Lizzie. 2022. Stalked by hunger but fighting obesity: Kenya's hidden food crisis. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/31/stalked-by-hunger-but-fighting-obesity-kenya-hidden-food-crisis-acc.
Deepalakshmi, K. 2017. Is 'plastic rice' for real? *The Hindu.* Accessed 3/4/34 from https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/is-plastic-rice-for-real/article62029867.ece.
DeHart, Monica. 2015. Costa Rica's Chinatown: The Art of Being Global in the Age of China. *City & Society*, *27*(2), 183-207.
Delpero, Alessandro and Gabriele Volpato. 2022. Integrated pond aquaculture and regional identity: ethnobiology of the golden humped tench of Poirino highlands, Northwest Italy. *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, *18*(1), 31.
Deo, Arpan Singha, P. J. Asheela Devi, K. S. Sijisha, R. Anusha, Tripti Mishra, Siby Mathew, K. Mathew Abraham, R. Jagadish, S. Priya. 2024. Comparative studies on the antioxidant, anticancer and anti-inflammatory activities of green tea, orthodox black tea and CTC black tea. *Journal of Food Science and Technology*, *61*(7), 1315-1325.
Dietler, Michael. 2020. Alcohol as embodied material culture. In Kimberley HockingsRobin Dunbar (Eds.) *Alcohol and Humans.* Oxford University Press, 115-129.
Dinerstein, Eric. 2003. *The return of the unicorns: the natural history and conservation of the greater one-horned rhinoceros*. Columbia University Press.
Ding, Chao. 2018. Xijiao, hugu, daodi suan shenme shenyao? (Rhino horn and tiger bones: what kind of medicine are they really?) *Zhihu.* https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/48442266.
Dingley, Zebulon. 2022. Politics by night: histories of extraversion and rumours of body part theft on the south coast of Kenya. *Africa*, *92*(1), 133-151
Douglas, Mary. 2003 [1966]. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.
Driessen, Miriam. 2019. *Tales of hope, tastes of bitterness: Chinese road builders in Ethiopia*. Hong Kong University Press.
———. 2020. Pidgin play: Linguistic subversion on Chinese-run construction sites in Ethiopia. *African Affairs*, *119*(476), 432-451.
———. 2022. Trials of trustworthiness between Ethiopian lawyers and Chinese clients. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, *45*(2), 274-289.
Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*. A. C. McClurg and Co.
Dua, Jatin. 2016. Dhow encounters. *Transition: An International Review*, (119), 49-59.
———. 2019. *Captured at sea: Piracy and protection in the Indian Ocean* (Vol. 3). University of California Press.
———. 2024. Anthropology of and from the Ocean. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *53*.
Edge, John T. 2009. Missouri Chinese: two cultures claim this chicken. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/dining/11cashew.html.
Elliott, Hannah and Martin Skrydstrup. 2021. The true price of quality: On the infrastructures of tea in postcolonial Kenya. *Commodity Frontiers*, (2), 16-23.
Ellis, Richard. 2005. *Tiger bone & rhino horn: the destruction of wildlife for traditional Chinese medicine*. Island Press.
Ese, Anders and Kristin Ese. 2020. *The city makers of Nairobi: An African urban history*. Routledge.
Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1940. *The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Clarendon Press.

Fabinyi, Michael and Neng Liu. 2016. The social context of the Chinese food system: an ethnographic study of the Beijing seafood market. *Sustainability,* 8(3), 244.
Fanon, Frantz. 1986. *Black Skin White Masks.* Pluto Press.
Farquhar, Judith. 2002. *Appetites: Food and sex in post-socialist China*. Duke University Press.
Feldman-Savelsberg, Pamela. 2020. Class Performances: Children's Parties and the Reproduction of Social Class among Diasporic Cameroonians. *Africa Today*, *66*(3), 20-43.
Fei Xiaotong. 1992 [1947]. *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society: A Translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo.* Gary G. Hamilton and Zheng Wang (Eds. and trans.). University of California Press.
Feng, Jenny. 2023. Cultural boon or abomination? American-Chinese food arrives in Beijing. *The China Project*. https://thechinaproject.com/2023/07/13/cultural-boon-or-abomination-american-chinese-food-arrives-in-beijing/.
Ferguson, James. 2006. *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*. Duke University Press.
Fontein, Joost. 2023. Goats, materials and uncertainty in Nairobi. *Africa*, *93*(1), 60-79.
French, Howard W. 2014. *China's second continent: How a million migrants are building a new empire in Africa*. Vintage.
Gal, Susan. 2021. How culture and society are communicatively constituted: A reflection on 40 years of linguistic anthropology. *Langage et société*, *172*(1), 125-148.
Gal, Sarah and Judith T. Irvine. 2019. *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life*. Cambridge University Press.
Gao-Miles, Linling. 2017. Beyond the ethnic enclave: Interethnicity and trans-spatiality in an Australian suburb. *City & Society*, *29*(1), 82-103.
García, María Elena. 2021. *Gastropolitics and the specter of race: Stories of capital, culture, and coloniality in Peru* (Vol. 76). Univ of California Press.
Geertz, Clifford. 1968. Thinking as a moral act: Ethical dimensions of anthropological fieldwork in the new states. *The Antioch Review*, *28*(2), 139-158.
Gherardi, Francesca, J. Robert Britton, Kenneth M. Mavuti, Nic Pacini, Jonathan Grey, Elena Tricarico, David M. Harper. 2011. A review of allodiversity in Lake Naivasha, Kenya: Developing conservation actions to protect East African lakes from the negative impacts of alien species. *Biological Conservation*, 144(11), 2585-2596.
Gill, Michael J. and Robin Burrow. 2018. The function of fear in institutional maintenance: Feeling frightened as an essential ingredient in haute cuisine. Organization studies, 39(4), 445-465.
Gilroy, Paul. 2005. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Columbia UP.
Gitonga, Antony. 2018. Chinese banned from fishing in Lake Naivasha. *The Standard*. https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/kenya/article/2001283098/chinese-banned-from-fishing-in-lake-naivasha.
Glassman, Jonathon P. 2004. Slower than a massacre: The multiple sources of racial thought in colonial Africa. *American Historical Review*, 109(3), 720-754.
Goffman, Erving. 1955. On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. Psychiatry, 18(3), 213-231.
———. 1974. Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. Northeastern UP.
Goldstein, Joseph. 2018. Kenyans say Chinese investment brings racism and discrimination.

New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/world/africa/kenya-china-racism.html.
Göpfert, Mirco. 2020. Epistemophilic obsessions: Espionage, secrets, and the ethnographer's will to know. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *10*(2), 487-498.
Gossner, Céline Marie-Elise, Jørgen Schlundt, Peter Ben Embarek, Susan Hird, Danilo Lo-Fo-Wong, Jose Javier Ocampo Beltran, Keng Ngee Teoh, Angelika Tritscher. 2009. The melamine incident: implications for international food and feed safety. *Environmental health perspectives*, *117*(12), 1803-1808.
Grimen, Harald. 2009. Power, trust, and risk: some reflections on an absent issue. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *23*(1), 16-33.
Guccini, Federica and Mingyuan Zhang. 2021. 'Being Chinese' in Mauritius and Madagascar: Comparing Chinese diasporic communities in the western Indian Ocean. *The Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, *4*(2), 91-117
Guest, Kenneth J. 2003. *God in Chinatown: Religion and survival in New York's evolving immigrant community* (Vol. 11). NYU Press.
Guo, Shibao. 2016. From international migration to transnational diaspora: Theorizing "double diaspora" from the experience of Chinese Canadians in Beijing. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *17*, 153-171.
———. 2022. Reimagining Chinese diasporas in a transnational world: Toward a new research agenda. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *48*(4), 847-872.
Gupta, Akhil and Jessie Stoolman, J. 2022. Decolonizing US anthropology. *American Anthropologist*, *124*(4), 778-799.
Han, Byung-Chul. 2017. *Shanzhai: deconstruction in Chinese.* (Vol. 8). MIT Press.
Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Free Association.
Harper, David M., Kenneth M. Mavuti, and S. Mucai Muchiri. 1990. Ecology and management of Lake Naivasha, Kenya, in relation to climatic change, alien species' introductions, and agricultural development. *Environmental Conservation*, *17*(4), 328-336.
Haruyama, Justin Lee. 2023. Shortcut English: Pidgin Language, Racialization, and Symbolic Economies at a Chinese-Operated Mine in Zambia. *African Studies Review*, *66*(1), 18-44.
Hawkins, Amy and Justin McCurry. 2023. Fukushima: China accused of hypocrisy over its own release of wastewater from nuclear plants . *The Guardian*. Accessed 3/4/34 from https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/aug/25/fukushima-daiichi-nuclear-power-plant-china-wastewater-release.
Heil, Tilmann. 2014. Conviviality:(Re) negotiating minimal consensus. In Vertovec, Steven (Ed.) *Routledge international handbook of diversity studies*. Routledge, 317-324.
———. 2019. "Conviviality on the brink." *Mecila Working Papers,* 14.
Helmreich, Stefan. 2005. How scientists think; about 'natives', for example. A problem of taxonomy among biologists of alien species in Hawaii. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *11*(1), 107-128.
Hennessey, William. 2011. Deconstructing Shanzhai-China's copycat counterculture: Catch me if you can. *Campbell L. Rev.*, *34*, 609.
Herzfeld, M. 2016. "Culinary stereotypes: the gustatory politics of gastro-essentialism." In Klein, Jakob A. and James L. (Eds.). *The handbook of food and anthropology*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 31-47.
Hess, Steve and Richard Aidoo. 2025. Hustlers and dynasties: exploring the role of anti-China

populism in Kenya's 2022 elections. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 1-22.
Hinson, Robert Ebo, Esi Akyere Mensah, and Doreen Anyamesem Odame. 2024. *Customer Service Delivery in Africa: Consumer Perceptions of Quality in Selected African Countries*. Routledge.
Hochet-Bodin, Noé. 2022. Kenya's Lake Victoria is dying as government looks the other way. *Le Monde*. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/12/24/in-kenya-lake-victoria-is-dying-of-overexploitation_6008918_124.html.
Holtzman, Jon D. 2003. In a cup of tea: Commodities and history among Samburu pastoralists in northern Kenya. *American Ethnologist*, *30*(1), 136-155.
Hom, Laureen D. 2024. *The Power of Chinatown: Searching for Spatial Justice in Los Angeles*. University of California Press.
Hsu, Elisabeth. 2009. Wonders of the Exotic. In Larsen, Kjersti (Ed.). *Knowledge, Renewal and Religion.* Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
———. 2022. *Chinese medicine in East Africa: an intimacy with strangers* (Vol. 20). Berghahn Books.
Hsu, Jeremy. 2017. The hard truth about the rhino horn 'aphrodisiac' market. *Scientific American*. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-hard-truth-about-the-rhino-horn-aphrodisiac-market/.
Huang, Echo. 2017. In China, consumers have to be on guard not just against fake food, but also fake news about food. *Quartz.* https://qz.com/934038/in-china-fake-news-about-food-goes-viral-because-people-find-it-hard-to-trust-anyone
Huang, Mingwei. 2019. The foreign and the familiar: Reading the China bag in South Africa. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *22*(4), 536-557.
———. 2022. Afro-Asian Adjacencies in South Africa's Long Twentieth Century. *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, *8*(1), 167-194.
———. 2024. *Reconfiguring Racial Capitalism: South Africa in the Chinese Century*. Duke University Press.
Human Rights Watch. 2020. China: Covid-19 discrimination against Africans. *Human Rights Watch*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/china-covid-19-discrimination-against-africans.
Huynh, T. Tu and Yoon Jung Park. 2018. Reflections on the role of race in China–Africa relations. In Alden, Chris and Daniel Large (Eds.). *New Directions in Africa–China Studies*. Routledge, 158-172.
IEBC. 15 August, 2022. Kenya presidential results 2022. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62444316
Ingold, Tim. 2018. Back to the future with the theory of affordances. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *8*(1-2), 39-44.
Jaworski, Adam and CrispinThurlow. 2010. Language and the Globalizing Habitus of Tourism: Toward a Sociolinguistics of Fleeting Relationships. In Coupland, Nikolas (Ed.). *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*. Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 255.
Johnston, Josée and Shyon Baumann. 2007. Democracy versus distinction: A study of omnivorousness in gourmet food writing. *American Journal of Sociology*, *113*(1), 165-204.
Ju, Lei, Wanyu Zhao, Chunlin Wu, Haofan Li, and Xin Ning. 2020. Abusive supervisors and

employee work-to-family conflict in Chinese construction projects: How does family support help?. *Construction Management and Economics*, *38*(12), 1158-1178.
Kajilwa, Graham. 2021. Kenyans' poor tea culture: blame it on sugar and milk. *The Sunday Standard*. https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/financialstandard/article/2001416308/kenyans-poor-tea-culture-blame-iton-sugar-and-milk#_=_.
Kaminsky, Amanda. 2025. Artisanal slaughter: the multicultural ethics of goat meat in Vermont. *Anthropological Quarterly* (Forthcoming).
Kamunya, Samson M., Francis Nyamu Wachira, Karl Nyabundi, Lilian Kerio, Muoki Chalo. 2009. The tea research foundation of Kenya pre-releases purple tea variety for processing health tea product. *TRFK Quarterly Bulletin, 14*(3), 3-5.
Kamunya, Samson M., Francis N. Wachira, Ram S. Pathak, Richard C. Muoki, Ram K. Sharma. 2012. Tea improvement in Kenya. In Chen, Liang, Zeno Apostolides, and Zong-Mao Chen (Eds.). *Global tea breeding*. Zhejiang University Press, 177-226.
Katiambo, David. 2019. International Trade as Discourse: Construction of a "China Threat" through Fakes. Critical Arts. 33:2, 56-69.
Ke-Schutte, Jay. 2022. Ubuntu/Guanxi. *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South*, 33-50.
Keane, Webb. 2009. On multiple ontologies and the temporality of things. *Material world blog*, *7*.
———. 2018. Perspectives on affordances, or the anthropologically real: The 2018 Daryll Forde Lecture. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *8*(1-2), 27-38.
Kierans, Ciara and Kirsten Bell. 2017. Cultivating ambivalence: Some methodological considerations for anthropology. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *7*(2), 23-44.
Kim, Claire Jean. 1999. The racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & society,* 27(1), 105-138.
———. 2015. *Dangerous crossings*. Cambridge University Press.
Kimani, Peter. 2023. Cannabis academy in SA affirms Wajackoyah's prescient vision of economic revival. *Standard Media*. https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/peter-kimani/article/2001475750/cannabis-academy-in-sa-affirms-wajackoyahs-prescient-vision-of-economic-revival.
Kimanthi, Kennedy. 2020. Farmer finds lucrative tea market in the East. *Nation*. https://nation.africa/kenya/business/seeds-of-gold/farmer-finds-lucrative-tea-market-in-the-east-1068192.
Kimari, Wangui and Henrik Ernstson. 2020. Imperial remains and imperial invitations: Centering race within the contemporary large-scale infrastructures of East Africa. *Antipode*, *52*(3), 825-846.
King, Kenneth. 1996. *Jua Kali Kenya: change & development in an informal economy, 1970-95*. Ohio State University Press.
Kingori, Patricia. 2021. Unmuting conversations on fakes in African spaces. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *33*(3), 239-250.
Kinyanjui, Mary Njeri. 2019. *African Markets and the Utu-Ubuntu Business Model. A perspective on economic informality in Nairobi: A perspective on economic informality in Nairobi*. African Books Collective.
Kipkirui, John B. 2017. *The effect of innovation strategies on market share of small scale tea packers in Kenya* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nairobi).

Kipnis, Andrew B. 1997. *Producing guanxi: Sentiment, self, and subculture in a north China village*. Duke University Press.
———. 2006. Suzhi: A keyword approach. *The China Quarterly*, *186*, 295-313.
Kiprop, Victor. 2023. China Square: the cheap Chinese shop at the centre of Kenya row. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64809423.
Kirsch, Stuart. 2002. Rumour and other narratives of political violence in West Papua. *Critique of Anthropology*, *22*(1), 53-79.
Knudsen, Ståle. 2014. Multiple sea snails: The uncertain becoming of an alien species. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *87*(1), 59-91.
Kobiah, Samuel Mugwika. 1978. *Origins of squatting and community organization in Nairobi* (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).
Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Univ of California Press.
Korir, Kipngeno Erick. 2018. *Development and Neo-colonialism in the Small-scale Tea Sector in Kenya* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nairobi).
Korir, Lilian, Marian Rizov, Eric Ruto. 2023. Diet diversity, malnutrition and health: Evidence from Kenya. *Journal of Agricultural Economics* 74(2): 534-550.
Ku, Robert Ji-Song. 2014. *Dubious gastronomy: The cultural politics of eating Asian in the USA*. University of Hawaii Press.
Kulundu, Mary. 2022. "Kenyan presidential candidate smoked out over misleading claims about commercial trade in marijuana. *AFP.* https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32FL2NN.
Kwan, Cheuk. 2022. *Have you eaten yet? Stories from Chinese restaurants around the world.* Douglas & McIntyre.
Ladegaard, Hans J. 2012. Rudeness as a discursive strategy in leadership discourse: Culture, power and gender in a Hong Kong workplace. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 44(12), 1661-1679.
Ladilova, Anna and Ulrike Schröder. 2022. Humor in intercultural interaction: A source for misunderstanding or a common ground builder? A multimodal analysis. *Intercultural Pragmatics,* 19(1), 71-101.
Lan, Shanshan. 2017. *Mapping the new African diaspora in China: Race and the cultural politics of belonging*. Routledge.
Langwick, Stacey A. 2011. *Bodies, politics, and African healing: The matter of maladies in Tanzania*. Indiana University Press.
Larrouy-Maestri, Pauline, David Poeppel, Marc. D. Pell. 2024. The Sound of Emotional Prosody: Nearly 3 Decades of Research and Future Directions. *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* 17456916231217722.
Latour, Bruno. 2005. An introduction to actor-network-theory. *Reassembling the social*.
Lauden, Laura. 2017. Foodways and ways of talking about food. *Laura Laudan: A Historian's Take on Food and Food Politics.* https://www.rachellaudan.com/2017/02/19542.html
Laukka, Petri and Hillary Anger Elfenbein. 2021. Cross-cultural emotion recognition and in-group advantage in vocal expression: A meta-analysis. *Emotion Review,* 13(1), 3-11.
Lee-Smith, Diana and Davinder Lamba. 2000. Social Transformation in a Post-colonial City: The Case of Nairobi. In Polese, Mario and Richard Stren (Eds.). *The social sustainability of cities: Diversity and the management of change*. University of Toronto Press.
Leung, Elly and Donella Caspersz. 2019. Chinese workers' history: passive minds docile bodies. Journal of Management History, 25(3), 304-322.

Li, Hongqin, William S. Harvey, Jonathan V. Beaverstock. 2023. Using guanxi to conduct elite interviews in China. *Qualitative Research*, *23*(4), 900-920.
Lin, Jan. 1998. *Reconstructing Chinatown: ethnic enclaves and global change*. University of Minnesota Press.
Li, Jia, Naixue Cui, N. and Jianghong Liu. 2017. Gutter oil: an overview of Chinese food safety issues and policies. *Global Health Promotion*, *24*(3), 75-78.
Lien, Marianne Elisabeth and John Law. 2011. 'Emergent aliens': On salmon, nature, and their enactment. *Ethnos,* 76(1), 65-87.
Lin, Edwin. 2014. "Big fish in a small pond": Chinese migrant shopkeepers in South Africa. *International Migration Review*, *48*(1), 181-215.
Livingston, Julie. 2008. Disgust, bodily aesthetics and the ethic of being human in Botswana. *Africa*, *78*(2), 288-307.
Liu, Li. 2008. Filial Piety, Guanxi, Loyalty, and Money. In Marková, Ivana and Alex Gillespie (Eds.). *Trust and distrust: Sociocultural perspectives*. Information Age Publishing, 51-78.
Liu, Xinqing. 2015. Kenya tea farmers, manufacturers turn to Chinese financing to expand. *CGTN*.https://america.cgtn.com/2015/11/21/kenya-tea-farmers-manufacturers-turn-to-chinese-financing-to-expand.
Liu, Xiaohui and Shuru Zhong. 2024. Unsettling wildness: seafood consumption in new materialism. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 1-13.
Liu, Ying-Ying Tiffany. 2018. (Mis) communicating through Conflicts: Chinese Restaurant Owners and Zimbabwean Employees in Johannesburg. *Africa Journal of Management*, 4(4), 426-446.
Lokongo, Antoine Roger. 2023. Africa sees Belt and Road as precious opportunity. *China Daily Global*. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202309/19/WS6508f195a310d2dce4bb66cc.html.
Lonsdale, John. 1977. "When Did the Gusii (or Any Other Group) Become a Tribe?" Kenya. Historical Review 5 (1): 123–135.
Lumumba-Kasongo, Tukumbi. 2011. China-Africa relations: A neo-imperialism or a neo-colonialism? A reflection. *African and Asian studies*, *10*(2-3), 234-266.
MacArthur, Julie. 2013. When did the Luyia (or any other group) become a tribe?. *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines*, *47*(3), 351-363.
Mahieus, Lise and Eugene McCann. 2023. "Hot+ Noisy" Public Space: Conviviality,"Unapologetic Asianness," and the Future of Vancouver's Chinatown. *Urban Planning,* 8(4), 77-88.
Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1923. The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages. In Ogden, C. and Richards, I. (Eds.). *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism.* K. Paul, Trend, Trubner, 296-336.
Malmström, Maria Frederika. 2019. Infused with suspicion: The transformation of the anthropologist body. *Anthropology Now*, *11*(1-2), 116-125.
Martin, Craig. 2022. *Deviant Design: The Ad Hoc, the Illicit, the Controversial*. Bloomsbury.
Martín-Torrijos, Laura, Tadashi Kawai, Jenny Makkonen, Japo Jussila, Harri Kokko, H., Javier Diéguez-Uribeondo. 2018. Crayfish plague in Japan: A real threat to the endemic *Cambaroides japonicus*. *PLoS One*, *13*(4), e0195353.
Maathai, Wangari. 2007. *Unbowed: A memoir*. Anchor.
Makwambeni, Blessing and Andzisani Prunnel Sibiya. 2022. Accounting for the popularity of

Black Panther among Black South African women in Soweto township. *Image & Text*, (36), 1-20.
Marcus, George E. 1997. The uses of complicity in the changing mise-en-scene of anthropological fieldwork. *Representations*, *59*, 0.
Mathews, Andrew S. 2008. State making, knowledge, and ignorance: translation and concealment in Mexican forestry institutions. *American Anthropologist*, *110*(4), 484-494.
Maundu, Patrick. 2022. Kenya's push to promote traditional food is good for nutrition and cultural heritage. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/kenyas-push-to-promote-traditional-food-is-good-for-nutrition-and-cultural-heritage-176384.
Maundu, P. et al. 1999. Traditional food plants of Kenya. *Kenya Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge, National Museums of Kenya*.
Mauss, Marcel. 2024 [1925]. *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. Taylor & Francis.
Mbae-Mugambi, Umotho Kinya, Christine Agatha Onyango, and David Okeyo Omondi. 2023. Community Food Systems and the Nutritional Status of Children 6-24 Months in Obunga Slums, Kisumu Kenya: A Cross-Sectional Study. *East African Journal of Health and Science*, *6*(1), 379-392.
Mbadi, Peter K. and P. Okinda Owuor. 2008. The role of Kenya Tea Development Agency Limited in the small-scale tea holder development in Kenya. *International Journal of Tea Science*, *7*(03 and 04), 07-15.
Mbembe, Achille. 1992. Provisional notes on the postcolony. *Africa*, 62(1), 3-37.
———. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press.
McCann, James. 2001. Maize and grace: history, corn, and Africa's new landscapes, 1500–1999. *Comparative studies in society and history*, *43*(2), 246-272.
McGovern, Mike. 2012. *Unmasking the state: making Guinea modern*. University of Chicago Press.
———. 2014. Bushmeat and the Politics of Disgust. *Cultural Anthropology*, *7*.
———. 2017. *A socialist peace?: Explaining the absence of war in an African country*. University of Chicago Press.
McIntosh, Janet. 2016. *Unsettled: denial and belonging among white Kenyans* (Vol. 10). Univ of California Press.
Meiu, George Paul. 2020. Panics over plastics: a matter of belonging in Kenya. *American Anthropologist*, *122*(2), 222-235.
Miller, William. 1997. *The anatomy of disgust*. Harvard University Press.
Mintz, Sidney W. 1986. *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history*. Penguin.
Mironga, J. M. 2006. Environmental implications of water hyacinth infestation in Lake Naivasha, Kenya. In *Proceedings of the 11 th World Lakes Conference-- Proceedings* Vol. 2, 80-592.
Mkhwanazi, Nolwazi. 2016. Medical anthropology in Africa: the trouble with a single story. *Medical Anthropology*, *35*(2), 193-202.
Mohan, G., & Lampert, B. (2013). Negotiating China: reinserting African agency into China–Africa relations. *African Affairs*, *112*(446), 92-110.
Momanyi, Christopher. 2024. Decent Work in the Informal Sector and Economic Growth: Jua Kali Artisan Businesses' Sustainability Challenges in Eastlands of Nairobi. Research Preprint, https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-4330945/v1.
Monson, Jamie. 2009. *Africa's Freedom Railway: how a Chinese development project changed*

lives and livelihoods in Tanzania. Indiana University Press.
———. 2013. Historicizing Difference: Construction of Race Identity in China-Africa Relations. In *Making Sense of the China-Africa Relationship: Theoretical Approaches and the Politics of Knowledge Conference,* Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, November (Vol. 18).
Moore, Amelia. 2012. The aquatic invaders: marine management figuring fishermen, fisheries, and lionfish in the Bahamas. *Cultural Anthropology*, *27*(4), 667-688.
Morara, George N., Albert M. Getabu, James M. Njiru, Reuben Omondi, Alice Mutie, Chrisphine S. Nyamweya. 2022. Shifts in composition of fish species of fishery in Lake Naivasha, Kenya: Trend implications for fishing effort, yields and revenue. *Lakes & Reservoirs: Research & Management*, *27*(1), e12397.
Morgan, Ben H. 1927. The Sugar Resources of the British Empire. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, *75*(3875), 362-379.
Mu, Dan. 2024 Shanzhai as a Pluriversal Praxis: Challenging Western Design and Innovation Paradigm, in Gray, C., Ciliotta Chehade, E., Hekkert, P., Forlano, L., Ciuccarelli, P., Lloyd, P. (Eds.). *DRS2024: Boston*, 23–28 June, Boston, USA. https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.184.
Mugo, Irene. 2022. How Karatina University is using purple tea for health benefits. *Nation*. https://nation.africa/kenya/counties/nyeri/how-karatina-university-is-using-purple-tea-for-health-benefits-4007164.
Muir, Sarah. 2016. On historical exhaustion: Argentine critique in an era of "total corruption". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *58*(1), 129-158.
Muir, Sarah and Akhil Gupta. 2018. Rethinking the anthropology of corruption: An introduction to supplement 18. *Current Anthropology*, *59*(S18), S4-S15.
Murage, George. 2018. Chinese fishermen banned from Lake Naivasha for "finishing stock." *The Star*. https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018-06-05-chinese-fishermen-banned-from-lake-naivasha-for-finishing-stock/.
Murray, Shawn Sabrine. 2004. Searching for the origins of African rice domestication. *Antiquity*, *78*(300), 1-3.
Murunga, Godwin Rapando. 2012. The cosmopolitan tradition and fissures in segregationist town planning in Nairobi, 1915–23. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, *6*(3), 463-486.
Mutai, Edwin. 2023. MPs move to bar Chinese fish with 20pc excise tax. *Daily Nation*. https://nation.africa/kenya/business/mps-move-to-bar-chinese-fish-with-20pc-excise-tax-4185368.
Muthike, Wairimu, Wanja Nyaga, Wanjiku Kiarie. 2024. Decolonizing food. *Busara*. No. 17.
Mwadzaya, Thelma. 2018. "China's lifting of its rhino horn ban reverberates in a Kenyan school." *Deutsche Welle*. https://www.dw.com/en/chinas-lifting-of-its-rhino-horn-ban-reverberates-in-a-kenyan-school/a-46160604.
Mwangi, Boniface. 2020. Agency cautions farmers as popularity of purple tea soars. *Nation*. https://nation.africa/kenya/business/agency-cautions-farmers-as-popularity-of-purple-tea-soars-896642.
Naccarato, Peter and Kathleen LeBesco. 2013. *Culinary capital*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
Nagata, Judith. 1993. From Indigene to International: The Many Faces of Malay Identity. *Ethnicity and Aboriginality: Case Studies in Ethnonationalism*, 97.
Namnyak, Josphista. 2022. Wajackoyah asked to remove snakes, hyena testicles agenda from

manifesto. *Citizen.* https://www.citizen.digital/news/wildlife-conservationist-threatens-to-sue-wajackoyah-over-snakes-hyena-testicles-agenda-n301740.
Ndegwa, Stephen N. 1997. Citizenship and ethnicity: an examination of two transition moments in Kenyan politics. *American Political Science Review*, *91*(3), 599-616.
Nelson, Steven. 2013. Rat meat sold as mutton by Chinese criminals. *USA News*. https://www.usnews.com/news/newsgram/articles/2013/05/03/rat-meat-sold-as-mutton-by-chinese-criminals#:~:text=Criminals%20in%20Wuxi%2C%20a%20city,treated%20with%20chemicals%2C%20Xinhua%20reported.&text=Other%20cases%20disclosed%20by%20Chinese,of%20dangerous%20chemicals%20in%20processing.
Nderitu, Agatha. 2020. Tea export procedures guide for SMEs in Kenya. *EU-EAC Market Access Upgrade Programme*. https://www.intracen.org/file/kenya-teaexportproceduresguidepdf.
Ng'ethe, Vincent. 2024. "Nairobi's high rise future unsettles its upmarket neighbourhoods. *The Continent*. https://continent.substack.com/p/nairobis-high-rise-future-unsettles
Ngumo, D. M. 2015. My experience in the tea sector. *Karatina University First International Tea Conference Paper.* 146-150.
Njeru, Gitonga. 2021. Kenyan farmers benefit from importing Chinese crop seeds and growing the produce locally. *China Africa*. Vol. 13. http://www.chinafrica.cn/Homepage/202109/t20210923_800258910.html.
Njuguna, Wangari. 2022. "I'm not a state project, Wajackoyah declares." *People Daily*. https://peopledaily.digital/august-9/im-not-a-state-project-wajackoyah-declares.
Nowicka, Magdalena. 2020. Fantasy of conviviality: Banalities of multicultural settings and what we do (not) notice when we look at them. In Hemer, O. M. P. Frykman and P. M. Ristilammi (Eds.). *Conviviality at the crossroads: The poetics and politics of everyday encounters*. Palgrave Macmillan, 15-42.
———. 2024. Conviviality and transnationalism–conceptual cross-fertilizations. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Transnational Studies*. Routledge, 249-259.
Nunes, Ana Luisa. 2016. Freshwater crayfish: the forgotten invaders wreaking havoc across Africa. *The Conversation.* https://theconversation.com/freshwater-crayfish-the-forgotten-invaders-wreaking-havoc-across-africa-58450.
Ochieng, Cosmus Milton Obote Ochieng. 2009. The political economy of contract farming in tea in Kenya: The Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA), 1964–2002. In Harris-White, Barbara and Judith Heyer (Eds.). *The comparative political economy of development*. Routledge, 162-183.
Ochieng', William R. 1988. Colonial Famines In Luoland, Kenya, 1905–1945. *Transafrican Journal of History*, *17*, 21-33.
Odoom, Isaac. 2019. Ghanaian agency in economic engagement in the 21st century: The role of Chinese transnational oil corporations in Ghana. In Aidoo, Richard (Ed.). *The Politics of Economic Reform in Ghana.* Routledge, 111-126.
Odula, Tom. 2020. Video of Chinese man caning Kenyan worker sparks outrage. Associated Press. https://apnews.com/article/2c0dc40167c34a42ba3fd83994cc8406.
Ogodo, Ochieng'. 2012. Cajun crayfish invading Africa, eating native species. *National Geographic.* https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/120109-louisiana-crayfish-invasive-species-environment-africa-science.
Olaloku-Teriba, Annie. 2018. Afro-Pessimism and the (un) logic of anti-blackness. *Historical*

Materialism, *26*(2), 96-122.
Olander, Eric. 2022. Frozen imported Chinese fish being passed off as fresh catch in Kenya. *China Global South Project.* Accessed 3/4/24 from https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2022/03/28/frozen-imported-chinese-fish-being-passed-off-as-fresh-catch-in-kenya/.
Oleschuk, Merin. 2017. Foodies of color: Authenticity and exoticism in omnivorous food culture. *Cultural Sociology*, *11*(2), 217-233.
Olingo, Allan. 2019. Why you should worry about Chinese fish. *Daily Nation*. Accessed 3/4/24 from https://nation.africa/kenya/news/why-you-should-worry-about-chinese-fish--136246.
Oluoch, A. O. 1990. Breeding biology of the Louisiana red swamp crayfish Procambarus clarkii Girard in Lake Naivasha, Kenya. *Hydrobiologia*, *208*, 85-92.
Omulo, Collins. 2024. Kenya targets 5 million kilos tea export to China annually after signing deal. *The Nation*. https://nation.africa/kenya/business/kenya-targets-5-million-kilos-tea-export-to-china-annually-after-signing-deal-4627066.
Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Duke University Press.
O'Regan, Michael, Jaeyeon Choe, Matthew H. T. Yap. 2019. Conspicuous consumption and hospitality at a wine festival in China. *Hospitality & Society*, *9*(2), 125-143.
Orinde, Hillary. 2021. Nine killed as crane collapses in Nairobi. *Barrons*. https://www.barrons.com/news/eight-killed-by-crane-collapse-in-nairobi-01629979507
Oritsejafor, Emmanuel and Allan D. Cooper (Eds.). 2021. *Africa and the global system of capital accumulation*. Routledge.
Osburg, John. 2013. Anxious wealth. Money and morality among China's new rich. Stanford University Press.
———2024. Chinese Consumer Culture: Luxury, Nationalism, and Class Formation. In Anthropology of Ascendant China (pp. 89-107). Routledge.
Osella, Caroline and Filippo Osella. 2008. Food, memory, community: Kerala as both 'Indian Ocean' zone and as agricultural homeland. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *31*(1), 170-198.
Ouassini, Anwar, Mostafa Amini, Nabil Ouassini. 2022. # ChinaMustexplain: global tweets, COVID-19, and Anti-black Racism in China. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, *49*(1), 61-76.
Oudia, Rushdie. 2021. Lake vs. pond fish: how to tell an 'original' tilapia from a 'fake' one. *Daily Nation.* https://nation.africa/kenya/news/lake-vs-pond-fish-how-to-tell-an-original-tilapia-from-a-fake-one-3594544.
Owens, Kathryn E., Kelly Askew, Rie Odgaard, Howard Stein, Faustin Maganga. 2018. Fetishizing the Formal: Institutional Pluralism and Land Titling in Tanzania. *Tanzania Journal of Development Studies*, *16*(1), 39-86.
Oxfeld, Ellen. 2007. Still guest people: The reproduction of Hakka identity in Kolkata, India. *China Report*, *43*(4), 411-435.
———. 2017. *Bitter and sweet: food, meaning, and modernity in rural China* (Vol. 63). Univ of California Press.
Oyugi, Dalmus Oyugi, David M. Harper, Japheth Michemi Ntiba, Seth Marande Kisia, and John Robert Britton. 2011. Management implications of the response of two tilapiine cichlids

to long-term changes in lake level, allodiversity and exploitation in an equatorial lake. *Ambio*, *40*, 469-478.
Pan, Yuling. 2000. Facework in Chinese service encounters. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, *10*(1), 25-61.
Pang, Laikwan. 2008. China Who Makes and Fakes' A Semiotics of the Counterfeit. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *25*(6), 117-140.
Paredes, Alyssa. 2021. Weedy activism: Women, plants, and the genetic pollution of urban Japan. *Journal of Political Ecology*, *28*(1), 70-90.
———. 2023. Experimental Science for the 'Bananapocalypse': Counter Politics in the Plantationocene. *Ethnos*, 1-27.
Park, Yoon Jung. 2023. Forever foreign? Is there a future for Chinese people in Africa?. In Guo, Shibao (Ed.). *Reimagining Chinese Diasporas in a Transnational World*. Routledge, 48-66.
Park, Yoon Jung and Xiaoyang Tang. 2021. Chinese FDI and impacts on technology transfer, linkages, and learning in Africa: evidence from the field. *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies*, *19*(4), 257-268.
Paulmann, Silke and Ayse K. Uskul. 2014. Cross-cultural emotional prosody recognition: Evidence from Chinese and British listeners. *Cognition & Emotion*, 28(2), 230-244.
Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2018. Doubt, suspicion, mistrust . . . semantic approximations. In Mühlfried, Florian (Ed.) *Mistrust. Ethnographic Approximations*. Transcript Verlag, 169-178.
Peluso, Nancy L. 1993. Coercing conservation?: The politics of state resource control. *Global Environmental Change*, *3*(2), 199-217.
Peng, Yuzhu. 2019. Sharing food photographs on social media: Performative Xiaozi lifestyle in young, middle-class Chinese urbanites' WeChat 'Moments'. *Social Identities*, *25*(2), 269-287.
Peterson, Richard A. 1992. Understanding audience segmentation: From elite and mass to omnivore and univore. *Poetics,* 21(4), 243-258.
Pierre, Jemima. 2020. Slavery, anthropological knowledge, and the racialization of Africans. *Current Anthropology*, 61(S22), S220-S231.
Pink, Sarah. 2015. Approaching media through the senses: Between experience and representation. *Media International Australia*, *154*(1), 5-14.
Plummer, Anita. 2022. *Kenya's Engagement with China: Discourse, Power, and Agency*. Michigan State University Press.
Pointer, Rebecca. 2023. Beyond western Afro-pessimism: The African narrative in African and non-western countries. *Journal of African Media Studies*, *15*(2), 151-160.
Pollio, Andrea. 2024. Of bloatware and spreadsheets: Nairobi, Chinese phones, and the limits of data coloniality. *Journal of Urban Technology*, 1-22.
Priest, Eric. 2006. The future of music and film piracy in China. *Berkeley Tech. LJ*, *21*, 795.
Puar, Jasbir K. 2008. 'The Turban is not a hat': Queer diaspora and practices of profiling. *Sikh Formations*, *4*(1), 47-91.
Quet, Mathieu. 2021. *Illicit medicines in the global south: public health access and pharmaceutical regulation*. Routledge.
Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. 1940. On joking relationships. *Africa*, *13*(3), 195-210.
Rahier, Nick. 2023. Tasting 'kienyeji': gustatory explorations of city futures in Nakuru, Kenya. *Africa*, *93*(1), 80-99.

Ranger, Terence. 1993. The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa. In *Legitimacy and the state in twentieth-century Africa: essays in honour of AHM Kirk-Greene* (pp. 62-111). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Rapanyane, Makhura B. 2021. Neocolonialism and New imperialism: Unpacking the Real Story of China's Africa Engagement in Angola, Kenya, and Zambia. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, *8*(3), 89–112.

Rappaport, Erika. 2017. *A thirst for empire: how tea shaped the modern world*. Princeton University Press.

Raschke, Verena and Bobby Cheema. 2008. Colonisation, the New World Order, and the eradication of traditional food habits in East Africa: historical perspective on the nutrition transition. *Public health nutrition*, *11*(7), 662-674.

Rashid, Khalid, Francis Nyamu Wachira, James Nyariki Nyabuga, Bernard Wanyonyi, Grace Murilla, Alfred Orina Isaac. 2014. Kenyan purple tea anthocyanins ability to cross the blood brain barrier and reinforce brain antioxidant capacity in mice. *Nutritional Neuroscience,* 17(4), 178-185.

Ravenelle, Alexandrea J. 2019. "We're not uber:" control, autonomy, and entrepreneurship in the gig economy. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *34*(4), 269-285.

Ray, Krishnendu, Jooyeun Rhee, Tina Chen. 2023. Cooking Cultures: Global Asias on the Move and in the Making. *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, *9*(2), vi-xviii.

Renne, Elisha P. 1996. Perceptions of population policy, development, and family planning programs in northern Nigeria. *Studies in Family Planning*, 127-136.

Rey, Jeanne, Matthieu Bolay, Yonatan N. Gez. 2021. Cosmopolitan enclaves: An introduction. *Critique of Anthropology*, *41*(4), 331-344.

Robertson, Claire C. 1997. Black, white, and red all over: Beans, women, and agricultural imperialism in twentieth-century Kenya. *Agricultural history*, *71*(3), 259-299.

Rodney, Walter. 2018 [1972]. *How Europe underdeveloped africa*. Verso Books.

Roitman, Janet L. 1990. The politics of informal markets in sub-Saharan Africa. *The journal of modern African studies*, *28*(4), 671-696.

———. 2023. Platform economies: Beyond the north-south divide. *Finance and Society*, *9*(1), 1-13.

Rolingher, Louise. 2009. *Edible identities: Food, cultural mixing and the making of identities on the Swahili Coast* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta).

Rosaldo, Manuel. 2021. Problematizing the "informal sector": 50 years of critique, clarification, qualification, and more critique. *Sociology Compass*, *15*(9), e12914.

Saeteurn, Muey C. 2019. Brewing Inequalities: Kenya's Smallholder Tea Farmers and the Developmentalist State in the Late-Colonial and Early-Independence Era. *Histories of Global Inequality: New Perspectives*, 233-253.

Said, Edward. 1983. Traveling theory. *The world, the text, and the critic*, *22647.*

Sanerib, Tanya and Sarah Pickering. 2021. "Lawsuit demands crucial wildlife trade data." *Brooks McCormick Jr. Animal Law and Policy Program, Harvard Law School.* Accessed 3/5/25 from https://animal.law.harvard.edu/news-article/wildlife-trade-data/.

Sankar, Amal. 2017. Creation of Indian–Chinese cuisine: Chinese food in an Indian city. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, *4*(4), 268-273.

Sarkar, Satyajit, Anurag Chowdhury, Sanjay Das, Bhaskar Chakraborty, Palash Mandal, Monoranjan Chowdhury. 2016. Major tea processing practices in India. *International Journal of Bioassays*, *2278*, 778X.

Sau-Wa, Mak. 2024. “The Stinkier the Better!”—A Case Study on the Reinvention of River Snail Noodles and the Transformation of Taste in China. *Global Food History*, *10*(2), 244-264.
Scharrer, Tabea. 2018. “Ambiguous citizens”: Kenyan Somalis and the question of belonging. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, *12*(3), 494-513.
Schmidt, Mario. 2014. ‘It Will Always Be with Us’: Corruption as an Ontological Fact among Kenyan Luo (No. 7). *Global Cooperation Research Papers.*
———. 2024. *Migrants and Masculinity in High-Rise Nairobi: the pressure of being a man in an African city* (p. 184). Boydell & Brewer.
Schmitz, Cheryl Mei-ting. 2018. Performing “China in Africa” for the West: Chinese migrant discourses in Angola. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, *27*(1), 9-27.
———. 2021. Making friends, building roads: Chinese entrepreneurship and the search for reliability in Angola. *American Anthropologist*, *123*(2), 343-354.
Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* Yale University Press.
Sexton, Jared. 2010. People-of-color-blindness: Notes on the afterlife of slavery. *Social Text*, *28*(2), 31-56.
Shani, Liron. 2024. Invasive species or legal alien? Confrontation and controversy in protecting sabras in Israel. *American Anthropologist*, *126*(4), 608-621.
Sheridan, Derek. 2016. “‘Racist’ or ‘Not-Racist,’ the Better Question is Whether Racism is Being (Re)-Produced or Deconstructed in China.” *Node to Node,* 22 June. https://dereksheridan.wordpress.com/2016/06/22/racist-or-not-racist-the-better-question-is-whether-racism-is-being-re-produced-or-deconstructed-in-china/.
———. 2018. Chinese peanuts and Chinese machinga: The use and abuse of a rumour in Dar es Salaam (and ethnographic writing). In Alden, Chris and Daniel Large (Eds.). *New Directions in Africa–China Studies*. Routledge, 144-157.
———. 2018. “If You Greet Them, They Ignore You”: Chinese Migrants, (Refused) Greetings, and the Interpersonal Ethics of Global Inequality in Tanzania. *Anthropological Quarterly,* 237-265.
———2023. The semiotics of Heiren (黑人): race, everyday language, and discursive complicities in a Chinese migrant community. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *49*(13), 3308-3326.
Shokeid, Moshe. 1988. Anthropologists and their informants: marginality reconsidered. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, *29*(1), 31-47.
Siegmann, Karin Astrid and Freek Schiphorst. 2016. Understanding the globalizing precariat: From informal sector to precarious work. *Progress in Development Studies*, *16*(2), 111-123.
Simmel, Georg. 2008 [1908]. The stranger. In *The Cultural Geography Reader* (pp. 323-327). Routledge.
Sitas, Rike, Liza Rose Cirolia, Andrea Pollio, Alexis Gatoni Sebarenzi, Prince Guma, Anirudh Rajashekar. 2022. Platform Politics and Silicon Savannahs: the rise of on-demand logistics and mobility in Nairobi and Kigali. *Cape Town: African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town*.
Sitole, Daniel. 2019. Purple tea is gaining ground in Kenya. *Modern Farmer*. https://modernfarmer.com/2019/07/purple-tea-is-gaining-ground-in-kenya/.
Smart, Alan. 1998. Guanxi, gifts, and learning from China: A review essay. *Anthropos*, (H. 4./6),

559-565.
Smart, Alan and Carolyn L. Hsu. 2017. Corruption or social capital? Tact and the performance of guanxi in market socialist China. In Anders, Gerhard and Monique Nuijten (Eds.). *Corruption and the Secret of Law*. Routledge, 1667-189.
Smart, Andrew C., David M. Harper, Françcois Malaisse, Sophie Schmitz, Stephanie Coley, and Anne-Christine Gouder De Beauregard. 2002. Feeding of the exotic Louisiana red swamp crayfish, Procambarus clarkii (Crustacea, Decapoda), in an African tropical lake: Lake Naivasha, Kenya. In *Lake Naivasha, Kenya: Papers submitted by participants at the conference "Science and the Sustainable Management of Shallow Tropical Waters" held at Kenya Wildlife Services Training Institute, Naivasha, Kenya, 11–16 April 1999 together with those from additional studies on the lake* (pp. 129-142). Springer Netherlands.
Smart, Devin. 2025. *Preparing the Modern Meal: Urban Capitalism and Working Class Food in Kenya's Port City.* Ohio University Press.
Smith, Constance. 2020. Collapse: fake buildings and gray development in Nairobi. *Focaal*, *2020*(86), 11-23.
———. 2023. City of icebergs: materiality, surface and depth in Nairobi's built environment. *Africa*, *93*(1), 100-120.
Souty-Grosset, Catherine, Pedro Manuel Anastacio, Laura Aquiloni, Filipe Banha, Justine Choquer, Christoph Chucholl, Elena Tricarico. 2016. The red swamp crayfish Procambarus clarkii in Europe: impacts on aquatic ecosystems and human well-being. *Limnologica,* 58, 78-93.
Spronk, Rachel. 2012. *Ambiguous pleasures: Sexuality and middle class self-perceptions in Nairobi*. Berghahn Books.
———. 2014. Exploring the middle classes in Nairobi: from modes of production to modes of sophistication. *African Studies Review*, *57*(1), 93-114.
Statista. 2022. Domestic tea consumption in Kenya from 2009 to 2022. *Statista*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1174360/domestic-tea-consumption-in-kenya/#:~:textThe%20local%20tea%20consumption%20in,reached%20nearly%2019%20million%20kilograms.
Steiner, Tina. 2021. Convivial worlds: Writing relation from Africa. Routledge India.
Stoler, Ann L. 2008. Imperial debris: Reflections on ruins and ruination. *Cultural Anthropology*, *23*(2), 191-219.
Strowick, Eric. 2005. Comparative epistemology of suspicion: Psychoanalysis, literature, and the human sciences. *Science in Context*, *18*(4), 649-669.
Subedar, Anisa. 2017. Why people believe the myth of 'plastic rice.' *BBC*. Accessed 3/4/24 from https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-40484135.
Subramaniam, Banu. 2001. The aliens have landed! Reflections on the rhetoric of biological invasions. *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, *2*(1), 26-40.
Sutton, David. 2003. Poked by the 'foreign finger'in Greece: Conspiracy theory or the hermeneutics of suspicion?. In Brown, K. S. and Yannis Hamilakis, Eds.*The usable past: Greek metahistories*. Lexington Books, 191-210.
———. 2010. Food and the Senses. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *39*(1), 209-223.
———. 2023. Eating with the Dead Ritual, Memory and a Gustemological Approach to Taste. In Bartz, C., J. Ruchatz, and E. Wattolik, Eds. *Food–Media–Senses: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, *100*, 289. Transcript Verlag.

Swainson, Nicola. 1986. Public policy in the development of export crops: Pineapples and tea in Kenya. *IDS Bulletin*, *17*(1), 39-46.
Tannahill, Reay. 1972. *Food in History*. New York: Stein and Day.
Tanui, Nikko. 2017. Blame your tea for low pay, South Rift farmers told. *The Standard*. https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/kenya/article/2000216412/blame-your-tea-for-low-pay-south-rift-farmers-told.
Taylor, Adam. 2016. China: No, we are not sending cans of human flesh to Africa. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/19/china-no-we-are-not-sending-cans-of-human-flesh-to-africa/.
Teyie, Selina. 2022. The planning of Kenyan baby showers. *The Star.* https://www.the-star.co.ke/sasa/2022-01-06-the-planning-of-kenyan-baby-showers#google_vignette.
The EastAfrican. 2024. Kenya slashes Chinese tilapia imports by half. https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/business-tech/kenya-slashes-chinese-tilapia-imports-by-half-4520278.
The Hype. 2022. "Wajackoyah—We will deport all the Chinese natuwapee makende ya fisi." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEmWXEg1P2I.
Thieme, Tatiana Adeline. 2018. The hustle economy: Informality, uncertainty and the geographies of getting by. *Progress in Human Geography*, *42*(4), 529-548.
Thieme, Tatiana, Meghan E. Ference, Naomi van Stapele. 2021. Harnessing the 'hustle': struggle, solidarities and narratives of work in Nairobi and beyond Introduction. *Africa*, *91*(1), 1-15.
Thomas, John Rhidian, Stephanie Masefield, Rhiannon Hunt, Matt J. Wood, Adam G. Hart, Jane Hallam, Sian W. Griffiths, and Jo Cable. 2019. Terrestrial emigration behaviour of two invasive crayfish species. *Behavioural processes* 167 103917.
Trubek, Amy B. 2008. *The taste of place: A cultural journey into terroir* (Vol. 20). Univ of California Press.
Tsing, Anna. 1993. *In the realm of the diamond queen: Marginality in an out-of-the-way place*. Princeton University Press.
———. 2005. Friction. An ethnography of global connection. Princeton University Press.
———. 2013. More-than-human sociality: a call for critical description. In *Anthropology and nature* (pp. 27-42). Routledge.
———. 2015. The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins. Princeton University Press.
Tuxun, Shajidanmu. 2022. The "Ethnic" Restaurant: Migration, Ethnicity, and Food Authenticity in Shanghai. *China Perspectives*, (2022/04), 59-68.
Uma, Apollo. 2022. History of rice in Kenya: When was rice first introduced in Kenya?. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS), 6 (2)*, 23-27.
Usman, Zainab and Aline Abayo. 2022. Will U.S.-China competition shape Kenya's trade trajectory? *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/15/will-u.s.-china-competition-shape-kenya-s-trade-trajectory-pub-87919.
Vail, Leroy (Ed.). 1991. *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa.* University of California Press.
Vanke, Alexandrina. 2024. Co-existing structures of feeling: Senses and imaginaries of industrial

neighbourhoods. *The Sociological Review*, *72*(2), 276-300.
Vickers, Adrian. 2023. Erasing and re-inscribing Chinese into Indonesian history. *Asian Ethnicity*, *24*(1), 78-92.
Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2012. Immanence and fear. *NatureCulture*, *1*, 88-106.
Wafula, Paul. 2020. Toxic dump: the poisons killing Lake Victoria. *Daily Nation*. https://nation.africa/kenya/nation-prime/toxic-dump-the-poisons-killing-lake-victoria-251224.
Wainaina, Eric. 2022. Peek at Roots Party vision of lucrative snake, bhang trade. *People Daily*. https://peopledaily.digital/august-9/profiles-manifesto/peek-at-roots-party-vision-of-lucrative-snake-bhang-trade.
Walcott, Rindaldo. 2019. The end of diversity. *Public culture,* 31(2), 393-408.
Walton, Brett. 2010. Blooming controversy: What is killing the wildlife in Kenya's Lake Naivasha. *Circle of Blue.* https://www.circleofblue.org/2010/world/blooming-controversy-what-is-killing-the-wildlife-in-kenya%E2%80%99s-lake-naivasha/.
Wang, Jenny Jing. 2020. How managers use culture and controls to impose a '996' work regime in China that constitutes modern slavery. *Accounting & Finance*, 60(4), 4331-4359.
Wang, Shuo. 2017. *Your next boss is Chinese: How European employees perceive organizational cultures in Chinese multinational companies* (Doctoral dissertation, Itä-Suomen Yliopisto).
Wang, Shu-Tai. 2017. When Chinese cuisine meets western wine. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, *7*, 32-40.
Wang, Xiaowei. 2020. *Blockchain chicken farm: And other stories of tech in China's countryside*. FSG Originals.
Wanga-Odhiambo, Godriver. 2016. *The Political Economy of Sugar Production in Colonial Kenya: The Asian Initiative in Central Nyanza*. Lexington Books.
Wanjau, Jackson Ngure. 2007. *A survey of relationship between corporate governance and performance in microfinance institutions in Kenya* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nairobi).
Warah, Rasna. 2018. The 44th tribe: The Asian question and the politics of exclusion. *The Elephant.* https://www.theelephant.info/features/2018/03/05/the-44th-tribe-the-asian-question-and-the-politics-of-exclusion/.
Watts, Jonathan. 2018. Experts fear impact of lifting trade ban on tiger and rhino parts. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/03/experts-fear-impact-of-china-lifting-trade-ban-on-tiger-and-rhino-parts.
Wei, Zhou. 2016. Weishenme Zhongguoren jihu sha dou chi: zai yinshi shang "bu jiang daode."[Why the Chinese eat and drink practically everything: in food and drink, "don't talk morality"] *The Paper.* https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1446610.
Weismantel, Mary J. 2005 [1994]. Tasty meals and bitter gifts. *Korsmeyer,* 87–99.
Weiss, Brad. 2022. Cuisine of economy, cuisine of excess: materializing value in culinary practice. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *28*(4), 1309-1325.
Whittlesey, Derwent. 1953. Kenya, the land and Mau Mau. *Foreign Affairs*, *32*(1), 80-90.
White, Luise. (1990). *The comforts of home: Prostitution in colonial Nairobi*. University of Chicago Press.
———. 2000. *Speaking with vampires: Rumor and history in colonial Africa*. Vol. 37.

University of California Press.
Wiegratz, Jörg. 2010. Fake capitalism? The dynamics of neoliberal moral restructuring and pseudo-development: the case of Uganda. *Review of African Political Economy*, *37*(124), 123-137.
———. 2019. 'They're all in it together': the social production of fraud in capitalist Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, *46*(161), 357-368.
Wilderson III, Frank B. 2020. *Afropessimism.* Liveright Publishing.
Williams, Raymond. 2015 [1977]. Structures of feeling. *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, 20-25.
World Food Programme. 2024. Kenya: a country trying to keep up with growth. *World Food Program USA.* https://www.wfpusa.org/countries/kenya/.
Wu, Di. 2020. *Affective encounters: everyday life among Chinese migrants in Zambia*. Routledge.
Wyrod, Robert and Kimberlee Chang. 2023. Tensions in Sino-African labour relations: the view from the Karuma hydroelectric dam in Uganda. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 61(4), 583–604.
Xiang, Biao. (2013). Multi-scalar ethnography: An approach for critical engagement with migration and social change. *Ethnography*, *14*(3), 282-299.
Xinhua. 2023. Kenya expects to increase tea export to China. *Xinhua*. https://english.news.cn/20230506/e178e50aff3b4b54b6cc1b668823b48f/c.html.
———. 2022. Int'l crayfish festival held in China's Jiangsu. https://english.news.cn/20220613/439fc30f25434168980b0c3323789e68/c.html.
———. 2019a. Kenya, China to cooperate in developing new tea varieties. *Xinhua*. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/05/c_138119257.htm.
———2019b. Kenya to export specialty tea to China annually. *Xinhua*. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/27/c_138342920.htm.
Yan, Hairong and Barry Sautman. 2024. COVID-19 and the racialisation of Chinese wildlife consumption. *Third World Quarterly*, *45*(7), 1177-1198.
Yang, Mayfair M. H. 1994. *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Yang, Yi. 2018. Feature: Tin Tin, popular Chinese restaurant wins hearts in Nairobi. *Xinhua*. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/01/c_136863559.htm.
Ye, Tianchen. 2024. "Feizhou jiyu" shi shenme gui? Lian shenme dou chi de Guangdong ren, dou pa chidao ta? ["What monster is the "African crucian carp," that even Guangdong people who eat everything are afraid to eat it?]. *163.com.* https://www.163.com/dy/article/ITEK3CG90556428S.html.
Yi, Lia. 2019. How Louisiana crayfish became China's national dish. *Goldthread.* https://www.goldthread2.com/food/how-louisiana-crayfish-became-china-national-dish/article/3023711.
Yongo, Edwine, Pengfei Zhang, Eunice Mutethya, Tian Zhao, Zhiqiang Guo. 2023. The invasion of tilapia in South China freshwater systems: A review. *Lakes & Reservoirs: Research & Management*, *28*(1), e12429.
Yoon, Duncan M. 2023. *China in Twentieth-and Twenty-first-century African Literature*. Cambridge University Press.
Youranpincha. 2021. Yong 25 nian shijian, yanfa Kenniya zicha, caiyong Zhongguo lücha

gongyi, kougan ziran wu kuse [Kenyan purple tea, researched and developed over 25 years using Chinese green tea craftsmanship, has a natural and non-bitter mouthfeel]. *Zhihu*. https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/400143989.

Zhang, Binxin. 2024. Africans in China, Western/white supremacy and the ambivalence of Chinese racial identity. *The China Quarterly*, *260*, 932-947.

Zhang, Mingyuan. 2023. Burn to harvest, burn to sabotage: Between fire and water on a sugar plantation in Madagascar. *American Anthropologist*, *125*(1), 100-111.

Zhi, Hui and Chen, Huan. 2021. Dependent or Independent: Exploring the Culture of Local Coffee Shops in China. *European Journal of Food Drink and Society*, *1*(2), 3.

Zhong, Shuru, Mike Crang, Guojun Zeng. 2020. Constructing freshness: the vitality of wet markets in urban China. *Agriculture and Human Values, 3*7(1), 175-185.

Zhu, April. 2022. The look of a nation. *Triple Canopy*. https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-look-of-a-nation?ui.header=true.

Zocchi, Dauro M. and Michele F. Fontefrancesco. 2020. Traditional products and new developments in the restaurant sector in East Africa. The case study of Nakuru County, Kenya. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, *4*, 599138.