Summary of thesis:

When China builds Africa.
Linking construction projects and economic development in Mozambique.

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This article-based doctoral thesis aims to contribute to the multifaceted debate on economic development, interests and power in China–Africa cooperation, through a qualitative study of Chinese activities in the Mozambican construction sector. Applying a theoretical lens that bridge development geography with economic geography, I examine Chinese-led construction projects: how they unfold, and their role in Mozambique’s economic development. The aim is to understand how Mozambican stakeholders assess and influence the growing relationship with China, and how this plays into continuing processes of inclusion and exclusion, both in the economic and political sphere. As such, this thesis is not about China in Mozambique: it sets out to explore economic development in Mozambique, and the role played by China within these ongoing development processes.

The research project examines how domestic backward linkages are created in Chinese-led construction projects in Mozambique, and how they are linked to broader development processes. Moreover, the project explores what characterises agency of the Mozambican government and other Mozambican stakeholders, and how this is expressed in the implementation of Chinese-led construction projects. The two main theoretical concepts, agency and backward linkages, are understood within a framework of global production networks. Domestic backward linkages are operationalised as domestic subcontractors, domestic suppliers and domestic workers.

With qualitative data collected during fieldwork in Maputo, three Chinese-led construction projects in Maputo are examined: 1) a roadworks project funded by the China Export-Import Bank, 2) a project involving the expansion and rehabilitation of the urban water system, funded by the French Development Agency and built by three Chinese companies, and 3) the construction of 5000 homes, administered through a joint venture between a Chinese SOE and a Mozambican development fund. The qualitative methods employed consist mainly of interviews and observations.

This doctoral thesis shows that the domestic backward linkages from the Chinese-led projects are few and weak. The most extensive backward linkage is that of labour, where Mozambican workers filled positions that were often casual and required few skills. Chinese contractors make use of domestic subcontractors and suppliers only to a minor extent. Such an outcome is explained through a combination of contextual determinants: factors connected to the ownership of Chinese lead firms, such as superior skills and technology, tied aid and closed
tendering processes, but more importantly, the weak local capabilities in the Mozambican construction industry, and the social infrastructures and policies surrounding it.

The thesis sheds light on how Mozambican stakeholders connect construction projects to development, which can be summarized as follows: the labour-intensiveness of construction projects and thus their positive contribution to employment generation, the fundamental role of construction projects in facilitating other productive activities, and how construction projects satisfy the impatience for development understood from a modernisation perspective, illustrating the inherent promise of progress and modernisation that large-scale construction projects bring forth.

Agency of the state is explored through the negotiation processes involved in the implementation of the roadworks project. The analysis highlights crucial elements in the debate on state agency in African countries – the various interests that make up the Mozambican state and influence which aspects are subject to negotiation, and the historical and structural conditions that shape how state actors enter into negotiations with China. In terms of the local industry, the analysis illustrates how domestic SMEs fall outside the networks of industrial relations and struggle to make themselves relevant in the Mozambican context, lacking network and institutional support, skills, technology and training. Consequently, the local industry is suffering despite an upsurge of construction work in Mozambique over the last decades. Regarding the Mozambican workers, I examine how Mozambican workers respond to their workplaces, and which factors enable or constrain workers’ agency. The analysis shows that Mozambican labour is positioned on the margins of the production network, with weak capacity for improvement. The degree of distance between Chinese and Mozambicans in the workplace leaves little room for participation and voice strategies, workers lack institutional support to react to company violations of their rights and labour regulations, and workers lack alternative employment opportunities.

Moreover, the findings of this PhD study contribute to a broad set of academic discussions – ranging from China–Africa relations, the changing architecture of international development assistance, general development discourses and industrial policies, to multi-cultural workplaces, and the role of construction and construction workers in global production networks. A main theory contribution comes from connecting GPN theory and linkage theory, where my approach to theorising domestic backward linkages serves to operationalise value capture as articulated in GPN theory.