

Rwanda Market in Addis Ababa: Between Chinese Migrants and a Local Food Network*

ZHENGLI HUANG

ABSTRACT: The increasing number of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia has created a niche market for Chinese food consumption, turning Rwanda Market into the only urban food market specialising in Chinese products in the city of Addis Ababa. The specific character of this market is that even though it primarily serves the demands of foreign migrants, the food value chain and the business network is predominantly local. Positioned in a relatively conservative business environment in Ethiopia's food sector, the local business network in Rwanda Market actively adapts to the needs of the migrant community and expands its food value chain. Through daily interactions between the local business network and Chinese food consumers, convivial relations are evolving in and beyond the market. These interactions contribute to reshaping the socio-economic space of the market and the food landscape of the city. This study of Rwanda Market provides empirical material for the developing and diversifying research field of China-Africa encounters.

KEYWORDS: Ordinary spaces, ethnic food market, China-Africa encounter, migration.

Introduction

Migratory movement from China to Africa dates back centuries. However, in the past few decades, the contemporary waves of Chinese migration to Africa present new specific features (Ma Mung 2008; Sullivan and Cheng 2018). The consequent new rounds of China-Africa encounters have drawn increasing attention from academics. While some scholars interpret recent Chinese migration to Africa as closely related to China as a rising global power, and seek to connect this with the state's growing interests (Cardenal and Araujo 2014; French 2014; Carmody 2016), others argue that the majority of recent Chinese migrants in Africa are driven by economic motivations. They have an opportunistic incentive, and are looking to upgrade their personal financial and social capacity (Haugen and Carling 2005; Lin 2014; Driessen 2015). These new waves of migration have also generated debates about China-Africa encounters. Some have focused on the construction or deconstruction of identity among Chinese diasporic communities (Park 2010; Harrison *et al.* 2012; Huynh 2018). Some scholars have examined African responses, especially resistance towards the growing Chinese influence (Sylvanus 2013; Warmerdam and Van Dijk 2016), while others explore the migrations' catalytic effects in generating new social spaces (Haugen and Carling 2005; Wei 2015). In relation to migration/host relations, Mohan offered an in-depth observation of the China-Africa migration and recognised the importance of "the everyday, micro-politics of inter-cultural encounter and exchange," which is relatively under-studied (Mohan *et al.* 2014: 163).

The case of "Rwanda Market" in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, offers a chance to fill this gap in existing research by providing empirical evidence. I see Rwanda Market as one type of Chinese space in Africa where local socioeconomic

activities take shape in a traditional market space under the dynamic influence of Chinese migration. Yet the extent of Chinese identity in this case differs from many other cases in the existing literature, such as China Town malls in South African cities (Huynh 2018), Chinese communities in rural towns (Deumert and Mabandla 2015), and real estate projects where Chinese capital and Chinese visions of modernity accumulate into a new city (Dittgen 2017). In these cases, business networks are triggered by migrant communities and ethnic groups, and to some extent are distinct from the local ones. In Rwanda Market, however, it is the local business network that is actively adapting itself and responding to the dynamic and complex needs of a migrant community.

A subtle implication embedded in almost every case study on Chinese spaces in Africa is that Chinese communities tend to practice self-segregation. Yan *et al.* (2018) challenged this widespread view in a recent study on Chinese presence in different contexts in Africa, but relatively few details were given on how Chinese and locals actively combated the obvious social and cultural gaps, and in what capacity they engaged each other in their daily lives.

These efforts to engage each other can be observed in great density in the case of Rwanda Market. Located in central Addis Ababa, it is the only open-air market in the city that sells Chinese vegetables. The market is dominated by local vendors. Some Chinese grocery shops and restaurants are found nearby, and many other Chinese restaurants in the city are also supplied by the market. In Rwanda Market, there are cross-border encounters between Chinese customers and local vendors, between curious locals and Chinese

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food products, and between Chinese suppliers and their competitors. In this sense, it contributes to Mohan's analytical framework of migration-host relations (2014) by concentrating all categories of a relationship into one location. While Chinese migrants did not build Rwanda Market themselves, they have stimulated the formation of a local network as a consumer group and the building of the market in different ways. This illustrates the day-to-day practice of these cross-national interactions as an "ethnography of the ordinary" (Overing and Passes 2000).

The research presented in this article forms part of a broader interest in understanding the changes in Ethiopian cities under the influence of Chinese investment and China-Africa migration, and primarily through infrastructure projects and industrial policy changes. The broadly framed research took place between November 2017 and June 2019. The findings presented here are based on first-hand observations and interviews conducted during field trips in Addis Ababa over a cumulative three-month stay conducted in stages between January and November 2018. During fieldwork, the case of Rwanda Market immediately stood out because, unlike other cases, Chinese investment is minimal here while the degree of daily engagement between the migrant community and the locals is outstanding. Chinese consumers, shop owners, and local vendors were interviewed in their mother tongue to ensure balanced information. This was achieved with the help of Chinese-speaking scholars and Amharic-speaking researchers from Addis Ababa. In the scoping stage, representatives from food-business-related government entities, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC), Agriculture Transformation Agency (ATA), and the sanitary and health department in the Addis Ababa City Administration were interviewed.¹ The purpose of this was to understand the local urban food economy. More than 50 short interviews were conducted. Half of those sampled were customers in the Market and the other half were interviewed outside the Market. Around 80% of those interviewed were Chinese, which reflects the composition of the customers observed in the Market. They were asked about their shopping experiences in Rwanda Market and their understanding of the city's food value chain. In-depth interviews were conducted in subsequent field trips. Eleven key Chinese informants, including restaurant owners, shop owners, and corporate consumers, were interviewed.² Furthermore, 11 local business owners and three government officials were also interviewed. On 20 October 2018, food price sampling was also conducted among different food outlets in the city.³

Based on analysis from first-hand observations and data, this article seeks to add empirical rather than theoretical value. It takes three steps to understand the physical and social forms of Rwanda Market as a space of conviviality. First, it analyses how the growing Chinese migration to Ethiopia coincides with the latter's globalisation and privatisation of the food economy. Second, it reads the market as a transformational space both from a historical perspective and by looking at the dynamic food value chain it builds. In so doing, it identifies key actors and networks within and surrounding the market. This serves to explain the socioeconomic relationship between Chinese migrants and the host population. Subsequently, it explores the different types of China-Africa encounters in the Market, and how this could lead to a new collective identity for the market through these encounters.

Chinese migration and Ethiopia's food economy

There is no accurate data on how many Chinese are currently living and working in Ethiopia. According to a recent study by the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, the number of Chinese workers in

Ethiopia increased from more than 5,000 in 2009 to around 10,000 in 2016.⁴ Other studies suggest that the Chinese population in Addis Ababa fluctuates frequently, and could reach tens of thousands at its peak.⁵ With the expansion of Ethiopian Airlines into a major transportation facility that provides connections between Chinese and African cities,⁶ many Chinese companies and institutions, such as the China-Africa Development Fund and the phone manufacturer Tecno Mobile, have made Addis Ababa their regional headquarters. Chinese managers and representatives are constantly flying in and out, with some staying for weeks or even months at a time. The growing political and commercial ties between China and Ethiopia indicate that the Chinese population in Ethiopia is set to remain significant (Adem 2012). This helps create a stable niche market for Chinese vegetables and other Asian food products.

However, unlike the developments in many other African countries, this steadily-growing market has not brought much Chinese investment into agribusiness and the food supply chain in Ethiopia (see e.g. Chatelard and Chu 2015). This is attributable to two major barriers. At the national policy level, the Ethiopian agribusiness and food business are restricted towards foreign direct investment (Woldu *et al.* 2013). Though Ethiopia has been among the top performers in terms of economic growth in Africa during the past decade, the country still bears a heavy external debt, and is facing a significant shortage in foreign exchange (Cochrane and Bekele 2018). This has led to an export-oriented economic policy, and efforts by the government to attract FDI (FDRE Ministry of Industry 2013). To facilitate a sustainable development path, FDI was only encouraged in manufacturing and other sectors with higher added-values. This means that it is restricted in many other areas, including the food sector.⁷ Secondly, the shortage of foreign currency in Ethiopia also discourages large-scale foreign investment in the food business. This is because, owing to the government's strong control over obtaining US dollars to sustain its reserve of hard currency, any foreign capital invested in Ethiopia is virtually locked inside the domestic market and cannot flow out without a struggle.⁸

Recent policy changes in Ethiopia, including the privatisation and globalisation of the national economy, suggest a possible flip of the current scenario. Currently, FDI is almost invisible in the country's food business.⁹

1. The interviews with government officials were mostly done in English. Two local officials in the health department were interviewed in Amharic.
2. Corporate consumers are Chinese companies in Ethiopia, where Chinese employees stay together and enjoy meals provided by the employer.
3. Among all the Chinese restaurants forming part of the interview process, one was permanently closed at the time of writing; another one changed ownership.
4. According to data taken from the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University website, <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-workers-in-africa/> (accessed on 28 November 2018).
5. "中國商人在埃塞比亞開農場" (Zhongguo shangren zai Aisaibiya kai nongchang, Chinese businessman opens farm in Ethiopia), *Afrindex.com*, 29 November 2017, <http://news.afrindex.com/zixun/article9967.html> (accessed on 28 November 2018).
6. "Ethiopian Airlines Expands Its Global Footprint to Link the World's High Growth Regions. 2013," *Centre for Aviation*, 24 April 2013, <http://centreforaviation.com/analysis/ethiopian-airlines-expands-its-global-footprint-to-link-the-worlds-high-growth-regions-102851> (accessed on 11 July 2019).
7. Interview with a government representative from Ethiopian Investment Commission, Addis Ababa, 20 January 2018, originally in English.
8. Interview with a Chinese investor, 29 January 2018. See also: Aaron Maasho, "UPDATE 2 – Ethiopian Foreign Exchange Shortage Will Last Years- New Premier," *Reuters*, 16 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-economy-idUSL8N1RT61K> (accessed on 1 December 2018).
9. In April 2018, a regime change took place in Ethiopia, with a peaceful power transfer but towards a drastically different ideology and policy orientation, including the promotion of privatisation and further pursuit of foreign investment. See e.g.: David Pilling and Lionel Barber, "My Model Is Capitalism: Ethiopia's Prime Minister Plans Telecoms Privatisation," *Financial Times*, 24 February 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/433dfa88-36d0-11e9-bb0c-42459962a812> (accessed on 1 December 2018).

Though there has not been a substantial transformation of the local food value chain, globalisation of the food business is already taking place in Addis Ababa. In 2014, a revision of foreign investment proclamation opened the tourism-related restaurant business to FDI. However, the minimum investment demand for foreign business was placed at 200,000 USD. This sets the bar very high for any foreigner interested in the catering business.¹⁰ Despite this, the international restaurant franchise Pizza Hut managed to enter the Ethiopian market, and opened its first branch next to a train station on the newly built Light Rail Train line.¹¹ The increasing number of Chinese restaurants in Addis Ababa is also palpable. There are currently 29 Chinese-invested restaurants registered under Ethiopia Investment Commission (EIC) in the city.¹²

Besides Chinese restaurants, there is a growing demand for Chinese food from Chinese companies based in Ethiopia. The construction of the Ring Road by China Road & Bridge Company (CRBC, now China Communication & Construction Company) before the turn of the century is considered a benchmark project for Chinese entering the Ethiopian market through the construction sector. To date, this area is dominated by Chinese companies. Chinese business entities in Ethiopia vary from large-scale State-Owned-Enterprises (SOEs) to financial institutions and small-scale family businesses. For both cultural and economic reasons, Chinese companies typically offer in-house catering for their Chinese staff. Some companies, usually those with a larger number of Chinese staff, lease land in Addis Ababa. They build their own dormitories and canteens, many of which are located in the Bole Sub-city.¹³ Some companies rent private properties and hire cooks (at least during workdays) to prepare three Chinese meals a day for their staff. Family-scale business owners or frequent-flyer-expatriates cook for themselves. They frequently visit Chinese restaurants nearby. The growing number of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia, together with the consequent demand for varied catering options and the presence of the Chinese catering business, call for a supply and distribution centre for Chinese food produce in Addis Ababa. It is these aspects that make Chinese culture, especially in relation to food, now a deeply-embedded feature of the local economy.

Despite growing FDI in the restaurant business in Ethiopia, the food value chain in the country remains relatively traditional and straightforward (Dorosh and Rashid 2013; Warshawsky 2016). Staple produce such as *teff* enjoys a more centralised distribution pattern, and relies on government-controlled outlets and specialty shops to reach individual customers (Woldu *et al.* 2013). The distribution of fruit and vegetables is more market-driven, as these products are perishable. The consumption pattern tends to be flexible (Minten *et al.* 2016). In Addis Ababa's urban value chain for vegetables and fruit, supplies come either from private farms, from *Erfruit*,¹⁴ or local wholesale markets. Urban vegetable-and-fruit outlets include regular shops, the *Erfruit* shops, private farm shops, modern retail such as supermarkets, and informal vendors or *Gulits* (Woldu *et al.* 2013). Despite the government's effort to modernise the economy, the city finds a large portion of its population working in the informal sector. To date, small-scale local food retailers remain dominant in the urban food landscape (Assefa *et al.* 2016). There are no more than a few regular food markets in Addis Ababa, of which the biggest is Atikilt Tera, located in the Piassa area. Atikilt Tera is the city's biggest wholesale market for fruit and vegetables, located next to Merkato. This is the biggest marketplace in the city, and arguably the biggest in the region. Atikilt Tera also consists of a great number of retail shops, offering a promising quantity of supply and varied kinds of food production. However, daily congestion in the area is caused by the huge amount of trading in and around the market, creating reluctance amongst the migrant-customers to visit the market on a regular basis.¹⁵ On the other hand, consisting of regular

retail shops and directly supplied by Atikilt Tera, Rwanda Market is located in the centre of the Bole Sub-city. This is where development projects are booming, and where the majority of Chinese migrants are concentrated. Being in a convenient location and easily accessible, Rwanda Market has become an inevitable choice for Chinese food consumers in the city.

An Ethiopian market selling Chinese food

Scholars have documented "ethnic food markets" in cities all over the world (Imbruce 2015; Joassart-Marcelli *et al.* 2017). These market spaces are usually managed by particular ethnic groups to serve the needs of specific communities at a local level. For the diversification of food products available in the markets, the vendors are generally associated with a global-scale business network, because some of the products are not supplied locally. As a result of these cross-national business activities, these markets typically present uncommon or ethnic characteristics in their physical forms that are distinct from the ordinary food outlets in the city.

Rwanda Market is an exceptional case in the sense that it supplies a migrant community with a local business network. It is an open-air market next to Rwanda Street in Addis Ababa.¹⁶ It is located in the sub-city of Bole, adjacent to the busy Airport Road, or Bole Road (See map 1). The street leading to the market from Bole Road is lined with small shops and restaurants, and becomes easily congested with traffic. The scale of the market and the relatively hidden location suggests that it mainly serves the demands of the neighbourhood. However, given the variety of Chinese fruit and vegetables in the market, customers visit the market from as far as 20 km away.¹⁷



Map. Rwanda Market, Chinese restaurants and other landmarks in Addis Ababa. Credit: author.

The daily operation of the Rwanda Market is a hybrid between local food business and non-local and uncommon food products (see pictures 1-2). A road cuts through the market, and this creates easy access for food delivery

10. Investment Proclamation 769/2012, available on the website of Ethiopian Investment Commission: www.investethiopia.gov.et/ (accessed on 1 December 2018).
11. "News: Pizza Hut Officially Opens in Ethiopia," *Addis Standard*, 10 April 2018, <http://addisstandard.com/news-pizza-hut-officially-opens-in-ethiopia/> (accessed on 16 October 2018).
12. Interview with an EIC representative, Addis Ababa, 31 November 2018, originally in Chinese.
13. Multiple interviews with Chinese customers, Addis Ababa, January 2018, originally in Chinese.
14. State-owned fruit and vegetable enterprises.
15. Multiple interviews with Chinese customers, Rwanda Market, January 2018, originally in Chinese.
16. It is sometimes referred to as the Japan Market due to its proximity to the Japanese Embassy and is indicated as Japan Market on Google Map, even if the location is only vaguely identified. However, for most of the Chinese in the city, it is referred to as Rwanda Market and I will therefore adopt this name throughout the article.
17. Multiple interviews with local vendors, Rwanda Market, October 2018, originally in Amharic.

and for customers. Local distributors arrive with food supplies in trucks. They park the trucks along the road, unload the vegetables and pile them into what looks like mountains of greenness in the front row of the market. The access road also becomes the prime location where most of the stores that sell Chinese food products line up on each side. Here, one can locate vegetables rarely found in other parts of the city, and mostly unknown to locals. These include Chinese lettuce, Chinese cabbage, radish, beansprouts, and many others.



Photo 1. View of the Rwanda Market. Vendors are advertising products in Chinese, 4 August 2018. Credit: author.



Photo 2. Chinese vegetables are stacking at the shops in Rwanda Market, 4 August 2018. Credit: author.

Around 8 am, the street starts to crowd with Chinese buyers, and Chinese language becomes more audible throughout the day. Besides the piling of Chinese vegetables in the front row, there are also meat products in the side parts of Rwanda Market. Pork, uncommon in the local diet but popular in the Chinese diet, is almost exclusively supplied here. Staff from Chinese companies in Ethiopia go there every day, and leave with big packs of food. Following the rapid expansion of the Chinese food business, Mandarin Chinese has become very popular in the market, even for Ethiopian vendors. Street boys shout out to Asian drivers and passengers "Dianhua ka?" (電話卡?, Mandarin for "want a mobile top-up card?")

In Rwanda Market, the Chinese presence is fully expressed on the signboards

on the *façade* of some stores, and through the market's aural landscape. But if one ignores the presence of written and spoken Chinese language, Rwanda Market presents a very similar appearance to any other traditional market in the city. As in other market places, the shops are sheltered with rudimentary structures. However, the spatial organisation is well-planned, with rows of shops arrayed and connected to the main road by access lanes. In the same way as other traditional markets in the city, shops here are strictly registered. Sanitation and taxation are also relatively well regulated. In this sense, Rwanda Market is essentially an Ethiopian market space contextualised in the socioeconomic situation of the local food value chain.

At least two facts decisively anchor Rwanda Market as an Ethiopian market space, and thus identify its particular position in the food value chain. One is that the vendors are exclusively Ethiopian. The other is that they organise themselves with social initiatives known as *Aksiyon*.¹⁸ The widespread awareness of such an organisation has a strong implication on the market's economic efficiency, social capacity, and identity building (Kebede 2017). *Aksiyon* is a type of shareholding group that builds partnerships among many individuals. They contribute a fixed amount of cash to a pool fund for stronger financial capacity. This model of collaboration among vendors and shop owners originated from Merkato's urban renewal process. Merkato was arguably the biggest trade and distribution centre in Ethiopia. Before the government's effort to rebuild the area into a collection of multi-floor shopping centres through the urban renewal program, there were large amounts of informal business owners. Facing the inevitable rebuilding process, vendors in Merkato organised themselves into *Aksiyons* in order to gain capital, and leased land directly from the government. Through this process, the local vendors became developers, and around 40% of the built spaces are rented by the *Aksiyon* members (Angélil and Hebel 2016). Encouraged by the successful transformation, business owners in Atikilt Tera initiated the same organisation process. Rwanda Market followed, in the hope of gaining a stake in future development plans.

There are currently two *Aksiyons* in the market: Rwanda *Aksiyon* and Japan *Aksiyon*. These names are adopted from nearby landmarks: the Embassy of Rwanda in Ethiopia, and a Japanese-sponsored public housing project. Almost all vendors and shop owners joined the *Aksiyons*. The Rwanda *Aksiyon* was initiated at the beginning of the 1990s, and consists of 280 members. The Japan *Aksiyon* has 82 members, and is relatively new.¹⁹ Members of the *Aksiyons* make monthly contributions to the organisations, and get their respective shares from them. These two organisations are registered under the woreda government,²⁰ and have their own offices. They have drawn up their own vision for the future development of the land they occupy, and are awaiting approval. The potential merging of the two *Aksiyons* would indicate their "capacity to undertake the construction of the buildings," and reinforce their stakes in the decision-making process.²¹ This is significant, especially against the backdrop of a government-led development system. By setting up an *Aksiyon*, financially uncompetitive individuals seek stronger bargaining power through collective micro-financing mechanisms.

Understanding the organisation of *Aksiyon* as a collective response by the

18. This term was mentioned in almost every interview with local vendors in August 2018. *Aksiyon* is "share" in Amharic. The word *Aksiyon*, or sometimes written as *Axion*, is a pronounced translation from Amharic word አክሲዮን ማኅበር. It is one of the ways in which rural households or individuals organize themselves into savings groups to tackle the challenge of cash shortages. It is a unique form of micro-finance in Ethiopia, and not much literature can be found in English about this type of cooperative.

19. Multiple interviews with local vendors, October 2018, originally in Amharic.

20. A woreda is an administrative unit at the local level in Ethiopian cities. In the administrative structure of Addis Ababa, the city is divided into several sub-cities, then woredas, and finally kebeles. See: UN-HABITAT (2008).

21. Interview with a local vendor, Rwanda Market, 8 October 2018, originally in Amharic.

Ethiopian vendors to the Chinese migration paves the way for understanding the transformation of Rwanda Market into a Chinese food market. It is not to say that the locals exclusively own the business in and around the market. Indeed, Chinese competitors are right next door. There are a couple of Chinese-owned grocery shops located next to the Rwanda Market, mostly selling imported food products. But they are outnumbered by the local vendors, and function mainly as a supplement to the primary market for frequent visitors. Chinese buyers who pay daily visits to local vegetable vendors go to the Chinese-owned shops once or twice a week only.²² With minimal intervention from the migrant communities, the local value chain for Chinese food produce has developed effectively. This will be examined in detail in the subsequent sections.

A developing food value chain

Transformation of the market

Rwanda Market used to be a place with muddled iron shacks that housed an informal market. In 2004, the government launched a renovation programme to turn it into arrayed structures.²³ The “upgrade” of the market represented a change with more of a regulatory nature than in its built forms. While the renovated structures are largely iron and timber, with rudimentary construction techniques, the ownership and administration of the market changed hands. The woreda government took control, creating unified rental payment from the shop owners and vendors.

Regularised but still small in scale, the shop owners and vendors in the market actively sought new linkages, ready to shift their business for better profit at any time. This is how Rwanda Market shifted towards Chinese customers when the opportunity arose. The exact timing is hard to trace, but the watermelon story in many ways depicts the arrival of the Chinese customers:

Our first introduction [to Chinese customers] was the watermelon. I didn't know about this fruit before (...). A Chinese cook from the Huawei company brought this fruit and suggested that we should sell it. At first, we were very suspicious. But when other Chinese customers came and bought almost all of the watermelons in a short time, we were won over. After that, we felt confident to take new items, and we looked for all kinds of vegetables that were demanded by the Chinese customers.²⁴

Identifying the promising market of Chinese food retail, many sellers of the Rwanda Market have started to re-orientate their perspectives. The transformation is still going on, as some vendors are still in the process of switching their original business to selling Chinese vegetables for better and steadier profits. Interviews show that most local vendors re-oriented their business towards this niche market not because they have direct interactions with the Chinese community, but because of their local networks that connect them to those who have experience in this business.²⁵

Watermelons might have inadvertently become the intermediary through which the Chinese joined the food value chain in Rwanda Market. Since then, the eating preferences, culinary culture, and purchasing habits of the Chinese migrant group in the city have (after being initiated by the locals) shaped and reshaped its food landscape. The dynamic social network of the market paved the way for economic aspiration for many vendors, and has enabled them to create new supply chains. For example, some of the farms supplying Chinese vegetables in Rwanda Market, mostly run by local farmers, are located as far as 300 km away from the city.²⁶ The same network has also created a unique food pricing and marketing mechanism in the market, with

direct and indirect influences from the Chinese community.

Food pricing, marketing, and supply

The role of urban market institutions, especially in Sub-Saharan African cities, is critical (Porter *et al.* 2007), with food pricing and marketing being important tools to understand the urban-rural interactions for food supply. In Ethiopia, traditional open-air markets are considered an affordable and accessible option when compared to other types of food outlets (Assefa *et al.* 2016). In Rwanda Market, this is partly achieved by maintaining a lower level of rent:

[T]he items on sale here are cheaper. We pay very little money for rental space, which is 120 birr (around USD 4) per month. This enables us to not charge too much on the items we sell. Because of this, we have many customers from different parts of the city.²⁷

However, is Rwanda Market really among the most affordable food outlets in the city? The following table (see table 1) shows the prices collected on the same day among three different food outlets in Addis Ababa, namely Rwanda Market, the Fresh Corner, which is a modern supermarket nearby with much higher rent cost, and the vegetable street in *Atikilt Tera*, the biggest traditional food market with similar economic attributes.²⁸

Table 1: Prices of selected products in three different outlets on the same day

		Rwanda Market	Fresh Corner	Atikilt Tera	Price unit
Cereal	Teff	30	N/A	25	Kg
	Rice*	25	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Wheat	25	N/A	N/A	Kg
Protein	Beef	180	280	170	Kg
	Egg	4.3	6	4.3	Piece
	Pork*	260	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Tilapia*	70	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Banana	25	23	25	Kg
	Orange	100	150	30	Kg
	Avocado	20	20	12	Kg
	Potato	10	9.5	7	Kg
	Tomato	20	18	13	Kg
	Onion	18	18.5	10	Kg
Fruits & Vegetables	Carrot	25	27	13	Kg
	Cabbage Chinese	11.5	12	8	Kg
	Cabbage	20	18	20	Kg
	Bok Chai*	50	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Chives*	50	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Radish*	50	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Chinese	50	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Lettuce*	50	N/A	N/A	Kg
	Leaf Lettuce*	50	N/A	N/A	Kg

*Only found in Rwanda Market

22. Interview with Chinese customers, Rwanda Market, 8 August 2018, originally in Chinese.

23. Multiple interviews with local vendors and government representatives, Addis Ababa, August 2018, originally in Amharic.

24. Interview with a local vendor, Rwanda Market, 10 October 2018, originally in Amharic.

25. Interview with local vendors, Rwanda Market, 11 October 2018, originally in Amharic.

26. Interview with a local vendor, Rwanda Market, 10 October 2018, originally in Amharic.

27. *Ibid.*

28. The prices were collected in October 2018, and all related interviews were done in Amharic.

The status of Rwanda Market as a neighbourhood market suggests that the price for the same food produce here should fall between Atikilt Tera, the wholesale centre of the city, and Fresh Corner, the modern chain store. The comparison shows that food pricing is much more complex than simply relying on the outlet typology. For example, although prices for eggs, onions, and carrots in Rwanda Market fall between those charged at Fresh Corner and Atikilt Tera, the Chinese vegetables that are exclusively shopped by Chinese customers, including Bok Choi, chives, radish, and Chinese lettuce, have a higher than usual and unified price (50 Birr per kg), even though the costs of production and transport should not exceed those for cabbage and onions in theory. Pork, which is exclusively shopped by Chinese customers, is also much more expensive than other types of meat. Moreover, some of the most ordinary vegetables, such as tomatoes and potatoes, are even more expensive in Rwanda Market than in Fresh Corner. The vendors were reluctant to answer question about their high prices, but some Chinese customers suggested that since they were already in Rwanda Market to buy Chinese vegetables in bulk, they "might as well pick up other necessities here like tomatoes even if it's slightly more expensive, instead of going an extra mile to another place just for a few tomatoes."²⁹ In this case, the pricing reflects the local vendors' collective response to the Chinese migrants' shopping habits.

Not only does consumer demand have a huge impact on food pricing here, policy interventions and other urban governance strategies also have a significant influence on food pricing. The city's recent VAT policy change, for example, has brought up food prices in different types of outlets generally (Assefa *et al.* 2016), but its effect on Rwanda Market is nuanced. Rwanda Market is government-owned, and therefore vendors must theoretically pay Value Added Tax (VAT) charges to the government. In practice, however, the compliance rate varies because the purchase may occur with or without the issuance of a receipt. During one interview, a Chinese consumer who frequents the Rwanda Market explained:

If you ask, vendors would sell you products without VAT. If you want a receipt, they would print it out for you, with VAT clearly stated on that sheet. Then you pay the price plus VAT. For restaurant buyers or companies who can claim income tax exemption, they need the receipts, but for us they are useless. When we go there and buy food, we don't pay VAT, and it's cheaper.³⁰

Low rent, competition among vendors, and VAT-compliance flexibility contribute to the affordability of food produce in Rwanda Market. Additionally, produce specificity and increasing demand from Chinese customers drive up prices. Due to the mixed nature of market forces, the pricing and marketing system in Rwanda Market is arguably more dynamic and precarious than most other food outlets in the city. This complexity also gave shape to a new supply chain of Chinese food produce.

The specificity of the Chinese vegetables in Rwanda Market may lead to speculation that some products are imported or supplied by Chinese farms in Ethiopia. But in reality, the majority of the Chinese vegetables are grown by local farmers. There is very little intervention and investment from the Chinese. Due to the lack of major economic incentives and political challenges, there is currently no large-scale Chinese investment in farming in Ethiopia (Brautigam 2015). A Chinese Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre (ATDC) located not far from Addis Ababa was established between the Ethiopian and Chinese governments several years ago, but it is prohibited to engage in commercial practice. Some interviewees indicated a possible

transaction of seeds and skills between ATDC and the surrounding local farms, but real stories were hard to trace.³¹ However, this speculation is supported by the fact that most local farms supplying Rwanda Market with Chinese vegetables are located near ATDC or other Chinese farms, making seed transaction and skill transfer relatively easy. There are only a few Chinese farms in Ethiopia growing Chinese vegetables. They started by aiming at a regional market, yet began to supply Rwanda Market as an ancillary interest at marginal capacities when approached by vendors and *dellalas*.^{32,33}

Not only are Chinese vegetables farmed locally, but the steadily growing market also contributes to the emergence of local businesses such as pig raising and fish farming. These are businesses that have been cultivated with Chinese technical support, but are usually locally-owned. This is often because the scale of investment does not meet the government's minimum requirement for FDI in the food business. For example, many vegetable vendors witness large quantities of live fish being sold in Rwanda Market almost every day around noon. Chinese culinary tradition considers live fish a special delicacy. To cater to this market demand, *dellalas* transport live fish from Hawassa, 300 km south of Addis Ababa, to Rwanda Market.³⁴ The Chinese customers, most of whom are restaurant owners and chefs, often go the extra mile to get the best live fish, either by paying a higher price or by joining forces with other buyers to make a better bargain:

Sometimes the market gets very crowded and by the time I get in, the fish may not be as fresh. Vendors would offer me lower prices but I would rather pay more for good fish. So, I would ask the chef of another restaurant to sell me some fish he has bought, and I will pay him a small tip.

These were the comments of a female Chinese restaurant owner during an interview, as she carefully put a two-kilo tilapia into a big wok for cooking.³⁵

Processed food products for Chinese consumers with higher added value are mainly imported and very expensive, due to a shortage of forex and increasing tariff. Some lower-end processed products are made locally and traded by local vendors:

There are some homemade food items we receive from the Chinese to sell, such as Doya, Tofu, and homemade noodles. There is one woman who makes Doya and Tofu at her home, and drives here to deliver to us... And this Chinese guy also brings us the pasta we sell. He also delivers packaged items such as soy sauce and other spices from their country.³⁶

The local vendors, grocery shops, butchers, and restaurants, with mixed ownership types and a relatively blurred boundary between cross-national actors and local business networks, form a vibrant food value chain in

29. Interview with a Chinese customer, Rwanda Market, 8 August 2018, originally in Chinese.

30. Interview with a Chinese customer, Rwanda Market, 15 October 2018, originally in Chinese.

31. Multiple interviews with both local vendors and Chinese customers, Addis Ababa, August and October 2018. 32 *Dellala* is the Amharic word for a broker.

32. *Dellala* is the Amharic word for a broker.

33. Interview with a Chinese farmer, Addis Ababa, August 2018, originally in Chinese. See also Cook, Lu, Tugendhat, and Alemu (2016).

34. Multiple interviews with Chinese restaurant owners, October 2018, Addis Ababa, originally in Chinese.

35. Interview with a Chinese restaurant owner, Addis Ababa, 30 November 2018, originally in Chinese.

36. Interview with a vendor, 10 October 2018, originally in Amharic.

Rwanda Market. This community and network showcase a process of mixing and interweaving between the Chinese and the locals. Chinese food produce and its supply chain create a platform around which socioeconomic exchanges between the Chinese migrants and the local vendors are at play on a daily basis. Furthermore, it is where different types of migrant-host relations unfold. It serves to create an unusual social space in a traditional urban market.

China-Ethiopia encounters in and beyond the market

A variety of cross-cultural encounters are documented in the new waves of Chinese migration to Africa. Tensions and conflicts are frequently seen between Chinese business owners and African employees, and between local business people and their Chinese competitors (Hanisch 2013; Liu 2018). But the unique business relations in Rwanda Market encourage the building of positive and convivial ties between the Chinese migrant community and the locals. The local supply and distribution network in the market, currently protected by investment policies against foreign competitors, relies on the demand of the migrant community to prosper. On the other hand, Chinese food consumers do not have many options in the city where they can purchase Chinese vegetables. Positive interactions with the local business network contribute to quality food consumption and maintaining their way of life. Despite the apparent differences and cultural gaps, this inherent demand for integration urges the two groups to actively search for shared values and experiences.

This is not to say there are no confrontations and conflicts. For example, some of the Chinese shop owners near Rwanda Market complain about price discrimination against Chinese tenants. They also claim that government officials in charge of sanitary conditions tend to inspect Chinese businesses more often and place higher thresholds on these businesses, which often leads to penalties that shrink the profit margin even further.³⁷ At the same time, local vendors complain about rising competition from Chinese grocery stores.³⁸

However, these conflicts should be read in relation to the broader context of the city's food landscape. For example, competition also exists between local vendors, and the domestic business-government relationship can also get intense. When envisioning the future of the market, the divide between the government and the private sector easily leads to political confrontation. To date, the government does not have a clear distribution of planning responsibilities among different levels of the administration.³⁹ On the contrary, private actors try to develop the market into "multi-storey commercial buildings" and gain collective ownership of the market.⁴⁰ This vision of private business owners is gaining broader recognition, as the bargaining power of the business network of Rwanda Market increases. With the development of convivial cross-national relations, this is likely to increase over time.

At an individual capacity, both the Chinese and the Ethiopian business actors in Rwanda Market are in precarious positions, but the two groups are motivated to forge a vibrant collectiveness. The interweaving network and its social collectiveness encompass a developing body of grassroots politics that is able to overcome external interference. For example, at a time of political unrest surrounding Addis Ababa in August-September 2018, a tool for political bargaining by certain ethnic groups in many places was targeting foreign businesses and demolishing their infrastructure.⁴¹ However, thanks to the exceptional convivial relations within the Market, vendors with

different ethnicities continued to run their business as usual during the state of emergency. This collective resistance against external influences is also reflected in the power relations with the city government. Recognising the importance of this network, one government official talked about a possible compromise when asked about the aforementioned difference between their vision of the market and those of the vendors:

If they [the vendors] receive approval from the land management office of their (land use) proposals, they will be developing the land accordingly. The woreda government does not have different information about the land use of the market, other than either keeping the function of the existing market place, or turning it into a multi-storey shopping centre.⁴²

An emergence of cultural exchanges also transpires from and beyond the daily operation of the Rwanda Market. This is especially reflected in its multilingualism. Vendors in the front row have learned basic Chinese, and some have even become fluent. An increasing number of Chinese migrants are also learning Amharic, and practice it through bargaining in the market with the vendors. Many local vendors still remember the day when one of their colleagues, speaking fluent Chinese, was interviewed by a China Global Television Network (CGTN) reporter to showcase the growing business relations between Ethiopians and Chinese.⁴³ Propaganda journalism or otherwise, the CGTN report immediately brought the daily practice of a local vegetable vendor to the foreground of a grand narrative of China-Ethiopia relations. Beside the language exchange, local traders invite their Chinese customers to local social events such as traditional weddings, and in return are invited by Chinese customers to taste authentic traditional Chinese food.⁴⁴ Next to Rwanda Market, there is a Chinese restaurant with a pond in the front yard that keeps live fish for catering. Here, more than one local guest experienced a double cultural shock when they tasted fresh fish from the pond for the first time: first, by the way the Chinese chef slammed the fish against the wall to knock it unconscious before preparation, and then by the extreme tenderness of the fish, which is totally different from their conventional fish cuisines.⁴⁵

Concluding remarks

Rwanda Market is unique in the sense that it caters to the food demands of a migrant community. It is also an ordinary space, representing the typical form of an Ethiopian food market. Moreover, the business network that answers to foreign food demand is predominantly local. Influenced by food policies in Ethiopia and a unique trade environment, the market forms an interface between Chinese migrants and the local business network. The

37. Multiple interviews with Chinese business owners, Addis Ababa, October 2018, originally in Chinese.

38. Multiple interviews with local vendors, Rwanda Market, October 2018, originally in Amharic.

39. Interview with local government representatives, Addis Ababa, 10 October 2018, originally in Amharic.

40. Multiple interviews with vendors, Rwanda Market, October 2018, originally in Amharic.

41. Though this period of violence was not thoroughly disclosed by Western media, reports of violent protests destroying foreign factories were frequent in social media at the time.

42. Interview with a woreda officer, Addis Ababa, November 2018, originally in Amharic.

43. Interview with local vendors, Rwanda Market, 11 July 2018, originally in Chinese.

44. Multiple interviews with local vendors, Rwanda Market, October 2018, originally in Amharic.

45. Interviews with a few Ethiopian customers in a Chinese restaurant, November 2018, originally in English.

demand of migrants initiated the evolution of the market from a traditional food outlet to a landmark for Chinese food consumers, and the local business network in the market constantly adapts itself to meet the changing demand of the migrant community. The two social groups are willingly interweaving each other into their daily livelihood as the business continues to stabilise and expand.

The Rwanda Market case study is in response to Steel's invitation to "read cities through food and the food markets" (Steel 2013: 122) and a unique site to observe the dynamics of individual actors and their networks in the city. Imbruce used the case of Chinatown in Manhattan to depict the possibility of an alternative food system through expanded immigration and globalisation (Imbruce 2015). In her study, the "alternative" indicates the peripheral position of the Chinese food industry in the power structure of the modern urban food industry in the USA. However, in the case of Rwanda Market, shared experiences and values between the Chinese and the locals integrate Chinese food into the local food value chain. The daily social encounter between the Chinese and the local food distribution network constructs Rwanda Market as a borderland space, as depicted in Park's studies (2010), where the two cultural groups come into "daily, intimate contact." But unlike Park's cases, it is not where the African businessmen

extend their business abroad through local transnational interactions, but rather where Chinese migrants find a place of survival through active adaptation to a local social network.

The research is limited in many ways. The fieldwork was conducted intermittently, and interviews were transcribed from different languages by scholars from various ethnic and research backgrounds, making observation and data collection inconsistent at a certain level. The three-month timespan of fieldwork is notably inadequate for sustained ethnographic research. Nevertheless, the case study offers a glimpse of the diversified China-Africa encounters that are emerging as new waves of Chinese migration take place in Africa. The article aims to showcase how the everyday China-Ethiopia encounters, both in and surrounding the market, generate convivial relationships and intertwined experiences, an emerging urban reality in many African cities.

■ Zhengli Huang is a Research Associate at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning of Sheffield University (United Kingdom) (jeringhuang@gmail.com).

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