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# The Portrayal of China in Ethiopia's Creative Works

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the portrayal of China in Ethiopian artistic works through the lens of Orientalism, postcolonialism, and representation theory. It focuses on six artists who use different narrative modes to illustrate the relationship between China and Ethiopia. Through textual analysis, the article examines the motifs, narratives, and ideological constructs that shape how the creative works view China. The article argues that after Ethiopia's 1991 political change, creative works began reflecting the evolving Ethiopia-China relationship, shaped by economic, cultural, social, and political ties, with artistic expressions celebrating and critiquing it. The findings reveal that most Ethiopian creative expressions depict China positively, highlighting its economic and cultural influence. However, they also uncover a subtle scepticism underlying this portrayal. The analysis examines how these representations show economic, social, and political changes shaping South-South relations and culture. The article contributes to the discourse on China's role as a key partner in Ethiopia's development and modernization and its implications for bilateral relations in a globalized context.

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## 1. Introduction

Relations between Ethiopia and China date back a long time, as historical records from travellers provide evidence. These records show traders exported rhinoceroses from Ethiopia to China around 202 BC (Harneit-Sievers et al. 2010). During the medieval period, Ethiopia's position as a trading centre continued to foster ties with China. There were early trade relations, but both parties showed little interest in establishing diplomatic relations until the twentieth century. Emperor Haile Selassie officially established diplomatic relations with China on December 4, 1970 (Tesfaye 2020). However, the Derg regime (1974–1991) strained these relations. After the political shift in Ethiopia, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi resumed ties with China in 1995, continued by his successor Hailu Mengistu and now by Abiy Ahmed. These economic collaborations have resulted in significant Chinese involvement in building Ethiopia's

infrastructure, including roads, railroads, energy projects, and telecommunications, transforming the country's economy and cultural landscape (Yan and Sautman 2024).

The growing presence of Chinese investment, and culture in Ethiopia has influenced Ethiopian creative works, reflecting increased cultural and social interactions (Thomas and Berry 2021). However, academic research on the Chinese presence in Ethiopia often neglects literary studies, concentrating instead on economic and political dimensions (Thomas 2019). According to Lyu (2023), theoretical perspectives on China's presence in Africa range from dependency and neo-colonialism to mutual benefit. Skjerdal and Gusu (2016) note that the portrayal of China in Ethiopian artworks since 1991 has been positive, emphasizing themes of camaraderie and mutual development that reflect Ethiopia's recognition of China as an important ally in its global integration efforts. Li (2021) points out that these depictions challenge Western stereotypes by portraying China as 'saviours' and important players in the modernization of Ethiopia.

This article examines various genres, including the song *China* by Abdu Kiar (2010), the novel *Enena Chu* by Fisseha Yazzie (2012), the comedy *YeChina Guday* by Kebebew Geda (2015), the film *Jemari Leba* by Abdissa Mitiku (2018), the film *Wedde Huala* by Mahmud Dawud (2019), and the play *Eyayu Fungus* by Bereket Belayneh (2019). The rationale for choosing these works is contemporary relevance, representation of ideological frameworks, engagement with global discourse, diversity of mediums, cultural significance, and narrative diversity. In addition, the article uses textual analysis to interpret and analyze texts, focusing on their meaning, structure, and context. It also utilizes critical theoretical frameworks such as Orientalism (Said 1977), postcolonialism (Spivak 1988), and representation theory (Hall 1997) to examine the depiction of China in Ethiopian creative works.

This article contains six sections. The first section provides an introduction. The second section examines Abdu Kiar's song *China* and Fisseha Yazzie's novel *Enena Chu*, focusing on their portrayal of China's role in Ethiopia's economic development. The third section analyzes Abdissa Mitiku's film *Jemari Leba* and Mahmud Dawud's film *Wedde Huala*, highlighting how the works portray China as the source of a new culture. The fourth section examines Kebebew Geda's comedic work *YeChina Guday* and Bereket Belayneh's play *Eyayu Fungus*, focusing on their sceptical portrayal of China in Ethiopian works. The fifth section examines factors shaping China's portrayal in Ethiopian creative works, including economy, politics, culture, trade, investment, history, and people-to-people exchanges. The analysis is organized around key themes rather than specific source materials. Finally, the article summarizes the most important insights.

## 2. China as a Role Player in Ethiopia's Economic Development

Various Ethiopian art forms represent and imagine China and thus contribute to a many-sided representation of China in Ethiopian art production. According to

Buzuev et al. (2020), poetry expresses emotions through language, images, and metaphors. Novels convey messages through content and form that are crucial to the reader's understanding and emotional response. Music and theatre trigger affective reactions and cultural references. Comedies use humour and satire to reflect stereotypes, contradictions, and paradoxes. Films use visual and narrative elements to respond to subjective experiences.

The popular singer Abdu Kiar rose to fame in 2003 with his music album *Merkato Sefere*. He is known for blending Ethiopian melodies with hip-hop and has since released several albums including *Fikir Bamaregna* (2006), *Minew Shewa* (2009), and *Tikur Anbessa* (2015). His music addresses social issues, such as HIV awareness and migration, and resonates worldwide. One of his songs-*China*- highlights China's contributions to Ethiopia's infrastructure development, particularly to the road construction in Addis Ababa. The lyrics portray China as a reliable partner and emphasize its wisdom and capabilities (Abdu 2010). This depiction of China's ongoing support in the song has also addressed Ethiopian youth to reflect on it rhetorically. Abdu (2010) sings:

China

Do not proclaim that I am unfit to endure life's trials.

It is this very resilience that ignites pride within the present moment.

Refrain from declaring that I am incapable of withstanding life's temptations.

China, please come to my homeland.

The song reflects China's work ethic and economic achievements and expresses the desire for Chinese involvement in Ethiopia's development efforts. It emphasizes China's resilience and determination to overcome economic challenges and shows national pride in its perseverance against all odds. The line 'Do not declare that I am incapable of resisting life's temptations' symbolizes China's rejection of corruption and shortcuts and underscores its commitment to integrity and hard work. Said's (1977) concept of Orientalism provides a critical lens for interpreting this narrative as it highlights how the West has historically portrayed the East as exotic and passive to justify Western dominance. In contrast, the song's appeal 'China, please come to my homeland' signals Ethiopia's quest for cooperation beyond Western paradigms and emphasizes China's role in infrastructure and investment across Africa. The song blends China's national pride with a call for strategic cooperation with Ethiopia. The song challenges the Orientalist view of Eastern societies as passive and affirms China's agency as an active participant in Ethiopia's development and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Spivak's work focuses on the subaltern, the marginalized voices, often silenced by the dominant power structures. The speaker's defiance in the face of 'trials' and 'temptations' reflects Spivak's assertion that the subaltern resists being silenced. Spivak (1988, 308) states, 'Would the colonial subaltern be able to speak? The answer is no.' The speaker's refusal to be labelled as 'unfit' or

'incapable' opposes cultural and vocal suppression. The call to 'China' implicates a call for solidarity among oppressed nations who, despite historical silence, have the strength to overcome challenges.

Hall's (1997) representation theory states that meaning is constructed through language, culture, and media, and emphasizes that representation involves a power dynamic. The song mentions China to explore its culture, highlighting the meaning of resilience and how Ethiopians perceive it. Hall (1997, 15) states: 'Representation is the production of meaning through language. It is always the result of a process of interpretation.' The speaker's use of 'China,' which carries meanings such as capable, patient, enduring, and resilient in Amharic, is a strategic act of representation that creates meaning and resists simplistic portrayals. It emphasizes China's resilience, pride, and strength.

The song emphasizes perseverance and wisdom, reflecting Chinese culture as a source of wisdom and industriousness. Spivak (1988) says, 'The oppressed, if given the chance, and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics can speak and know their conditions.' In the song, the representation of China and Ethiopia aligns with themes of agency and self-determination within the global South, emphasizing mutual exchange rather than dependency. Bhabha (2012, 173) says, 'The postcolonial perspective departs from the tradition of the sociology of underdevelopment or dependency theory. It attempts to revise those nationalist or nativist pedagogies that set up the relations of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition.' Ethiopia's desire to learn from Chinese culture signals a vision for economic growth and a deeper understanding of cultural interactions. Abdu (2010) articulates in the song:

Ethiopia's capital, where I was born  
On the street of my city, where I could see him just voicelessly  
Today, he parted his lips and inquired:  
'Where is China? Where has the sage vanished to?'

The lyrics of the song focus on Addis Ababa. The speaker expresses curiosity by asking, 'Where is China?', portraying China as a problem solver and the economic backbone of Ethiopia (Abdu 2010). China is depicted as the embodiment of knowledge and development, reflecting the hope that Ethiopia will emulate its path to modernization. The voiceless man symbolizes the increasing silencing of the public in political discourse and serves as a call for more political awareness and activism in Ethiopian society, urging people to learn from China's development. Bhabha (2012) explores hybridity and the 'third space' to highlight the importance of cultural exchange and identity negotiation in political discourse. He argues that marginalized voices challenge dominant narratives, fostering both dialogue and resistance. The 'voiceless man' symbolizes silence and the potential for new voices to emerge. The song criticizes the current power structures in Ethiopia and appeals to educated citizens to shape the country's future. Abdu captures the emotion with the lines:

The hero who steadfastly refused to surrender,  
 The hero who stood resolute even in the face of adversity,  
 The hero who overcame all obstacles,  
 Patient China, with profound humility, forged him into a steadfast ally. (Abdu 2010)

The above song recalls the great Ethiopian ancestors who fought back against the Italian invaders in 1934, with resistance and perseverance being the main themes. The verse 'The hero who steadfastly refused to surrender' recalls the postcolonial theory of glorifying those who resisted colonial aggression and fought for their sovereignty (Spivak 1988). This highlights the hero's modesty while emphasizing the friendship between China and Ethiopia, suggesting a modern partnership that transcends past colonial rule (Li 2021). Ethiopia is portrayed as a rock of strength and perseverance and China as a model of toughness and reliability. The song promotes values such as determination, courage, and humility to foster strong relationships and economic success. In this way, the story of Ethiopia is placed in a broader context of global sovereignty and solidarity. As Abdu (2010) expresses:

His eyes are neither pearls nor golden rings,  
 And his brows do not arch like celestial orbs.  
 Yet he possesses the vision to see afar,  
 Guiding with remarkable clarity the paths through distant lands.

The lyrics praise the Chinese man who can lead others to foreign lands and emphasize the importance of inner beauty over outer beauty. Even if the person's physical appearance does not conform to traditional ideals of beauty, his ability to 'see afar' symbolizes a deeper understanding and foresight. This idea aligns with postcolonial themes that emphasize knowledge and understanding as essential tools, rather than physical beauty, for charismatic leadership.

Indeed, Harrison, Yang, and Moyo (2017) explain that visual imagery influences perceptions of a country in postcolonial contexts. They argue that visual narratives can either reinforce stereotypes or foster nuanced cultural identities. The authors advocate for critical engagement with dominant narratives about China in Africa, asserting that knowledge empowers individuals to challenge and reshape these narratives. The song praises intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom as valuable skills that can improve society. This leadership concept, rooted in intrinsic qualities, aligns with postcolonial empowerment by emphasizing the importance of guiding others through knowledge and skills (Sun and Cheung 2022). As noted by Abdu (2010):

Oh, sons and youths of my homeland, where has our wisdom fled?  
 Enshrouded in our pride, we have disappeared.  
 Before our eyes, Addis Ababa and China have forged a wedding ring.  
 China!

The last verse of the song criticizes Ethiopia for its lack of wisdom. It suggests that this absence, coupled with selfishness, is contributing to the country's internal

division and decline. The reference to Addis Ababa and China tying a wedding ring in front of the people represents a narrative of economic cooperation. The poem emphasizes that wisdom and cooperation are prerequisites for lasting wealth. The refrain's repeated mention of 'China' highlights the significance of this partnership. It underscores the need for mutual understanding and coexistence with China to achieve economic benefits. Finally, it urges Ethiopian youth to regain their wisdom and fight corruption to build a stronger country.

Similar to the above song, China has become a recurring motif in an Ethiopian novel-*Enena Chu* by Fisseha Yazzie. The novel is a prominent work in the Amharic literary scene. Fisseha's works present distinctive narrative styles and depictions of Ethiopian culture and society. In novels such as *Ye Ethiopia Ye Amist Shi Tarik (Ke Noah Eske E'hadeg)* and *Yesatinael Goal Ethiopia I and II*, he explores themes of identity, morality, and political oppression while analyzing the impact of past power regimes on the formation of modern Ethiopia (Fisseha 2012).

Fisseha challenges Western stereotypes by portraying Ethiopia's relationship with China as mutually beneficial. He emphasizes a productive partnership rather than depicting Ethiopia as merely dependent on China. His novel *Enena Chu* tells the story of a young Chinese girl, Chu. As the eponymous character, Chu's experiences shape the themes of the story and allow the reader to explore the complexities of identity, culture, and personal growth. Since its publication in 2012, the novel has been well-received and reprinted three times, a testament to its popularity. Chu travels to Ethiopia to build roads and develops a love affair with a young Ethiopian. This romantic relationship symbolizes both the opportunities and challenges in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Chu's conflict resolution skills with her Ethiopian partner reflect her commitment to bridging cultural differences. Promoting collaboration and mutual respect, she exemplifies coexistence in a multicultural workplace. Her empathy for young Ethiopian girls aspiring to emigrate to Arab countries fosters cross-cultural dialogue and understanding (Fisseha 2012).

The novel portrays Chu as a culturally adaptable character who embraces Ethiopian social norms, highlighting the potential for cultural understanding and hybridity. The love story, emphasizing mutual respect and agency in a globalized context, symbolizes the reciprocal power dynamics in Ethiopia-China relations. However, Chu's achievements are compared with those of her Ethiopian peers, which becomes clear during a dinner with her landlady. In this scene, Chu narrates the remarkable achievement of a young Chinese girl building a 2,000-kilometre road at just 22. Her remark criticizes the procrastination among Ethiopia's youth. She suggests this delays the nation's social progress. This contrast highlights the admirable work ethic of young Chinese while critiquing the shortcomings of young Ethiopians (Fisseha 2012).

The novel plays on the industrious nature of Chinese identity in contrast to the more stagnant stereotypes of Ethiopian culture as depicted in Chu's story. Indeed, the portrayal of Chinese 'industriousness' versus Ethiopian 'indolence'

offers a simplistic and dichotomous view of the two cultures. This perspective overlooks the richness and complexity inherent in both. On the other hand, Von Pezold and Driessen (2021) argue that the emphasis on individual achievement as a prototype may symbolize national identity. This focus presents China as a modern, progressive nation striving for cultural legitimacy. From a postcolonial viewpoint, Chu represents China's effort to reclaim its voice in a historically marginalized system.

*Enena Chu* praises Chinese development. The novel stresses that Ethiopia must confront numerous challenges such as insufficient investment, inadequate infrastructure, and ineffective policies and reforms in rural areas to progress like China (Fisseha 2012). Besides, she highlights the lack of modern technology as a barrier to achieving food self-sufficiency. The novel contrasts the sluggishness of Ethiopia's infrastructure sector with China's advancements in this field. Chu's young Ethiopian partner, who is unnamed, values China's infrastructure successes, which extend beyond China and benefit Ethiopia. Lauria (2023) also points out that Ethiopia stands to gain greatly from China's infrastructure development. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative fosters economic growth and empowers local actors.

In general, the song *China* and the novel *Enena Chu* portray a proactive approach to tackling Ethiopia's socio-economic challenges. They highlight China's role as a key player in this development, contrasting the achievements of today's Chinese generation with those of the contemporary Ethiopian generation. They also stress the need for innovative strategies and lessons Ethiopia can learn from China to drive economic growth. Yan and Sautman (2024) suggest that comprehensive cooperation with China has been assisting Ethiopia in achieving its economic goals.

### 3. China as a Source of New Culture

Abdisa Mitiku's film *Jemari Leba* (A beginner thief) draws analogies between the work ethic of Ethiopians and Chinese. Abdisa is a prominent Ethiopian film director and screenwriter known for his unique storytelling that tackles social and political issues, though little information is available about his life. The film extols Chinese industriousness and condemns Ethiopian society's indolence. It reflects on the challenges Ethiopian society faces and draws valuable lessons from Chinese work culture (Abdissa 2018).

*Jemari Leba* tells the story of Teddy, a student expelled from university for disciplinary reasons, who turns to theft. He meets a young girl named Haben, who is involved in commercial sex work. Teddy and Haben move into an apartment known as the Chinese Compound, named after the Chinese residents who once lived there. The plot explores the consequences of Haben's decision to transition from student to commercial sex worker, highlighting themes of failure and social dysfunction. The compound owner notices a discrepancy in national work

ethics and stereotypes by observing his occupants: 'Not every Ethiopian is a runner, just as not every Chinese is a tireless worker' (Abdissa 2018). The film makes it clear that individual actions do not reflect entire cultures. It emphasizes that success relies on hard work and personal commitment rather than nationality while critiquing prevailing social expectations.

*Jemari Leba* explores cultural diversity emphasizing unity through interracial marriages. In the film, Lee, a Chinese man and a major character, marries an Ethiopian woman. This union, symbolizing the connection between Ethiopia and China, highlights the cultural exchange between the two nations. Drawing on Hall (1997), the film aligns seamlessly with postcolonial theories that advocate hybrid identities and the necessity of dialogue in developing intercultural relationships. It highlights that this marriage has the potential to transform understanding and cooperation between cultures in the globalized world. The homeowner's said:

I have leased this house to two Chinese gentlemen, one of whom is named Yan Xing. We had to dismiss him for disciplinary reasons. The other, named Lee, is disciplined. Oh, Lee, my esteemed brother. Remarkably, I arranged for him to wed an Ethiopian woman in accordance with the customs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. (Abdissa 2018)

The film also explores cultural misunderstandings stemming from differing backgrounds. Yan Xing cheats his Ethiopian landlord and lies about his khat addiction. This causes the narrator to question his beliefs that 'All Chinese are renowned for their tireless work ethic' (Abdissa 2018). Khat, a plant containing the stimulant cathinone, is legally regulated in different countries. Khat, legal in Ethiopia but illegal in China, highlights cultural differences. Its legal status reflects how cultural differences shape drug policies worldwide. In Ethiopia, khat holds deep cultural and social significance, used for social, religious, and economic purposes. In contrast, China classifies khat as a controlled substance due to concerns about its psychoactive effects, public health, and potential for abuse. While Ethiopia normalizes khat as part of daily life, China's strict approach to drug control overrides any cultural familiarity with the plant. According to Tesfaye (2020), China harbours a strong aversion to drug use, influenced by its historical experience with the Opium Wars.

This issue highlights broader concerns of international law and cultural relativism. The acceptability of substances or practices is often dependent on context. Yan Xing adopts local customs, such as chewing khat, to socialize and relieve stress, blurring cultural boundaries. This portrayal aligns with postcolonial theories highlighting respect in intercultural relationships. These theories argue that respect is essential for understanding and cooperation between cultures (Sun and Cheung 2022). In general, *Jemari Leba* highlights the challenges and rewards of cultural exchange while promoting awareness of multiculturalism (Wang 2023).

One of the main motifs in *Enena Chu* is the depiction of migration. While many Ethiopians seek work abroad, the presence of Chinese workers in Ethiopia challenges the notion of limited job opportunities. According to Afrobarometer Round 6 (2016), this highlights the importance of fostering a culture of hard work. In addition, language, a central theme in the novel, is also vital for international collaboration (Fisseha 2012). The novel emphasizes the advantages for Ethiopians in learning Mandarin, as China is Ethiopia's largest trading partner. China's significant role in the economy and international affairs makes this skill increasingly valuable. Chu is also fluent in Amharic and English (Fisseha 2012).

*Enena Chu* emphasizes the Chinese way of time management with punctuality, efficiency, and discipline. Chu demonstrates these qualities by completing tasks in just 20 minutes. In contrast, these same tasks would take an Ethiopian worker an entire day to finish (Fisseha 2012). Furthermore, the novel emphasizes the importance of making and maintaining friendships at work. Chu embodies networking, motivation, and caring — traits that reflect Chinese cultural values — and is portrayed as essential to success (Fisseha 2012). The novel emphasizes the influence of group harmony, collaboration, and collective success over individual achievements in the workplace, highlighting respect for seniority, clear hierarchical structures, and deference to leadership and decision-makers.

*Enena Chu* portrays the forces driving China's economic growth. Fisseha (2012) provides a broader perspective on China's economic growth. He highlights the interplay of factors such as economic opening, human capital, political party discipline, trade policies, and foreign direct investment. He also points to strategic investment in infrastructure and technology, diplomacy, and global economic dynamism as key contributors to the country's success. The novel also portrays China's societal structure that promotes creativity and efficiency. It assumes that success is merely a product of individual labour and also incorporates structural elements of economic facts. The novel discusses economic development and how government intervention, policies, and reforms are crucial to the nation's progress and stability.

The statement from Chu's unnamed Ethiopian partner to Chu, 'I love Chu, just as Ethiopia loves China,' conveys deep affection for both nations and a positive view of their relationship (Fisseha 2012, 152). However, the novel suggests that Ethiopia needs to catch up with China's remarkable economic progress. The Ethiopian partner's struggle to keep up with Chu symbolizes Ethiopia's frustration in catching up with China's development. This reflects the perception that China's progress represents unattainable goals for Ethiopia. This situation illustrates the challenges Ethiopians face in adapting to rapid modernization (Fisseha 2012). This narrative explores the links between development aspirations and cultural identity. It aligns with postcolonial theories that stress the need for local entities to absorb and reinterpret external lessons (Harrison et al. 2017).

The excerpts below emphasize China's strong work ethic and the success associated with martial arts, which requires dedication and discipline. The film promotes patience, hard work, and moral integrity as essential virtues for success in Chinese society. It attributes the country's rapid growth to the collective dedication to hard work. The narrator of the film, who is also the homeowner, admires the skills of the Chinese. He plans to travel to China to seek holy water, a practice rooted in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition. The reason for this search is an illness he contracted while training for his second black belt in taekwondo in Ethiopia (Abdissa 2018). This divergence accentuates the irony of looking for solutions in the wrong place. The homeowner as portrayed in the film makes the following statements:

Thirty years ago, the Chinese lived in greater poverty than we do, but they have transformed their lives through hard work and earnest dedication. Their remarkable skills in taekwondo reflect this dedication. When I was preparing for my second black belt, I fell ill and planned to travel to China to seek holy water or *Tsebel* for a speedy recovery. If fate had been kind to me, I could have worn my second black belt with pride. (Abdissa 2018) Why not adopt the Chinese work ethic instead of lounging on that stone? In China, standing with hands in pockets is simply unthinkable; it's considered far too severe. (Abdissa 2018)

The above statements portray China and Chinese identity favourably. In contrast, the portrayal of lazy Ethiopians reinforces criticism of perceived idleness. The portrayal idealizes the Chinese work ethic while criticizing the Ethiopian attitude toward work. Both rely on problematic stereotypes. However, the emphasis on the 'hardworking Chinese' celebrates a national spirit rooted in hard work and dedication. This aligns with Naod's (2015) portrayals of China and its people as disciplined, efficient, and committed to the common good. Haile-Eyesus and Seyoume (2015) argue that these stereotypes, though simplistic, portray China and its people as models of progress, especially compared to perceived Ethiopians' inefficiency. However, according to Said (1977), this view oversimplifies Chinese and Ethiopian society and promotes a binary understanding of cultural productivity.

The landlord's statement, 'In China, standing with hands in pockets is simply unthinkable' reflects a cultural and political environment that emphasizes constant productivity, a strong work ethic, and a commitment to national progress (Abdissa 2018). Such representations create an image of the Orient as 'the other' and emphasize its differences from other nations (Said 1977). This aligns with colonial narratives that emphasize discipline and hard work for progress, showing how postcolonial nations can adopt these beliefs to meet modern expectations (Thomas and Berry 2021). The statement also reflects an Orientalist perspective by portraying Chinese cultural norms as disciplined and industrious, reinforcing the stereotype of a 'hard-working East' versus a 'more relaxed Africa.' The excerpt reduces a complex society to a single cultural trope, highlighting a postcolonial

reality in which China emphasizes productivity and national progress in response to its historical subjugation.

The homeowner's statement, 'work like a Chinese,' encourages the occupants to adopt the positive traits commonly associated with Chinese culture (Abdissa 2018). Tesfaye (2020) also reported that Chinese core values such as hard work, discipline, and a strong sense of community help the country for rapid development. This portrayal of China as a model of effective work inspires admiration, but it risks overgeneralizing the rich diversity of experiences within Chinese society. As Thomas and Berry (2021) discuss, the above extract implies that Chinese society is inherently unique and exotic in its approach to work and social values. Indeed, the portrayal of the Chinese as hardworking and disciplined aligns with the screenwriter's narrative, which aspires to promote Ethiopia's national growth and identity (Abdissa 2018). In Hall's (1997) representation theory, while this narrative reinforces China's status globally, it also risks perpetuating stereotypes, overshadowing other cultural and economic expressions, and reinforcing narrow definitions of national identity.

In *Jemari Leba*, the landlord highlights the Chinese work ethic, suggesting Ethiopians could benefit by adopting similar habits. The landlord told the tenant, 'Ethiopian youth sit on stones all day' which portrays unproductive behaviour and reflects cultural attitudes toward work and societal expectations. The film highlights the importance of hard work, good behaviour, and cultural exchange (Abdissa 2018). This aligns with Hall's (1997) idea that representations in media can influence how cultural traits are understood and valued within society. In *Jemari Leba*, Lee's portrayal highlights work ethics Ethiopians can emulate, with his dedication valued across cultures. This representation illustrates how representational theory can essentialize cultural identities by portraying Lee as the ideal 'other' whose behaviour is worth emulating (Hall 1997). The landlord said to an Ethiopian tenant:

This is Lee, a tenant much like yourself. He made this house his home for two years, never spending a single night away, not even by accident. His devotion to his work is unwavering, and his character is exemplary. Because of his outstanding conduct, I have entrusted him with my villa. (Abdissa 2018)

*Enena Chu* highlights China's significant progress in sustainable agricultural practices and points out that Ethiopia could learn valuable lessons from this experience. This portrayal positions China as the 'exemplary other' whose practices are worth emulating (Fisseha 2012). On the other hand, the novel criticizes Ethiopia's politically motivated recognition of 'productive farmers' and contrasts it with China's merit-based criteria for achievement awards. This comparison challenges postcolonial critiques, asserting that political influence holds more value than genuine merit (Bhabha 2012). The narrative also portrays how Ethiopians can enhance the aesthetics of their homes by adopting Chinese practices. This

reinforces Hall's (1997) representation theory that states some cultural practices as universally applicable.

Similar to the themes discussed in the above novel, the film *Wedde Huala* (Walking Backward), directed by Mahmud Dawud, criticizes Ethiopia's stagnation, attributing it to an education system that prioritizes imported, impractical knowledge over indigenous knowledge. The main characters include Prof. Biruk, Ewunetu, an unnamed professor, and other students and teachers. Ewunetu states that 'The modern Ethiopian education system makes Ethiopians modern slaves' (Mahmud 2019).

Ewunetu, the protagonist, tries to improve the academic reputation of his university — Bahir Dar University — by integrating indigenous knowledge. However, his efforts lead to frustration and ultimately result in a mental illness. The narrative contrasts Ethiopia's underdevelopment with China's progress, emphasizing the latter's success through quality education and hard work. The film expresses regret over Ethiopia's educational deficiencies and stresses the need to integrate indigenous knowledge into the curriculum (Mahimud 2019).

Ewunetu advocates for integrating indigenous knowledge and a practical-based curriculum into the Ethiopian university system. At the same time, he strives to eliminate Western theoretical curricula that disregard local contexts. The film highlights the enduring effects of colonialism by portraying dependence on foreign knowledge. Spivak (1988) points out that such knowledge is a form of intellectual colonization that undermines local forms of knowledge. He argues for an educational decolonization that honors indigenous knowledge systems. Ewunetu's predicament reflects the psychological and cultural dislocations that those resisting the imposed educational curricula face. *Wedde Huala* portrays Ethiopia's underdevelopment as a consequence of systemic problems within the education system rather than an inherent flaw. The film suggests that progress is possible through cultural and intellectual self-reliance, similar to the approach taken by China. Ewunetu, in a soliloquy on the street where he lives, said:

Walking backward, ha! ... Let's step aside for the citizens, and give them the place, the position. Ah, citizens! (Fake laughter). You may laugh at it today, but tomorrow, you'll cry. You will speak it as a prophecy. Yes, prophesy! Today, the Europeans boast of building Dubai, but tomorrow, the sons of China will say, 'Look at Ethiopia! See how our ancestors built Ethiopia.' They will make you weep with pride for what they accomplished. If the minds that created Axum and Lalibela were alive today, they would be ridiculed, insulted, and condemned. Walking backward. (Mahimud 2019)

The excerpt reflects Ethiopia's architectural stagnation and shame experienced by the current generation. It highlights Ethiopians to draw inspiration from China's journey of achievements. It contrasts China's progress with Ethiopia's decline, portraying Ethiopia as a once thriving nation now struggling with hindrances. Ewunetu, speaking to himself on his street, said in a soliloquy, 'The modern Ethiopian education system produces many bottles with big stomachs

and necks, but no brains.’ The film criticizes the impact of adopting modern systems influenced by external powers and the lingering colonial legacy in education. Besides, it highlights the gap between the appearance of progress and the substance of meaningful intellectual development.

*Wedde Huala* highlights numerous cases of abuse at Ethiopian universities, including sexual harassment of female students, insincere research initiatives, misuse of funding, administrative problems, and the neglect of indigenous knowledge. The film addresses the lack of practical knowledge in the Ethiopian higher education system. It also highlights the dangers of excessive borrowing of words from foreign languages. Furthermore, it critiques the inadequate use of ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church classical manuscripts for local problems (Mahimud 2019).

The film presents China as a model of self-reliance and growth, showcasing its ability to leverage its own resources and innovations. In contrast, Ethiopia struggles with the quest for modernization due to its dependence on imported technology and goods, despite having local alternatives available. The film also highlights how the preference for foreign medicine over Indigenous practices perpetuates a colonial legacy that marginalizes local knowledge, aligning with Spivak’s concerns about subaltern voices. Moreover, Ethiopia’s reliance on food aid, as depicted in *Wedde Huala*, reinforces Hall’s (1997) idea of painting the global South as perpetually needy. The film further illustrates Ethiopia’s importation of weapons for its civil conflict, emphasizing the enduring effects of neo-colonial structures that compel dependence on external forces for security.

Overall, *Jemari Leba*, *Wedde Huala*, and *Enena Chu* view China as a source of a new culture for Ethiopia’s modernization, offering an alternative perspective on development. The works challenge existing knowledge production processes in Ethiopia, emphasizing the importance of indigenous knowledge. They underscore the need for a decolonized approach to development that honors indigenous knowledge systems and practical expertise. The creative works call for a re-evaluation of the current development framework. They emphasize the potential for progress through indigenous knowledge and self-exploration.

#### 4. Criticism of Chinese Investment Influence

Kebebew Geda, a well-known Ethiopian comedian, used his comedic platform to criticize China’s investment influence in Ethiopia. He rose to prominence in Addis Ababa in the early 1990s, where he used humour to address social, economic, and political issues. Despite touring the Arab world, Europe, and North America, he never travelled to China. Earlier in his career, he presented modern and folk dances with the Ethiopian National Theatre. Currently living in the United States, Kebebew is no longer well-known in the Ethiopian entertainment scene. During the 2015 Ethiopia Day celebrations in Dallas, he criticized Ethiopia for being a passive recipient of Chinese influence. He used humour to

address the socio-political implications of the Chinese investment presence in Ethiopia (Kebebew 2015). Kebebew humorously pointed out:

China is rising in Ethiopia, and alongside its ascent, a childbearing Chinese feature grows up here. The reasons for their presence—whether to build roads or shape the future through their children—remain unclear. Yet, everywhere you look, China’s influence is evident. (Kebebew 2015)

The excerpt highlights the potential for cross-cultural human relations. It also points to China’s growing human relationship influence in Ethiopia, as seen in children who resemble Chinese. The reference to children resembling Chinese individuals symbolizes cultural mixing. However, it also raises the question of whether this reinforces or complicates stereotypes. The comedian’s scepticism about this influence highlights the importance of examining cultural exchange. This scrutiny is essential for understanding its impact on national identity (Kebebew 2015). The comedy captures the dynamics of culture in a globalized context and highlights the cross-cultural interactions and their impact.

The comedian also critiques Chinese cuisine based on his Christian religious culinary traditions. He highlights the practice of eating dogs, which contrasts with Ethiopian norms. This culinary portrayal risks reinforcing stereotypes about Chinese food culture and perpetuating exotic views of the ‘other’ (Said 1977). The comedian portrays the tensions between local food culture and Chinese food customs and reflects concerns about maintaining cultural integrity in a globalized world. However, the comedian’s approach simplifies Chinese culinary practices, reducing them to a single negative stereotype and obscuring the diversity of Chinese culture (Kebebew 2015). Comedians have to recognize diversity and speak out against discrimination. As Kebebew joked:

Since that time, whenever dogs spot a Chinese person from afar, they seem to whisper among themselves, ah, a Chinese man approaches, where can we flee? And if a restless dog is ever cursed, his fate is sealed—he will find himself at the mercy of the Chinese the moment he pours the dough. (Kebebew 2015)

In Korea and China, dogs are traditionally considered a delicacy—a notion I once thought was just a rumour. However, with workers from these countries arriving in Addis Ababa for the ring road construction, the truth is clear: the number of dogs in our neighbourhood diminishes daily. By day, they labour on the roads; by night, they quietly take the dogs away. (Kebebew 2015)

In the extract below, an Ethiopian man encounters a Chinese martial artist and becomes anxious about being attacked. He looks for a way to escape before any confrontation occurs. The comedy derives much of its humour from the Ethiopian man’s tone and reactions. The humour eases tension and fosters positivity for listeners. As Bhabha (2012) observes, new meanings emerge during moments of cultural encounter. In addition, humour serves as a coping strategy that exposes human vulnerabilities and builds resilience during difficult times. As Spivak (1988) suggests, the marginalized often reveal strategies of survival and

resistance. Similarly, the comedy portrays the Ethiopian man searching for a way to survive. As Hall (1997) points out, meanings are not fixed but are constantly in flux depending on the cultural context. The comedian reinforces negative stereotypes about China. In the words of Kebebew:

Oh, my God ... It seems China is approaching me for a confrontation. Well, let him come. Karate is his expertise, a skill he's mastered. But I know the tactic. If he says, 'Ya,' I'll simply respond, 'Ja,' and then make my escape. (Kebebew 2015)

The Chinese have been digging everywhere after being asked to build roads. Recently, people no longer say 'Ethiopia's mountains' in public, but 'Ethiopia's wells'. (Kebebew 2015)

The extract 'The Chinese have been digging everywhere after being asked to build roads' implies a pervasive Chinese presence blending work with romantic relationships. It romanticizes their commitment as both industrious and affectionate (Kebebew 2015). The shift from 'Ethiopia's mountains' to 'Ethiopia's wells' reflects stereotypes of the 'Orient' as essential to development and relationships. Furthermore, as Shinn (2013) points out, the presence of Chinese labourers in Ethiopia reflects the dynamics of Ethiopia's dependency and its need for cooperation in the new global order. The excerpt shows how narratives about infrastructure and relationships can oversimplify the Chinese' diverse experiences. This tendency reduces the Chinese experience in Ethiopia to a one-dimensional story.

Similarly, Bereket Belayneh's play *Eyayu Fungus* takes a critical look at China's involvement in Ethiopia. The main character Eyayu symbolizes Ethiopian teachers moving from the countryside to the city. The play highlights the risks of blind faith in foreign investment. It emphasizes the need to carefully assess the safety and potential consequences of foreign projects. The play also addresses the concept of corporate social responsibility (Bereket 2019). The playwright echoes that foreign investment may exacerbate the vulnerability of local communities. The play urges a critical view on construction safety and foreign technology, encouraging caution. Bereket said:

What if they have indicated a security risk in the hole they have dug? It's wise, after all, to question and scrutinize China's actions. Should we merely laugh at the sight of their eyes or nose? For at night, they might reopen that hole and knock out the teeth of the man who laughed. And what does that translate to in Chinese? Perhaps it means 'a trap for the unwary!' (Bereket 2019)

They enter the bedroom and drive the car as if it were a jet plane. But really, how can we place our trust in China? They speak to us in words like '*Chummanchi*.' Did they even bother to have it translated? They may say, 'We began with a jet, but now we have turned it into a truck.' And now, any teenager can handle it with ease. (Bereket 2019)

The above excerpt highlights the playwright's concerns about the dangers of blindly engaging in foreign technology. It emphasizes the risks of not being fully aware of their potential consequences. The remark 'We began with a jet,

but now we have turned it into a truck' serves as a criticism of the Chinese manufacturing industry and highlights the discrepancy between the original promises and the actual deliverables (Bereket 2019).

The excerpt below suggests Ethiopia is increasingly becoming a market for external interests. This shift reflects neocolonial tendencies, where the government prioritizes profit over essential services. As a result, the citizens face systemic disadvantages (Bereket 2019). The play criticizes a leadership that overlooks the needs of its citizens. It stresses the importance of responsible investment and policies that prioritize citizen well-being over profit. It advocates for careful consideration of how economic interactions influence local conditions (Bereket 2019). The play calls for scrutiny and accountability in foreign collaborations to ensure fair benefits for all. Bereket said:

Ethiopia has become a marketplace for others, a country where our government, like a shopkeeper, prioritizes profit over progress. Rather than illuminating your home with electricity, it would rather sell you a candle imported from China, simply because it yields a higher profit. (Bereket 2019)

The above quote criticizes the Ethiopian government's economic development strategy, which prioritizes consumption over production. It positions the country primarily as a buyer of foreign goods. Bereket's statement 'Our government like a shopkeeper' indicates a profit-oriented focus that neglects the needs of citizens and reflects a postcolonial critique of a leadership that encourages dependence on foreign companies. This reflects Spivak's (1988) observation that the leadership often suppresses the subaltern's voice. This leadership fosters dependence on external forces rather than empowering local systems. In addition, Bereket's statement that the government 'would rather sell you a candle imported from China than illuminate your home with electricity' highlights a troubling preference for immediate profits over macroeconomic stability strategies. This resonates with how economic policies can perpetuate inequalities instead of fostering self-reliance (Bereket 2019).

## 5. Sources of the Representations

The depictions of China in Ethiopian creative works are shaped by various social, political, economic, and cultural factors and individual perspectives. An important source for a positive portrayal, as presented in Abdu (2010) and Fisseha (2012), is infrastructure development and economic partnerships. Driessen (2020) also argues that Ethiopia's Chinese-supported infrastructure such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, industrial parks, roads, hospitals, schools, airports, museums, libraries, and buildings have brought Ethiopia's modernization, progress, and economic growth. Similarly, Skjerdal and Gusu (2016) point out that Chinese infrastructure achievements in Ethiopia inspire artists to portray China positively. Afrobarometer Round 6 (2016) discusses the role of the Belt and

Road Initiative in improving China's image in Ethiopian creative works. Cultural exchange and diplomacy, as Fisseha (2012) notes, promote positive representations, while South-South solidarity and postcolonial alternatives further contribute to this positive portrayal. In *Jemari Leba*, China is portrayed as a partner that offers an alternative to Western development models (Abdissa 2018). In addition, Ethiopia's media and state narratives influence positive representations. Hall (1997) explains, 'Representation is the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged among members of a culture.' This exchange leads to representations that emphasize cooperation and mutual respect.

Despite positive portrayals, Ethiopian creative works also show negative depictions of China. One source of criticism is economic and technological dependence. In Kebebew's comedy and Bereket's play, Ethiopia's dependence on Chinese investment, technology, and the market is portrayed as a form of negative representation (Bereket 2019; Kebebew 2015). Kebebew's satirical comedies and Bereket's social commentaries emphasize concerns about duties, responsibilities, and self-reliance. Bhabha (2012) explains this dynamic through his concept of 'mimicry', where the adoption of foreign models can lead to dependency rather than development. Cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes, as seen in Kebebew's comedy, contribute to negative portrayals. Differences in language, customs, and working practices also lead to misunderstandings and tensions (Kebebew 2015). The comedian criticizes cultural clashes and stereotypes. As Hall (1997) explains, 'Representations are shaped by cultural codes' which can reinforce prejudices and misperceptions.

On the whole, the portrayal of China in Ethiopian creative works reflects both admiration and criticism through binary oppositions, ambivalences, and hybrid narratives. Bhabha (2012) describes such representations as 'ambivalence' in which contradictory emotions coexist, highlighting the tension between dependency and opportunity. Ethiopian creative works draw from diverse sources to portray China, reflecting cultural interactions and changing perceptions. This representation often fluctuates between celebratory and critical tones, shaped by Ethiopia's socio-political context and its evolving relationship with China.

## 6. Conclusions

This article examines how China is portrayed in six Ethiopian creative works across various genres, including song, novel, comedy, film, and theatre. The findings suggest that most of these works portray China positively, viewing it as a significant contributor to Ethiopia's economic development. China is mainly depicted as playing a central role in infrastructure development, investment, trade, technology transfer, capacity building, and industrialization. These works highlight China's positive influence on Ethiopian work ethics. They emphasize China's values such as diligence, time management, communication skills, efficiency, and productivity. However, some of the creative works offer a critical

perspective, addressing concerns over Ethiopia's growing dependence on Chinese technology, and construction projects.

The above finding aligns with Li (2021), who states that various social groups in Ethiopia, including the elite, politicians, middle class, and ordinary citizens, have differing perceptions of China. Orientalism theory suggests that cultural representations are often shaped by bias and stereotypes (Said 1977, 40). The meaning of these depictions is not fixed but is continuously negotiated through media and cultural products. Hall (1997, 10) argues, 'meaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the passage through representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting with context, usage, and historical circumstances. It is therefore never finally fixed.' As Ethiopia's relationship with China deepens in social, political, economic, and cultural areas, the portrayal of China in Ethiopian creative works is expected to change.

The article concludes that Ethiopian creative works are reimagining China in new ways. This highlights Ethiopian artists' agency in shaping their cultural discourse. Spivak (1988) pointed out, 'Resistance is not simply the rejection of the dominant narrative; it is the creation of new possibilities for agency and representation.' The artists' imagination goes beyond just opposing the dominant narrative. They develop their forms of self-expression and representation. Indeed, the lack of qualitative research, such as interviews with Ethiopian artists, limits the study's understanding of cultural production. A multidisciplinary approach incorporating cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology could provide richer insights into the portrayal of China in Ethiopian creative works. In addition, cultural products such as literature, films and art, media, academic journals, cultural exchange programmes, opinion polls, government reports and policy papers, international conferences, and think tanks play a crucial role in reflecting and shaping perceptions of other countries. Thus, researchers should explore these sources for future insights into image analysis and its effects on Ethiopia-China relations in a globalized context.

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