DECONSTRUCTING GLOBAL RHETORICS OF “MUTUALITY” AND “PROGRESS” SURROUNDING CHINESE DEVELOPMENT IN JAMAICA

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Abstract: Much of the research on Chinese development initiatives in the Global South focuses on macro-economic transactions between the China, multinational companies, and the receiving state, but has not appropriately explored how these engagements come to bear in the on-the-ground engagement between Chinese nationals and local communities. Borrowing from Mohan and Lamperts resituating Africans as agentive in Sino-African relations, In this paper I attune my analysis to the everyday ways in which Jamaicans rhetoricize and engage with Chinese nationals and sponsored projects in Jamaica as a method of evaluating the divergent global discourse surrounding Chinese development strategies. I situate my analysis within 3 sites within Kingston, Jamaica: construction projects, low income marketplaces, and environmental locations. I argue that these sites see productive spaces of public memory in which conceptions about power, legacies of colonialism, and Sino-Jamaican relationships/South-South relationships are engaged through engagements with rhetorics of mutuality and progress.

NOTE: This is a working paper. Some elements are in progress and all are subject to change.

Introduction
Since its colonial beginnings, Caribbean has served as a nexus for the vast movements of people and ideologies that flow across Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993). Because of its geographic and human diversity the Caribbean and its diaspora has been oft referred to as a “master symbol”—a laboratory of sorts in which understandings of race, culture, demography, and ideology have been explored, examined, and revised (Khan 2001, Slocum and Thomas 2003). In the past decades, increased investment from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) has destabilized the West’s historically hegemonic hold of the region. In response, political scientists, economists, policy practitioners, and anthropologists have scrambled to hypothesize how this economic shift may affect “America’s backyard.”

Dominant analysis of these projects has focused on economic flows and geopolitical battles, leaving it’s distinct rhetorical element understudied. In this paper I pair ethnographic, media, and discourse analysis to examine both global and local discursive framings Chinese
economic and infrastructure development within the LAC region. In the first section, I outline the importance of the LAC region as a strategic site for globalization and development analysis given its colonial history. Building upon the work of Dehart (2018), I tease out the ways in which China and the United States have retooled this history to differentially frame PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as dangerous or liberatory.

I then move my analysis to the ground, tracing the ways this global cosmopolitan rhetoric is operationalized by local actors to reconcile PRC projects in Kingston as well the ways it is used against them. I analyze the mythos and rumors within Chinese construction sites, market places, and ports to understand the ways in which local Afro-Jamaicans utilize cosmopolitan and politicized language to center historic traumas, claim ownership, and push back against perceived oppression/neo-liberalism. I then shift my lens to the Chinese workers that remain at the center of this rhetoric. I note that that while their work is at the core of this political language, language itself erases their bodies as well as experiences of physical and economic precarity.

Decoding China in the Caribbean

Beginning in 2001, Chinese investment in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region has boomed with bilateral trade growing to $306 billion USD in 2018 (25 times more than its volume in 1999), and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) becoming the primary trade partner for countries like Brazil, Chile and Peru (Myers and Wise 2017, Zhang 2019). In Jamaica alone, PRC foreign direct investment (FDI) skyrocketed from $20,000 USD in 2006 to $839 million USD in 2017 (Bernal 2017, Jamaican Information Service 2018, Minto 2019). Much of this money has been used to fund road infrastructure projects, urban revitalization, and the development of Jamaica’s natural resource sector in preparation for the country to be a part of
China’s emerging trade network (Minto 2019). Chinese nationals now account for the majority of immigration into the country (International Organization for Migration 2018). As a result of the PRC’s extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) –the PRC’s re-imagination of the silk route that spans Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America—into the LAC region in 2018, PRC-LAC relations are projected to grow exponentially in the future (Meyers 2018, Zhang 2019).

Across the country Jamaica, Chinese roadway projects have emerged in both rural and cosmopolitan areas, signaling developmental change. In downtown Kingston, one now can hear the murmurings of Mandarin and Cantonese intermingling with urban cacophony of patois, motor vehicles, and “bad words” as shops downtown have become increasingly run Chinese nationals, who are able to barter connections in China and strong ethnic networks to provide goods at lower prices than their Afro-Jamaican competitors. Their emergence in downtown has signaled an increase access to global goods while at the same time, signaling to some, the decline of the local economy. Even more recently, gleaming metropolitan buildings emerged, and the scaffolding of “progress” yet to come, powered by ever growing numbers of Chinese-operated construction companies. While for Jamaica’s elite these development projects have signaled “progress,” for the working and business class they the dispossession of the land and wholesale markets that they depend on for subsistence.

China’s emergence in the LAC region has steadily begun to capture the attention of the West, from academic scholars to policy think tanks; one of the most prolific being the Inter-American Dialogue’s Asia & Latin America Program. Named in the top 2% of US think tanks, Inter-American Dialogue writes collects data and conducts research on issues within Latin America and the Caribbean (the Asia & Latin America Program maintains a China-Latin America Finance Database, in which they detail the $137 billion USD China has invested in the
Members also publish pertinent findings in policy papers, articles, and blog posts (which can be found on the Inter-American Dialogues website). In an article written by Margaret Myers, the director of the Asia & Latin America program, Myers outlines the ways in which China’s engagement in the LAC region as serves as a potential threat to local democracy. To this end Myers writes

“Democracy is also vulnerable, as we’ve seen, to China’s particular approach to overseas engagement. Elsewhere in Latin America, the possibility of no-strings-attached Chinese financing and investment has led some governments to relieve themselves of the burdensome regulations and democratic oversight generally encouraged in the West and required by many international financial institutions. Decisions to erode existing standards are made by recipient governments, of course, and not by Beijing. But these decisions are often made with tacit support from China, which defers to the interests of host governments. And the trade-offs of rapid, non-transparent deal-making are numerous, ranging from heightened corruption and labor problems to steep environmental costs” (Myers 2020).

Mutuality vs. Hegemony: Unpacking Rhetorical Approaches to Development in Latin America and the Caribbean

Myer’s causal connection between LAC policies and Western democracy is by no means a new one. Anthropologists and historians have long recognized the importance of the Caribbean as a site through which Western states power has been cemented through colonial and neo-colonial projects (Khan 2001, Mintz 1965, Said 1978, Khan 2001, Trouillot 2003) as well as the trauma those projects have caused to the nations and people within these regions leaving them seemingly forever connected. This history—from the horror of colonialism and slavery to modern-day neoliberalism by the hand of entities like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—has burdened countries within the LAC region with staggering debt, fractured economies, a skepticism of foreign aid (and what contingencies may be embedded within it).

However, while Myers acknowledges the burden Western aid has historically laden on countries in the LAC region, she positions the region itself ultimately as a safeguard of
democracy and “liberal” values. In her description, China reads as a cunning puppeteer, leading LAC countries to not only their own demise but the demise of the West with them. A demise, which they could be saved from by adhering to American democratic principles despite their historically oppressive conditions. Myer’s hammers this idea of decay, writing, “It is worth noting… that when a [Latin American or Caribbean] country’s democratic fundamentals are fragile, enhanced engagement with China, even in pursuit of new economic opportunity or inspiration, as Yang encourages, has at times risked a decline in the quality of that country’s democracy” (Myers 2020).

The dichotomy between framings of Chinese development as perilous or progressive have become increasingly emergent in global discourse surrounding Chinese development strategies—namely the projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In “Remodeling the Global Development Landscape: The China Model and South-South Cooperation in Latin America,” Monica Dehart exposit on the ways in which the United States have PRC have used rhetorical strategies as a key tactic in their battle for the region. In briefs and papers American politicians and scholars have tactically terms such as China Model and the Beijing Consensus to frame China as an opportunistic economic authoritarian whose actions may have disastrous implications for the “liberal world order.” Recognizing the suspicion that developing countries with histories of colonialism may have towards Chinese aid, the PRC conversely operationalized rhetoric that assures their commitment the PRC’s five principles of peaceful coexistence; namely: “mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence” and describes itself as
producing a “harmonious world order based on nation-state sovereignty and partnerships with mutual benefits” (DeHart 2012).

This duality can be seen in Jamaica. In the year preceding Jamaica’s adoption of the BRI, PRC officials often described this mutuality as a result of the PRC’s technical status as a developing nation despite their wealth, market share, and geopolitical power. In this way they remain interconnected to developing nations across the world despite both geographic, political, and economic distance. At an address at the renaming of the North South Highway into the “Edward Seaga (a former Prime minister) Highway,” Chinese Ambassador to Jamaica Tian Qi noted:

Though China and Jamaica are 14,000 kilometers far away, our interests and future are interconnected. We enjoy the dual-partnership of "Belt and Road" initiative and production capacity cooperation in accordance with the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. The journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step. Our partnership has achieved early harvest such as Edward Seaga Highway and JISCO Alpart Alumina Plant, etc. When we look down from the peak of Blue Mountain, the whole island comes into view. At the crucial period of the development of Jamaican economy and our friendly cooperation for mutual benefit, it’s necessary to aim high and look far.

In this excerpt from his speech concepts of mutuality, partnership and friendships are highly stressed. Throughout the year, Ambassador Qi stressed this message of mutuality in all of his speeches, from cultural association banquets to state dinners with the Prime Minister. His message was clear. China is diametrically different from other nations that have subordinated Jamaica in the past. They are not colonizers, they are partners.

Principles of mutuality and respect are not localized only to PRC officials, but are also consistent in the rhetoric independent Chinese businesses in Jamaica. While not officially connected to the PRC or PRC sponsored development projects, independent Chinese SME’s

1 Author’s emphasis
(small-to-medium-sized-enterprises) benefit from connections to globalized forms of Chinese power that have been fostered by the “China Boom” (Siu 2005, Green and Liu 2017, Pinheiro-Machado 2018). As much of China’s aid is aggregated around infrastructure projects, this connection is especially advantageous for Chinese-owned construction companies. Similar to Chinese bureaucratic messaging, in promotional documents, an independent Chinese firm I worked with described their core values as “teamwork,” “integrity,” “commitment,” and “mutual respect” (personal communication, 2018). This company further positioned their own projects as an extension of PRC works on the island by describing their equipment and speed as part of the “Chinese advantages.”

However, not all agree with this perception of China and its subsidiaries as equal partners. American politicians from across the aisle have been especially critical of Chinese expansion in the developing world, despite a difference in tactics. In her capacity as Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton warned audiences at the Forum on Aid to “Be wary of donors who are more interested in extracting your resources than in building your capacity” (Dehart 2012). In the Great Decision’s documentary on China’s Road in Latin America,” U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is shown deploying a similar message to participants at the APEC CEO Summit (which targets leaders in the Asia-Pacific) “To all the nations across this wider region and the world, do not accept foreign debt that could compromise your sovereignty. “Though the documentary makes it clear that partisan usage of rhetoric around the Monroe doctrine was different, their messaging is consistent: Do not trust China.

In Jamaica, one of the most impactful presenters of this message was President Barack Obama. As America’s first Black President, Barack Obama occupies a very important role for Jamaicans, who have historically maintained close connections to concepts of blackness within
the African diaspora. Thus, it is unsurprising President Obama’s word held a lot of weight for many Jamaicans. From taxicab drivers to local bureaucrats, respondents frequently brought up President Obama’s warning to Jamaica during a monumental visit in 2015. One respondent reflected

And I can remember --I was listening to Obama when he was in Jamaica, up by UWI there, and he said clearly- As long as the Chinese are here, they’ll develop your infrastructure and everything is okay, but don’t go any further. And I thought that was something that was very telling. A lot of people don’t pick up on that because for some reason they don’t hear it. So. I think they have an agenda. I cannot pinpoint everything. But I think its just to encompass the United States of America, yeah. If you look at their location, it's very strategic.

Here Obama’s warning does not only inform the respondent but provides him the language to structure his own reticence to China’s motives in Jamaica.

Through these examples we see that in addition to monetary flows, rhetorical strategies have become an integral part of China’s trade strategies as well as the strategies of countries like the United States to disrupt Chinese power. However, while the positioning of China as an authoritarian threat to Western liberalism may easily accepted by American constituents, how do they received on the ground by post-colonial citizens for whom the memory of colonialism has not been erased? In the next three sections I explore rhetoric surrounding 3 Chinese development spaces in Kingston, Jamaica: a historic marketplace, a port city, and two Chinese run-construction sites.

The Geographic Afterlife of Aid: The Experience of Low-Income Communities in Development Zones

Home to a third of Kingston’s primarily low-income population, downtown Kingston is primarily a wholesale district, distributing goods that have been purchased in bulk (Carnegie 2014). On weekdays the streets of downtown are packed with cacophony of shoppers, cars,
motorcyclists, higglers\textsuperscript{2}, armored security guards, chickens, food, and debris. Lines of small mostly Chinese owned cement wholesale shops and haberdashery’s line the streets filled with throngs of shoppers who peer through the iron windows to request packs of cigarettes, oil, tin mackerel, and bits of cheese.

The first iteration of this downtown was constructed in the wake of the political turmoil and spatial restructuring that occurred during the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. While many point to the elites rejection of the nationalist policies and economic turmoil during the Manley era as the impetus for the mass exodus of Jamaica’s middle and upper classes, in “How Kingston was Wounded,” Robotham highlights several factors that led to the rupturing of Kingston around the spatial markers of uptown and downtown. Key to Robotham’s argument was, the political weaponizing of low income “garrison” communities located downtown in the late 1930’s (and on) , the creation of subsidized residential areas for the rising middle class outside of the downtown region in the late 1950’s, and the development of the New Kingston commercial region in the 1960’s (2003).

Coupled with the industrialist boom after independence, the creation of ‘cosmopolitan’ residential and commercial areas distinct from downtown fed middle class imaginaries of Western modernity. The clock at Half Way Tree became (and remains) a physical indicator of mobility as people left in droves to live ‘above the clock’ (Robotham 2013). By the time the elite rejected the Manley’s socialist policies in the 70’s, the division between uptown/downtown was already secure. Middle class Jamaicans and Chinese Jamaican merchants who did not flee abroad moved to these well-resourced areas and “secure” areas north of Half Way Tree greater

\textsuperscript{2} Street vendors that are predominantly lower class Afro-Jamaican women (Brown-Glaude 2011)
facilitating the cavernous gap between wealthy and impoverished Jamaicans both spatially as well as financially.

Areas such as Barbican, Manor Park, and New Kingston flourished with middle class investment, sprouting Western-style strip malls, supermarkets, cafes, and boutiques that serviced the appetites of Jamaica’s petite bourgeoisie. With these amenities, Jamaica’s elite, who are largely dependent on private automotive travel, no longer had any need or impetus to engage with the working-class citizens downtown, further stripping it of their economic resources (Carnegie). As a result of decades of this physical and imaginative spatial fracturing downtown Kingston became reconstructed by elites as a “place of terminal decay” and danger (Robotham 2003, Carnegie 2017). The image of low-income garrison communities produced by the elite suggest of a Kingston full abject poverty, violence, terror, and fear. This is the image of Kingston that is frequently invoked in press, scholarly, news media--perilously paralleling the image of Jamaica as a tourist paradise.

While encapsulated by downtown Kingston, the image of a poverty and decay is not one localized to the downtown area. exists peppered in low-income garrison communities throughout the city, threatening the elite Western topography built by Jamaica’s nouveau riche. PRC sponsored projects have serve effectively as extensions this “revitalization” effort, producing gleaming skyscrapers, the infrastructure for 5G internet, the building of Jamaica’s first overpass, and perfectly paved roadways.

While these efforts have imaginatively functioned as a part of the larger vision of win-win development between the PRC and Jamaica, conceptions of this “progress” differ between the Jamaican and elite and the low income locals who make up the majority of the country. One of the most visible examples of this divergence is the demolition of the Constant Spring Plaza.
Constant Spring Plaza Case Study

When I moved into the upper-class neighborhood of Manor Park in 2018, one of the first things I noticed was the disjuncture between the coffee shops, nail salons, grocery stores, and wine bars of the heavily guarded and glossy Manor Park Plaza and the yellow cinderblock market place across the street. In the brightly Select Grocers I could find perfectly shaped fruit which were regularly refreshed by workers in starched uniforms. However, if I crossed the street (often barely avoiding the constant onslaught of traffic) I found a drastically different environment. Middle aged and older vendor women sat staggered at stations in the cavernous unlight cement room, selling local mango’s, tomato’s, and root vegetables (colloquially known as “ground provisions”). Rather than imported fruit, these women’s stands often reflected the local agricultural climate, sometimes sparse and other times brimming with fresh produce. The market was the center of an informal economy that provided for the low income come community directly behind it as well as those who cycled through it on their daily commute to and from “town.” On one corner a man carved pineapple for hungry commuters, while behind a vehicle repair shop patched tires for “cheap.” At night one could find a smokey jerk stand outside offering chicken and hard dough bread.

As the year continued however, it grew increasingly clear that the market was in danger of extinction. Contracted by the Jamaican government the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) has been slowly expanding the oft busy Constant Spring road that connected residents of Manor parks and the surrounding hills to Kingston’s central commercial district, Half-Way Tree. As part of this road widening project, construction workers demolished sidewalks and

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3A local reference to Kingston
business parking lots that encroached on government property. Many of these spaces once held informal businesses that catered to low income Jamaicans and travelers on local transportation. Rather than the bourgeois home renovation companies and high-end plaza’s on Constant Spring road, it was often the higgler stands selling fruit and the dive bars that were eliminated to create space. To create access for Kingston’s cosmopolitan future. And the end of the road, it was the Constant Spring Market that served as the final victim of this expansion.

Supported by local activists the vendors of Constant Spring Market pushed back. The woman protested the demolition of the market outside its door and successfully requested court injunctions to bar the Kingston and St. Andrew Municipal Corporation (KSAMC) from demolishing the historic site. For both the women who sold and the market and the neighboring low-income communities this decision was devastating. Especially as, while the women were offered compensation to move to other areas, there would be no plan for the market’s replacement (Radio News Jamaica 2019). After two years of battle, these injunctions were eventually lifted, making way for demolition (Jamaica Gleaner 2019).

Media discussion of the impending demolition was often situated in terms of the people versus progress. In the Jamaica Observer article, “Constant Spring Market: A case for public education” an uncited author describes their conflicting feeling about the market demolition writing:

But, as we listened to the painful cry of the Constant Spring Market vendors, we feel great empathy, not because anything evil was being done to them, but because of the clear lack of understanding among them that such improvements must come and that no one should expect to remain in one place forever.

For this author, their feelings of empathy come not from the displacement of workers from a historic market or the loss that gentrification often brings to communities but the governments inability to educate it’s low income masses that their sacrifice is necessary for Jamaica’s
progress. For the author, it is a given that “the people have to be uprooted in the name of this progress” and must be educated in order to “understand the new realities and the futility of their action to stop the progress” (Observer 2019).

But progress for whom? As I watched the sprawling plaza across the street remain mostly unaffected by these changes, it was clear that this “progress” was classed, opening up new opportunities for consumption for Manor Parks upper-class population at the expense of others. Ironically, it seemed that the vendor women well understood the factors inherent in this so-called progress. In an article in Loop news (2019) a “cook shop” owner named Miss Dell stated:

We nuh want the Government come just push things down we throat and come offer we no hundred thousand (dollar). How far that can go? We know progress have to go on, but is just how them deal with we without compassion.

In her response Miss Del highlights the reality that not only is $100,000JMD ($687 USD) that the government was offering the women was little in the way of building back their livelihood, but that it undergirded a lack of compassion that the state had for the welfare of it’s most vulnerable citizens. It highlighted the reality that they –who most reflected the nation as a whole –were not being constructed as part of Jamaica’s burgeoning imaginaries of “progress.”

The dichotomy in language about the development projects between the state (and bourgeoisie) and low-income Jamaican’s was consistent across multiple projects proposed in Jamaica. In addition to language about compassion and belonging, low income Jamaicans also utilized savvy concepts such as environmental conservation to reflect feelings of governmental abandonment and Chinese imperialism.
"When Chiney Start Dredge": Deployment of Environmental Rhetoric in Urban Anti-Development Struggles

In 2013, CHEC proposed purchasing two small islands to build a Transshipment Hub project. The islands in question (comprised of Great Goat Island and Little Goat Island) are small islands that are a part of an archipelago off of the coast of Old Harbour Bay in St. Catherine Parish, Jamaica (Luton 2013). This proposal was met with immediate backlash. Diasporic academics wrote letters cautioning Prime Minister Portia Lee Simpson about the oversight it would be to sell Jamaican land. Several “Save Goat Island” campaigns were created, positioning the islands as cultural heritage sites as well as homes to many endangered species. Many urged for the protection of the islands and called for their development as ecotourism sites, in spite of failed past attempts in the past and questions about whether there are actually any endangered species on the island (an unnamed private sector leader remarked that “the only sign of life on Greater Goat island were two ants that bit him” (Hibbert 2014)). However, more interesting than the rhetoric constructed by academics, or environmental groups, whose jobs are in part to construct these types of arguments, was the ways in which these were co-opted by the public in order to push back to what I claim they regard as neo-colonialism as well as the negotiations between the “mediator” group, or the Jamaican government and the arbiter of access (or China).

The Jamaican news program All Angles profiled locals, environmentalists, and politicians about their perspectives on the project (All Angles, August 28, 2014) In this episode a female fish vendor described her perspective on the sale:

The idea is a no no because we – we vendahs – not only vendahs. We depend on de fishermen out dere. They ave a – right now dey ave a place out dere dat dey fence round’ dat is de fish sanctuary dat dey say fisha’man kyan fen im- fishin round dere, an if dey do this like de government talkin’ bout Goat Island (. )they
gonna take ovah Goat Island an give it to Chiney is a no no because we nah see the investment. Right now fisha’man in Old Harbour Bay we a get a knock. We a get a knock because we cant go out an fish if we hav a line an Goat Island a out dere out fi we.

No::: we no see no job. Cuz out here se take way from we also. Not only Goat Island alone ya kno. Because de Chiney dem wan big up place out here fi go ova an do dem business. So right now we are a small seculars. If we don’t come an demonstrate an talk bout our rights we ah get knock by it….. And we a tell de Prime Minister an say dis is a no no [[waves hands in circular motion]]. Goat Island cyant take way from we. A- Dis generation from we a pickney till, now an Goat Island a take way from we. No- our- our children wont know bout Goat Island cuz one Chiney a tek it ovah. We no whan dat innah OUR country.

The vendor starts by situating her argument in a we vs. them binary that highlight panics around Chinese foreignness. She uses “we” to indicate solidarity and equality: we vendors depend on the fishermen to survive but the government is endangering our livelihoods (the knock) by giving our island away to them, the Chinese companies (it helps that her interview is done at Old Harbour Bay which creates a visual connection to the space she is trying to protect).

She then expands this narrative by stating that this project will not bring jobs (34:30- we no see no job. Cuz out here take way from we also) and thus invoking panics about job security and low employment rates (a hot button issue in Jamaica).

Her narrative keenly calls attention to the ways in which the Jamaican government has chosen to barter Jamaican land as a way of ensuring access to future resources. While this exchange is supposed to ensure future access for the Jamaican people. she critiques this structure by claiming that not only will Jamaican people “not see the investment” but also will also be disenfranchised through this process (the knock). She goes as far as to situate this as an infringement to their rights as citizens (34:30 If we don’t come an demonstrate an talk about our rights, we ah get knock by it…Goat Islant cyant take way from we).
Here, Jamaican land rights serves as both a practical and metaphorical representation of the Jamaican people noting that Goat Island is home to the people who have “never leave here gon no where” and the place where three generations of her family were raised. She talks about her children who she raised in Old Harbour Bay as a single parent. She constructs them as “good children” who have, or will go to college and do not have criminal records, ending with the question “Wha gonna happen to the generation a we gon come up?” By tying Old Harbour Bay to the idea of the family unit, she also ties the development projects to the destruction of the Jamaican family. In this context, rather than a project that could potentially benefit Jamaica’s development, she recontextualizes the Goat Island deal as not only an abandonment of the welfare of Jamaican people but as willful endangerment of Jamaica’s cultural heritage. Finally, she indites the Jamaican state of facilitating Chinese wealth to the detriment of Jamaicans (“Chinese dem wan big up de place out here fi go ova and do dem business”).

This move is critical, given that Jamaica is a country that has been historically disenfranchised by foreign bodies the World Bank, IMF, colonialism, etc. One of the most recent cases was the Jamaica Export Zone Act. In the mid 80’s-90’s Jamaica created free trade zones in the hopes of creating more jobs and reviving the economy. In order to incentivize big business to build assembly factories on the island, these zones offered US companies incentives such as freedom from “paring corporate income taxes, import duties, import and export licensing and from foreign exchange restrictions” as well as enforcement of many labor laws (Cowen 171) (Wyss and White 2004). Due to the lack of labor regulations in these free trade zones, those hired by companies in the free trade zones were often paid meager wages and overworked. Later, they were replaced skilled Asian workers only for the zones to be shut down shortly thereafter.
This ultimately left Jamaica left with the billions of dollars of debt borrowed from the World Bank used to produce these centers (Black 2001).

For many Jamaican’s the free zones added to a social memory of Chinese bodies replacing Black Jamaican labor that spanned back to the colonial period. For some, the proposal for a logistics hub funded and built by China seemed too easily connected to the narrative of Chinese theft and exploitation long left behind by European colonizers as an explanation of Black Jamaican suffering (see Chapter 2).

Transshipment hubs in are “a location where traffic is exchanged across several modes of transport… for the shipment, storage, collection and distribution of goods” (citation). Similar to export free zones, these logistic hubs facilitate global trade by offering incentives for companies and removing trade barriers (citation). Many of these logistics hubs are serviced by a non-citizen labor force. In Dubai, 99 percent of the logistic hub labor force was comprised of non-citizens—a process is likely to repeat with the new logistics hubs (Cowen 173).

It is this abandonment of Jamaican interests in service of being a part of globalized trade (or progress) that the vendor invokes in her speech. By identifying uncertainty about job security and low employment rates, and situating the development project as something that will take from Jamaicans, she critiques the idea of globalization, progress, and access as systems that will benefit her community. Knowingly she recognizes Jamaica’s geographic positionality and natural resources as asset, and thus refuses concepts of development and access that is grounded in concepts of their need or frailty.
Deconstructing Conflict on Chinese Construction Sites

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, Chinese labor camps and construction sites became a main stay throughout Jamaica. Most of these development projects were heralded as creating access. A new hospital on Montego Bay that provided additional access to healthcare and advanced equipment, the new faculty of Law and medical school at the University of the West Indies, Mona, expanded students access to education. While there were several Chinese operated development sites throughout the country, the most visible were the roadway projects. In particular, North South Highway project (also known as the Highway 2000 and the Beijing Highway) which spans through 6 parishes and connects Ochos Rios to Kingston and was financed 610 million dollar (USD or over 74 billion Jamaican dollars) China Development Bank and from equity provided by the China Harbor Engineering Company, was often constructed as creating more expedient travel (Jamaica Observer 2014) (China Harbor Engineering Company 2013).

However, as these sites popped up throughout the island they were often regarded with distrust. Cab drivers, family, and random passers-by (who upon hearing about my researchers often launched into their opinion about the Chinese presence) often filled in the gaps behind these narratives with information about the construction plans and how much China and the upper class of Jamaica stood to gain from these projects. As one of the premier institutions on the island, UWI Mona facilities would only be available for the predominantly upwardly mobile students that had access to university education. Similarly, the highway, upon completion, was often empty save for the few upper-class residents that could afford it’s exorbitant toll. Rather than heralding the efficiency of the project, or potential shortening of their commutes these interlocutors told stories of resistance. People would remark that they preferred to use more
circuitous routes to avoid the highway and paying the tolls despite the extra time it added to their commutes and the wear on their cars. In fact, the few times that I drove on the highway I noticed that it was eerily empty, as opposed the jam-packed roads I was typically used to in Montego Bay and Kingston.

In these conversations people often framed these narratives in terms of supporting locals, whose routes were overshadowed by the highway project. Furthermore, interlocutors often suspected who these projects were for. In one case, the reconstruction of a road in Kingston in preparation for a trip from President Obama, resulted in the upset at the thought that “Portia was fixing it up for show,” while roads in poorer neighborhoods were left dilapidated. The presence of Chinese bodies on many of these Chinese projects became a source of unrest as people questioned the benefit of these projects. If Jamaicans (read here as afro-Jamaicans) were not being hired, and were not using these resources, then who are they for? Access for whom?

One of the most visible inequities were the sites themselves. A consistent and extensive media and political critique of Chinese development projects in Jamaica is that they lack Jamaican workers. Critics have accused Chinese multinational companies of draining the local economy by choosing to import Chinese laborer and equipment rather than using local resources. This imbalance is exacerbated by the dozens of Chinese workers local spot working on their commutes and increased Chinese lettering on signs and machinery throughout the sites.

Near one road construction site in Kingston, I overheard an Afro-Jamaican man say “Pure Chinese flags on the wall. No Jamaican flags.” when referring to the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) construction flags flying over a small 2 lane metal bridge on the site. Two weeks before it was opened for use, the bridge was covered with brightly colored flags
For many Jamaicans, these signs indicate both ownership as well as exclusion. The signs are unintelligible to the majority of Jamaicans who do not speak Mandarin or read Chinese characters. They stand as reminders that everything owned “the Chinese” is illusive to their black bodies—the wholesale shops in downtown everywhere grated with thick metal gates and plexiglass windows, the mysterious construction camps building large swaths of the University of the West Indies Campus. What remains are brief glimpses of workers without names or stories, fervently working on the billion-dollar highway projects, hospital buildings, roads and university campuses around the island. Jobs, that in a suffering economy could be for Jamaicans. This unrest was reflected on the sites themselves as well. Jamaican workers I spoke to were often disgruntled about unequitable treatment on the site.

Many workers expressed their frustration with pay. A stone mason in his mid to late 40’s outlined his main problem “with the Chinese” ——they short pay you. However, his argument about the ways in which he was “short payed” were quite complex. He went on to map out ways in which the Chinese construction company violated what his conceptions of what equitable wages should be. Firstly the mason was frustrated that despite working every day in the hot sun he only made S50,000-60000 JMD a fortnight and unlike other jobs he did not make overtime for holidays or time and a half on weekends. Moreover, he felt that his work and skill were devalued because masons and unskilled laborers were paid at the rate (about is about $2700 JMD a day or $19.01 USD).

The mason contextualized this inequality within the context of his knowledge of the market in Jamaica noting that for work he found himself he could easily get $150,000 JMD for
his work (though the rates changed in each retelling of his story). Similarly, a black Jamaican manager described being able to live for a year off of the wages he made working for a season in the Northeast United States. However, other laborers viewed wage issues not only as a miscalculation of their skill, but as a reflection of Chinese imperialism.

On one occasion an interlocutor I asked a Black laborer in his early twenties act as signatory on a form. While signing he asked if his signature was going to be used to send the Chinese back to their “fucking” country. Invoking the term “on the record” he demanded that I (and by extension my audience) need to know that the Chinese were treating them right. He described that by the time he pays taxi fare and lunch, the little money that they do make is gone. On multiple occasion during the conversation, the young man equated his work to slavery and says that the Black Jamaican workers are being treated as slave labor.

It is interesting that in this short interaction he deploys the legal rhetoric “on the record.” In many of my interviews, its counterpart “off the record” was utilized by upper class citizens and bureaucrats as a way of navigating the perceived legal implications of their candor. By saying “off the record” the speaker could seemingly erase ownership of any information their shared with me, as well as re-veil the information itself. However, in this instance this young man demands visibility by demanding that his critiques be “on the record” and heard. Furthermore, he invokes a broader pro-Black and post-colonial history by equating his involvement on the construction site to slave labor. In this way his experience (like those of the underpaid workers) is not tethered only to Jamaica, contextualized within a larger landscape of inequality and oppression that connects the African diaspora and the Global South—a concept in direct conflict with China’s south-south imaginary.
This rights-based discourse percolated often throughout the site. When asked about his experience, one worker commented that in general “Chiney dem nuh treat we right”. They don’t get any breaks and are expected to work from 7-6:30 straight with no igloos (water coolers).” He also complained that there were no toilets leaving them without bathrooms to use. When workers attempted to have a “little” meeting to articulate their desires and complaints, they were accused of striking. “They don’t like [it] when we have a meeting or strike.” Ultimately, with very little black representation within management the workers felt “we don’t have anyone to stand up for we… Anything they want to do they can do. They don’t care.” “As a Jamaican they come here and treat we as one piece of shit” “We don’t have no right.”

A Bridge Called Their Back: Understanding Advocacy and Conflict on Chinese Construction Sites

It seemed unclear if the workers felt that had anyone to protect them. Recently work had become extremely slow as many of the businesses refused to allow workers on their properties despite the legal requirement for their compliance. Due to these hold ups the site could not function at capacity or justify hiring as many local men as promised. The numbers of Chinese laborers were fixed. But Jamaican workers were not, in order to accommodate the large numbers of unemployed men in the area their labor was flexible.

Chinese managers who had worked on other sites in rural parts of Jamaica, often requested to bring workers who they had built comradery with to their new sites, further lowering the number of spots available. In addition to their work, these rural men often served as translators for young Chinese managers, diffused tense situations, observe the site, or relay the thoughts of their peers. Black Jamaicans in turn only had the recourse of the five overstretched black supervisors on the site, the government liaison officer, and his local representative. These
intermediaries often took on the additional role of protecting workers who were in danger of being fired. However, they had to be present to do so.

When trying to protect the job of a female worker who she may soon be fired, one Jamaican supervisor had to frequently visited her site in order to physically deflect attempts at her firing or caution her against specific actions like, “taking fives” (resting). Government officials had the additional burden of having to serve as bridge between the Chinese administration and the men in conflicts that sometimes turned violent. On one day a “youth” who had been having “problems with the Chinese,” and just today had gotten into an altercation with a Chinese manager. In order to make sure they did not fight, the liaison officers representative had to physically put herself between them. Enraged, the manager wanted the young man fired. Miss Ruth quickly contacted the Jamaican liaison officer who with the Chinese project manager decided the young man can stay.

“Sometimes you see dem wan fight and mek me tell you, if I am there no fight can go on you know. Cuz me reach innah de middle. And often time people say you always always stop de fight. No, you cant mek things go out of hand that it reach to fighting. Don’t care how you and a person cyant get along it better you tell me, I tell the liaison officer or I go to the Chinese and say going move this person from here and put him on another site so that them nuh have no confrontation.”

Like the black supervisors, she too spent her days tirelessly patrolling the different parts of the site to make sure the men don’t get caught “taking a 5” or going to get food. Both of which could be a fireable offense.

Because of their important role in advocating for the laborers, the workers positionality was in many ways tied to the positionality of the supervisors, which was marginal. A supervisor explained it as such:
I think legally CHEC has to have at least 50 percent of workers who are local. Legally. However, it is not stipulated that those 50 percent have to be supervisors or managers. It’s that they have to be normal workers. So, on the site, at the time I was leaving they had like what 89 maybe 90 supervisors’ managers or skilled Chinese workers. In comparison to two hundred and something local workers

In addition to their already minimal numbers, during the 3 weeks that I visited the site, the numbers of Jamaican supervisors dropped. This supervisor, who was on a temporary student internship, left once his program ended. Furthermore, a beloved Jamaican supervisor left abruptly under suspicious conditions. Once he left many of the local workers attributed his leaving as evidence of the overarching disrespect they felt, despite a lack of clarity on his motivations for leaving. One skilled worker claimed that he was fired. When how he knew he was fired, the worker said that the Chinese Project Manager came to the site and bragged that he had fired the Black supervisor and put a Chinese supervisor (who many of the workers had a history of conflict with) in charge. For men who were already upset because of disparities in pay, these factors served as further evidence of the unfairness of the Chinese companies and further highlighting their perceived lack of protection on the site.

Without the consistent support of government officials or equal representation in management, language became an important tool for workers to advocate for themselves. Like the market women on Constant Spring road, and the vendors near the Goat Islands, though the laborers understood the impact of using rights-based rhetoric to highlight their positionality in the absence of others to advocate for them. By connecting themselves to nationalist, environmental, land, and labor based rights claims these low income workers could connect their plights to issues that permeated the Global South as well as connected to questions of China’s effect on the region. By being aware of and engaging both frames they maintained an
intersectional position that privileged their own experiences over the interests of the PRC or the United States.

**Nyam: Images of Chinese Bodies as Consumptive**

But what of the other laborers connected to site? While the bodies of Chinese laborers were illusive their mythos was ever present, murmured over cigars and Jamaican rum, in domino games, church pews, and the back of taxi cabs. Like previous incidents of anti-Chinese critique in Jamaica, many of these rumors took on racist stereotypes, reminiscent of colonial rhetoric about Chinese indentured laborers. Rumors spread throughout the island that the Chinese laborers were hardened criminals, brought to Jamaica to work as free labor. These rumors aligned with American framings of China as a fierce neo-colonial power coming to capitalize on Jamaica’s developing status. A hotel employee described visiting a local development site for work where she had been told the workers were Chinese prisoners. She said this made sense because when she walked it none of the men looked at her and instead looked down. Also, when they walked it was a single file line and they did not make eye contact with anyone. This behavior confirmed to her that the Chinese companies were using forced or prison laborers.

There were also several rumors about their diet. Videos were shared throughout Whatsapp of Chinese nationals eating donkeys or other forms of exotic meats. At one construction site Jamaican laborers shared with me concerns that they had seen the Chinese workers ship in dog to eat at a private going away party for one of the Chinese managers. This corresponded with local perceptions that “Chinese nyam (eat) dog.” When I asked the Chinese managers directly about the food, they clarified that it was actually duck that they had imported in for the occasion.
During one site visit, a portion of the cement laying process caused the Chinese workers to not be able to return to their camp for lunch. Instead trucks brought Styrofoam containers filled with chicken, cabbage and bao’s cooked by their Chinese chef to the workers. A manager who I was placed with to observed gruffly offered me a container. However, being a vegetarian and seeing none of the black workers receiving food I declined until one of the Jamaican truck drivers explained that they had brought it specifically for me. Despite frequently ordering lunch from a local Chinese restaurant near the site, the Jamaican workers gawked blatantly at my plate asking if it was dog—which they claimed was killed and brought for the Chinese cook to use. The truck drivers who had tried the food criticized it, noting that the bao (which they mistook for a dumpling—a quintessential Jamaican food) did not have enough salt on it. Jamaicans, they declared matter of factly, needed salt in their food. This food was too foreign.

These rumors of Chinese laborers as dangerous criminals were exacerbated by the fact that despite seeing constant signs of Chinese presence, locals had very little contact with the laborers themselves. Many of the laborers on the Kingston site were from poor villages and depended on their income working on the construction sites to send back to their families in China. These men often worked without taking holidays, partially out of financial necessity, but also due to the fear of losing their work visa and being replaced. Once in Kingston they live in fear of experience violence in a country that has one of the highest murder rates per capita in the world. Stories of violence against Chinese migrants that circulate WeChat followed with suspicions that the local police officers are incompetent and cannot protect them. On some site’s workers are made to sign contracts pledging that they will not leave the site alone. On others they sign waivers indicating that their employer is not responsible for their safety. A promise they are not willing to challenge.
As temporary laborers, they spent most of their time on the construction sites or on the labor camps. The camps are small tin roof and cement edifices which are usually housed on the construction site and built by workers upon arrival. If they are housed offsite, the workers are shuttled back and forth to the site by cars limiting their engagement with the outside public. All their needs are built into the site, with even Chinese chefs hired to cook for the workers. They are ecstatic to learn more about Jamaica but may feel they have very few “safe” opportunities to do so.

When visiting one site I was barraged by middle aged Chinese construction workers who upon learning I spoke Mandarin, greeted me jovially in a mixture of Mandarin and choppy patios. My interlocutor, a manager at the site, explained that while many of these men had lived on the island for ten years, they rarely left the site and thus spoke little to no English. When I asked the manager in an interview if he (who had more mobility as an English speaker) befriended Chinese Jamaicans he responded:

Yeah, they’re [Chinese Jamacians] really really friendly, but I heard it’s dangerous and that’s the biggest concern I have in my mind. So I don’t have the – I don’t get the freedom I get in China.

He followed this up with a story he had been told through a friend.

I mean it’s not safe you know. Downtown area. Especially downtown. I hear a lot of crazy stories…this friend he told me, he was here with his wife to take care of his sister’s two shops in downtown. And I hear a lot of stories about this. And then one day he was carrying about 2 million Jamaican. To bank. And somebody shot him but missed him. And he was like Oh my gosh this is so scary. I know this would come but I didn’t expect it so soon.

Like many of his coworkers who had travelled abroad to get experience or save money for their families, fraternizing under these conditions were not risks many were always willing to take.

Without interaction with the laborers, Jamaicans are left to construct imaginaries of the character. Limited communication due to the laborers lack of English language skills and
reticence to interact with Jamaicans led way for perceptions that they were “facety,” arrogant, disrespectful, and prejudiced against black people. Cultural differences in communication compiled these differences often leading to conflicts on site.

One reoccurring source of conflict was the response (or more specifically non-response) of managers to inquiry’s they found offensive. A government representative who oversaw the site on behalf of the National Works Agency identified the requests of locals for managers to buy them food or drinks as a consistent source of tension.

What I find is that with the Chinese are MAINLY friendly. They are in a strange country. They are friendly. But what they don’t like is the begging, the locals tend to beg a lot and they don’t like it. So, it create a little friction between them. Frustration with “begging” was often mentioned by Chinese managers on both private and state-sponsored development sites.

While observing at a private construction firm site I watched as a Black Jamaican driver came to request money for toll. After receiving the cost of toll the worker hung back to ask for additional funds for “juice.” After the worker left, the Chinese manager who had given him the funds remarked to the room “You know what I don’t like? When Jamaicans say ‘Chinaman, buy me a juice.’ I don’t like that. What should I buy you something?” He then turned to the singular black Jamaican worker in office. “See—[he] and I are friends, but he does not ask me to buy him anything”

I later asked the project supervisor to clarify this exchange, as I understood it to be a part of traditional Chinese culture to exchange gifts, and I myself had been offered food and drinks on numerous occasions while being there. He clarified says that while it is normal to bring a present to a guest or a friend’s house, or to even treat a friend to dinner, this is not extended to strangers. He would not accept beer or juice from a stranger nor would he ask a stranger for anything, especially as they so enthusiastically rejected Chinese food.
Abject silence was a frequent response to lewd jokes or requests for food or work that they Chinese workers and managers didn’t understand or deemed inappropriate. However, this response sometimes escalated conflicts. On one site, a local approached a local supervisor to demand a job he felt was owed to him. When met with silence the man escalated, ultimately threatening to “bash” in the feet of the supervisor’s present until he was informed by a black supervisor present that they had little control over hiring, which was in the purview of the local liaison officer, not them. The same supervisor described these reoccurring conflicts as evidence of the language barrier between Chinese managers and Black Jamaican workers.

…When you speak the language they can’t cut you off. Like when you speak English to a Chinese person who doesn’t understand you that well, and he doesn't have the patience that time to listen to you, he’s going to cut you off. But if you’re speaking Chinese, even if he doesn’t have the patience to hear you he’s going to listen to you because your speaking Chinese—that’s the difference. I feel like the language, if a lot more of the skilled workers could speak Chinese or supervisors at least [Me: or opposite] …English would be better. English is easier to learn. It would be better

English would be better. On an island battered by conflicting rhetorics around China, language (and in particular mastery of the English language) has become a key way to demand voice and representation, especially for those caught in the crosshairs of globalizations. However, unlike Jamaican workers unskilled Chinese migrant workers are unable to utilize cosmopolitan rights-based language to demand their representation. To demand recourse. Who advocates for them? They remain invisible and, in many ways, misunderstood.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to outline the many ways in which global rhetorics about Chinese development in the Caribbean are manifested on the ground by local marginalized agents to demand representation and claim agency. At the same time I have hoped to reveal the ways in which these same rhetorics can also serve to make the precarious situations of Chinese
migrant laborers invisible. By doing this I have hoped to illuminate the power of language in such engagements and hope to encourage other researchers to similarly trace their effects.

NOTE: This is a working paper. Some elements are in progress and all are subject to change.