

Made in Ethiopia—or anywhere else in the world

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Made in Ethiopia is a documentary directed by Xinyan Yu and Max Duncan about a massive Chinese industrial park in Dukem, in the Oromia region. This is some 37 kilometres from the capital Addis Ababa and close to the Chinese-built railway linking the capital to the Red Sea port of Djibouti. After screenings at various film festivals, the film is on general release.

Shot over four years before and during the pandemic, it shows the impact of this first industrial park that hosts 103 companies producing cement, ceramics, aluminium, and fast fashion and employs 20,000 people, at a time of profound crisis.

Ethiopia is a major hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa. Beijing has invested \$5 billion in around 460 construction and manufacturing projects in the country, financing and building much of Ethiopia's air, road and rail infrastructure, as well as the \$200 million African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa. It has become Ethiopia's most important trading partner as well as its most important creditor, with its estimated \$13.7 billion of Chinese debt second only to Angola's in Africa.

Prior to the pandemic, Ethiopia was Africa's fastest growing economy, having grown at 10 percent a year for more than a decade. Despite this, two thirds of Ethiopia's 126 million strong population—the country is the second most populous in the continent—live in poverty. Nearly half of its population are under 18.

The film shows that despite the promise that China's investment and industrialization would bring development and prosperity, the reality nearly 20 years later turned out to be very painful, even before the country confronted the isolation of the pandemic and the brutality of successive civil wars. Those who prospered were already rich.

The film is powerful, interesting and valuable

precisely because it shows the universal process: that under the capitalist mode of production for private profit, the wealth created by the working class is expropriated, quite legally, by the capitalist class. The Chinese capitalists are no different in this respect from their counterparts all over the world. Furthermore, the global industrialisation, of which this enterprise park is a part, has swollen the ranks of the world's working class, as people move from “farm to factory.”

These developments are revealed through the eyes of three women at a garment factory, without narration, commentary or explanation of the broader context. First, there is the ambitious—and obnoxious—factory director Motto Ma using international management speak to push through a high stakes Phase Two expansion plan that promises to increase jobs from the present 20,000 to 50,000. She lauds Ethiopia as the land of endless opportunity and claims that her efforts to expand the industrial park will make Ethiopians realize their dreams within their lifetime.

Factory worker Beti shows that is all just sales talk. She quit farm work for an equally gruelling job sewing jeans at just \$50 a month, barely enough to eat. Equally devastating is the impact on Workinesh, whose family at caught in the crosshairs of the park's expansion. They are farmers whose land, some of the most fertile in Ethiopia, was taken by the government so the Chinese industrial complex can expand, but never received the replacement land promised.

The film opens with the wedding of a Chinese manager and an Ethiopian woman where a big wad of notes is handed over to the bride's father. That sums up the whole process. The Chinese try different policies to make their workers work harder: docking pay if they are late, or goods are damaged, or they work too slowly. They complain that their workers don't value

their jobs enough. They do whatever they can to increase profit. In 2020, they even forced some of their workers to live for months in the factory away from their families during the COVID pandemic. Whatever their workers do, they cannot win, earning barely enough to eat. They have no free time. Despite the promises, years after the factories have been built, there are no quality schools, hospitals or other facilities. At one point, the workers rebelled, going on strike when their quotas were raised.

In November 2020, just months after the pandemic first struck, civil war broke out, with Ethiopian federal forces, along with Amhara regional forces and the Eritrean army, attacking Tigray's ruling party, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that had dominated the country since 1975, and declaring Tigray's regional government illegal.

That war was a product of the growing social and economic crisis that had engulfed the country from the mid-2010s. Anti-government protests and factional divisions within the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF) in which the TPLF had played the paramount role, eventually forced a political transition that brought the Washington-backed Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018, when he was feted with a Nobel Peace Prize for bringing an end to the 20 year-long war with Eritrea.

The brutal two-year war, characterised by widespread humanitarian rights violations and sexual violence, claimed at least 600,000 lives, displaced more than 3 million people and devastated the region with the cost of reconstruction is estimated at more than \$20 billion. While the fighting in Tigray has ended, many are unable to return to their homes and farms because they are still occupied by the Eritrean army and Amhara FANO militias now fighting Ethiopian government forces.

Exacerbating the impact of the civil war have been the sanctions imposed by the US Biden administration in September 2021 and recently extended for another year. Biden declared a "National Emergency with respect to Ethiopia." He said the "widespread violence, atrocities, and serious human rights abuse, including those involving ethnic-based violence, rape and other forms of gender-based violence, and obstruction of humanitarian operations" constituted a threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United

States.

In practice, this has been used against Eritrea, as part as of broader effort to roll back Chinese influence in the region. In 2022, Washington suspended Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) that had previously supported around 56,000 jobs in the country, mostly in garment manufacturing, worth \$237 million in exports to the US in 2020.

After defaulting on its only international government bond in December last year, in July, Ethiopia secured a \$3.4 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, the first tranche of a \$10.7 billion loan. This was only after allowing its currency, the birr, to float against the US dollar, pushing up inflation. Abiy has pledged to privatise state-owned enterprises, allow foreigners to own property and establish a new stock exchange in the hope of generating a new wave of investment.

The film mentions without any explanation, although most people know little about it, that the combined impact of the war, sanctions and AGOA blacklisting and the broader economic crisis, sent investors fleeing. The park's Chinese investors abandoned Motto Ma's much vaunted Phase Two expansions plans that were to bring another 30,000 jobs to Dukem. Confronted with angry workers and a community in turmoil, the mayor says, "They make billions but give pennies." When he sent Motto a letter blaming her for everything that went wrong, she threatened to go after him with the aid of the Ethiopian government.

As the farmer explained, "Our sacrifices don't help development because of the thieves in the middle." While Motto says, in a throwaway line at the end of the film, after she has left the park to work elsewhere, "Those who fall behind get trampled on." That is indeed the experience of workers everywhere living an economically unequal, unjust and oppressive class-based society.



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