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# *Whose Building? Tracing the Politics of the Chinese Government-Funded Parliament Building in Lesotho*

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*When the government of China offered to fund the construction of Lesotho's parliament building, the building plans developed by Lesotho government bureaucrats were set aside. Instead, Chinese firms designed and built the new parliament building. These firms continue to be responsible for the maintenance of the building. In this article, I explore the rationale and impact of this approach through tracing the story of how this building project was carried out and discussing the extent to which the finished product met the needs and interests of the parliament of Lesotho. I argue that China used the parliament building project to generate a sustained presence in Lesotho's political and diplomatic orbits. This article contributes to literature on China–Africa through problematising the notion of African agency in the relationship. In particular, the case study builds on Rich and Recker's analysis of the China–Africa relationship, revealing the complex and nuanced ways in which African agency plays out or is undermined.*

**Keywords:** African legislatures; African state architecture; China–Africa; Chinese aid; Lesotho; parliament of Lesotho

## **Introduction**

The People's Republic of China has fully financed the construction of at least 15 new African parliamentary buildings and refurbished and furnished several others on the continent.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese government and firms are also involved in long-term maintenance of the buildings. This is puzzling for three reasons. First, why would recipient states acquiesce to receiving as gifts significant buildings that enable national decision-making and typically embody the state? Second, why is China interested in 'strengthening' African parliaments – institutions historically conceived from a liberal-democratic tradition? Third, why are these parliament buildings being given predominantly to poor African countries, when dominant accounts portray China's foreign aid as primarily directed towards countries rich in oil, gas and other natural resources?

This article focuses on Lesotho, one of the beneficiary countries. In Lesotho, plans to replace the colonial-era parliament building had been mooted since independence. The building, located within the Maseru central business district, was no longer fit for purpose

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1 S. Wang and C. Wang, *China and Africa, Win–Win Cooperation* (Beijing, *Beijing Times Chinese Bookstore*, 2015), p. 12.



**Figure 1.** The old parliament building in central Maseru, September 2019. (Photograph by the author.)

because it could not accommodate the two houses of parliament that were created at independence. It had been constructed in 1909 and refurbished in 1959 for the largely advisory Basutoland National Council (BNC), made up of hereditary chiefs. From independence (1966) until 2012, the BNC building became the home of the bicameral Lesotho parliament. Owing to the power differential emerging from the independence constitution, the main chamber in the building hitherto used by chiefs during the BNC era was allocated to the elected National Assembly. The Senate (hereditary chiefs) was accommodated in a small annex abutting the building. There was also little space available to accommodate staff, presiding officers and chairpersons of committees. Parliament resorted to using the old premises of the British Embassy as meeting rooms for its sessional committees (see [Figure 1](#)).<sup>2</sup>

A resolution to construct a new building with modern amenities on the outskirts of Maseru at Mpilo Hill was approved in 2004 as part of a wide-ranging parliamentary reform programme.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, a multi-stakeholder steering committee, drawing members from the National Assembly, Senate, ministry of public works' building design services (BDS), Maseru city council and ministry of finance, was given the responsibility to execute the task. With input from the National Assembly and Senate as end users, the BDS went on to design the building. However, all this changed soon after Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili's trip to China in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

During the trip, the government of China offered to fund the parliament building project. China proposed a complete project aid grant funding model which set aside the earlier plans developed by the Lesotho government's multi-stakeholder steering committee.<sup>5</sup> Chinese firms nominated by China's government subsequently designed and constructed the new parliament

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2 Interview with a parliament of Lesotho executive, Maseru, 17 September 2019. All interviews for this article were conducted by the author.

3 Interview with a senior parliament staffer, Maseru, 11 September 2019.

4 Xinhua, 'Wen Jiabao Holds Talks with Prime Minister of Lesotho', Xinhua, 1 December 2015), available at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceie/eng/NewsPress/t224765.htm>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

5 Z. Cheng and I. Taylor, *China's Aid to Africa: Does Friendship Really Matter?* (Abingdon, Taylor and Francis, 2017), p. 26.

building. The Chinese firms continue to be responsible for the maintenance of the building. While infrastructure aid to African countries is an established modus operandi of China's political engagement in the continent, it is their keenness to design, construct and later maintain Lesotho's parliament building unilaterally that is puzzling. China could have supported the Lesotho government's framework for the multi-stakeholder steering committee to oversee the parliament building, but chose not to. As Rosenberg and Weisfelder put it, 'why would a single-party communist state build a multiparty democratic Parliament, especially given Lesotho's marginal economy and lack of minerals to export to China?'<sup>6</sup> This article answers the question by illustrating that China specifically targeted parliament as a means to gain access to Lesotho's political system and secure its long-term foreign policy interests.

Data for this article are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Maseru, Lesotho from September to November 2019. Theoretically, I adapted Yaneva's 'mapping controversy' in architecture method, which entails following the processes of making, using and contesting buildings.<sup>7</sup> This approach of tracing how the building was constructed gave me insights into plausible explanations of the Chinese government's motivations. I collected data through interviews with key informants, focus group discussions and participant observation. I selected specific senior government officials as key informants because of their intimate knowledge of the building project. These included parliament of Lesotho executive management and senior officials from the ministries of public works, foreign affairs, development planning and finance. I supplemented insider information by interviewing active citizens who had followed the construction project from a distance. These included private sector architects, academics from the National University of Lesotho, environment activists and civil society leaders. I conducted these interviews in English.

Further, I conducted eight focus group discussions with cross sections of ordinary Basotho who live and work in Maseru. These discussions included an average of eight participants drawn from informal traders, youths, women, transport operators and unemployed people. In most of the discussions, I worked with a translator and recorded the responses in Sesotho; these were later translated into English. Lastly, I was a participant observer in the parliament building for 45 days. I was assigned work space on the fourth floor of the building and I observed quotidian practices and took pictures in and around the building.

The literature on China–Africa relationships hitherto has failed to discuss China's intentions in constructing parliament buildings for African countries. However, there is adequate material to develop some preliminary inferences. For example, Alden and Barber indicate that, owing to the rise in China's security interests in the continent, the doctrine of non-interference is being revised.<sup>8</sup> While Alden and Barber's main focus is on China's expanding military presence and participation in Africa, this conceptualisation of security interests includes China's interest in extending political influence in both resource-rich and resource-poor African countries.<sup>9</sup> According to Christensen, China is conscious of both its increasing global power and the concomitant push back from western players, hence the need to develop safety mechanisms through mobilising support in multilateral organisations.<sup>10</sup>

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6 S. Rosenberg and R.F. Weisfelder, *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho* (Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2013), p. 159.

7 A. Yaneva, *Mapping Controversies in Architecture* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2012).

8 C. Alden and L. Barber, 'Introduction: Seeking Security: China's Expanding Involvement in Security Cooperation in Africa', in C. Alden, A. Alao, Z. Chun and L. Barber (eds.), *China and Africa – Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1–12.

9 See L. Hanauer and L.J. Morris, 'The Impact of Chinese Engagement on African Countries', in *Chinese Engagement in Africa, Drivers, Reactions and Implications for US Policy* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2014), pp. 45–54; also Y. Sun, 'The Political Significance of China's Latest Commitments to Africa' (Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 2018 [12 September]), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/09/12/the-political-significance-of-chinas-latest-commitments-to-africa/>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

10 T.J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (London, W.W. Norton, 2015).

The above factors notwithstanding, analysing China's direct interest in constructing 'liberal leaning' parliament buildings is complicated by persuasive arguments about China's disdain for the established liberal world order. For instance, Barma *et al.* imply that China is bent on imposing its own authoritarian model.<sup>11</sup> Seen from this perspective, China's aid activities in Africa, especially those supporting parliamentary infrastructure, could be portrayed as advancing an authoritarian agenda. Naim goes as far as calling China a 'rogue' donor.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Thrall asserts that Beijing has neither advanced a direct counter-attack on liberalism nor tried to force through communism in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Thrall's argument, coupled with Rich and Recker's nuanced reading of China's engagement in Africa, opens up an avenue for considering China's investment in African parliament buildings beyond ideological predilections, looking instead to pragmatism. Building on this world view, this case reveals a more complicated relationship.

The details of the Lesotho parliament building project align more with Rich and Recker, who posit that the reality is somewhere in the middle 'with the potential for deeper mutually beneficial relationships coexisting with some level of exploitation'.<sup>14</sup> While China undoubtedly leverages aid to advance foreign policy interests, the benefits that accrue to the recipient country are equally significant. In providing funding for much-needed infrastructure, China is advancing the development aspirations of the receiving countries. However, the ways in which this support is delivered raises agency questions. This means that, in interpreting the dynamics of China–Africa political relationships, one should consider these complexities rather than fall for false binaries of 'rogue aid' on the one hand and 'win–win' characterisation on the other.<sup>15</sup>

In this article, I build on Rick and Recker's third-way perspective in two distinct ways. First, I utilise the parliament building project to help to explain the politics of Chinese official bilateral assistance projects in Africa.<sup>16</sup> This allows me to explore the interests and motivations of different stakeholders, which include the Chinese government, the Lesotho political elites and local bureaucrats, in these aid projects. Second, the Lesotho parliament building project enables me to go beyond Cheng and Taylor's finding that African countries welcome Chinese foreign aid<sup>17</sup> by problematising the notion of African agency in the relationship. In this way, details of the building project feeds into and extends Rich and Recker's analysis of the messy nature of the China–Africa relationship by identifying the nuanced ways in which African agency plays out or is undermined.

The article is divided into five sections. The first contextualises the nature and development of the Lesotho–China relationship, showing how it has evolved over the years prior to the new parliament building project. In the second section, I discuss how the building project was carried out. I illustrate how the China-led construction process largely disregarded Lesotho's established public construction procedures and marginalised the

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11 See N. Barma, E. Ratner and S. Weber, 'Chinese Ways', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-05-03/chinese-ways>, retrieved 25 April 2022; N. Barma and E. Ratner, 'China's Illiberal Challenge', *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, 2 (2006), available at <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/2/chinas-illiberal-challenge>, retrieved 15 May 2021.

12 M. Naim, 'Rogue aid', *Foreign Policy*, online, 15 October 2009, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/rogue-aid/>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

13 L. Thrall, *China's Expanding African Relations: Implications for U.S. National Security* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2015), available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR905.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR905.html), retrieved 15 May 2021

14 T.S. Rich and S. Recker, 'Understanding Sino-African Relations: Neocolonialism or a New Era?' *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 20, 1 (2013), p. 61.

15 L. Mhandara, C. Manyeruke and E. Nyemba, 'Debating China's New Role in Africa's Political Economy', *African East-Asian Affairs*, 2 (2013), available at <https://doi.org/10.7552/0-2-107>, retrieved 15 May 2021.

16 Cheng and Taylor, *China's Aid to Africa*.

17 *Ibid.*

involvement of local architects, regulators, contractors and artisans. Thirdly, I evaluate the extent to which the completed building – arising from this process – met the accommodation and functional requirements of the parliament of Lesotho. In the fourth section, I discuss and suggest possible explanations for China’s interest in the parliament of Lesotho. In the final section, I briefly reflect on the long-term implications of the parliament building project. I illustrate three ways in which China’s chosen approach of delivering the parliament building assures its long-term presence in Lesotho’s parliamentary built space. I argue that this presence is indicative of China’s new strategy of projecting its political influence through investing in the domestic political institutions of its partner countries.

## The Nature and Development of China–Lesotho Relations

China and Lesotho’s donor–recipient relationship is typical of relations between wealthy and poor states, which are characterised by ‘dyadic and particularistic linkage based on the exchange of political support in return for material compensation’.<sup>18</sup> This linkage relies on the understanding that the recipient country demonstrate its gratitude by ‘supporting the stronger power’s diplomatic agenda, economic interests, and often its projection of military might’.<sup>19</sup> Taylor posits that, for Lesotho, financial inducements have been a ‘strong incentive’ for conferring diplomatic recognition on either Taiwan or China.<sup>20</sup>

Before 1994, the relationship between China and Lesotho was characterised by ebbs and flows, making it one of ‘the PRC’s more complicated and unstable relationships in Africa’.<sup>21</sup> The interference of apartheid South Africa in Lesotho’s foreign policy contributed to this instability. At independence in 1966, the Basotho National Party (BNP)-led government – then in South Africa’s good books – aligned with Taiwan, but, as time went on, tensions between Maseru and Pretoria led to the former switching to the PRC in 1983. Subsequently, in 1986, South Africa engineered a coup in Lesotho.<sup>22</sup> The new military leaders maintained the status quo for a while, and this is why Lesotho was visited by the Chinese foreign minister, Qian Qichen, on his inaugural trip to Africa in July 1989. In 1990, however, the military junta terminated diplomatic relations with China and re-established relations with Taiwan. Lesotho–China diplomatic relations were restored in 1994 by the democratically elected Basotho Congress Party (BCP) government. Since resumption of relations in 1994, the relationship has grown, and China has to date constructed four crucial state buildings for Lesotho: a national conference centre (1999),<sup>23</sup> a state library and archives (2006),<sup>24</sup> a parliament building (2012)<sup>25</sup> and a state house (2018).<sup>26</sup>

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18 W. Veenendaal, *Politics and Democracy in Microstates* (London, Routledge, 2014), p. 562.

19 J.D. Ciorciari, ‘A Chinese Model for Patron–Client Relations? The Sino-Cambodian Partnership’, *International Relations of the Asia–Pacific*, 15, 2 (2015), p. 246.

20 I. Taylor, The ‘captive states’ of Southern Africa and China: The PRC and Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 35, 2 (1997), p. 88.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

22 M. Parks, ‘South Africa’s 3-Week Blockade of Lesotho Lifted as Rebels Leave’, *Los Angeles Times*, 26 January 1986, available at <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-01-26-mn-183-story.html>, retrieved 29 April 2020.

23 African State Architecture, ‘Manthabiseng Convention Centre, Maseru’, 1 January 2018, available at <https://www.africanstatearchitecture.co.uk/post/manthabiseng-convention-centre-maseru>, retrieved 13 January 2021.

24 Government of Lesotho, ‘China donates M1,000 000 to Lesotho’, 19 June 2020, available at <https://www.gov.ls/china-donates-m1000-000-to-lesotho/>, retrieved 13 January 2021.

25 *Aiddata*, ‘Chinese Government Provides RMB81.48 Million Interest-Free Loan for Parliament Building Construction Project (Linked to #55597)’, (Williamsburg, William and Mary, n.d.), available from <https://china.aiddata.org/projects/1096>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

26 B. Mpaki, ‘China Cancels Lesotho Debts, Gives More Aid’, *Lesotho Times*, 15 September 2018, available at <https://lestimes.com/china-cancels-lesotho-debts-gives-more-aid/>, retrieved 13 January 2021.

In the years leading up to the Lesotho parliament building project, China was seized with the task of consolidating the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Having launched its ministerial-level platform in October 2000 in Beijing,<sup>27</sup> FOCAC adopted its plan of action in Addis Ababa in 2003<sup>28</sup> and prepared to scale up to its first full summit,<sup>29</sup> where African heads of state and government would validate the initiative. FOCAC has since become the most critical component of Chinese foreign aid architecture.

A Lesotho diplomat told me:

under the framework of FOCAC, that is where we negotiate long term projects that we carry out. For Lesotho, concentration has always been on projects that detail construction of landmark buildings, roads construction and so on. Amongst them, as you may know, we could cite four big buildings which have been constructed with the assistance of China here under FOCAC.<sup>30</sup>

Reading this with the benefit of hindsight, one can see that Lesotho was one of the crucial countries that made up the numbers and was the testing ground for China’s big idea of creating FOCAC. Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili visited China twice during this period (2001 and 2005). In addition, Li Zhaoxing, then Chinese foreign minister, visited Lesotho in January 2006.<sup>31</sup> In the run-up to the first FOCAC summit, Lesotho was the Southern African Development Community (SADC) chair.<sup>32</sup> Prime Minister Mosisili played an important role at that FOCAC summit in Beijing. On behalf of SADC, he was given the opportunity to address the opening ceremony of the high-level dialogue and the second conference of Chinese and African entrepreneurs.<sup>33</sup>

## **Marginalisation of In-Country Expertise**

China ignored the Lesotho government’s existing plans for parliament and took full control of the construction process, displacing and marginalising Lesotho’s established structures from the decision-making locus of government building project design and management. This displacement accompanied increasing reliance on Chinese funding, expertise and materials. This is not to suggest that the process was linear; rather, it was filled with tension, as there was constant push-back, albeit mostly unsuccessful.<sup>34</sup> There were differences between the political authorities’ and bureaucratic elites’ views on this project. The political leaders in government gave China blank-cheque authority and support in the implementation of the project.<sup>35</sup>

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27 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), ‘Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation’ 16 August 2004, available at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cezw//eng/zt/zflt/t150402.htm#:~:text=We%20agree%20that%20the%20China,development%20is%20our%20common%20objective>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

28 FOCAC, ‘Forum on China–Africa Cooperation – Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004–2006)’, 25 September 2009, available at [http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx\\_1/zywj/200909/t20090925\\_7933568.htm](http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/200909/t20090925_7933568.htm), retrieved 25 April 2022.

29 China.org.cn, ‘2006: Beijing Summit Forum on China–Africa Cooperation’, 4 November 2012, available at [http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th\\_cpc\\_congress/2012-11/04/content\\_26749757.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/04/content_26749757.htm), retrieved 30 April 2020.

30 Interview with a Lesotho diplomat, Maseru, 26 September 2019.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Southern Africa Development Community, ‘SADC Communiqués 1980–2006’, available at <https://www.sadc.int/document/sadc-summit-communications-1980-2006>, retrieved 30 April 2020.

33 SINA English, ‘Lesotho PM: China–Africa summit “a landmark full of hopes”’, 4 November 2006, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20070709182847/http://english.sina.com/1/2006/1104/93773.html>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

34 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

35 Interview with the Speaker of Parliament, Maseru, 14 October 2019.

On the other hand, the government's public works officials approached the project from a technocratic angle and wanted to check all the boxes, in conformity with their established practices.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the end users of the building (parliament) felt marginalised and that their needs were being subverted.<sup>37</sup>

This marginalisation of in-country expertise began with the politics of the building design. The idea to construct a new parliament building had been a recommendation of the parliamentary reform process.<sup>38</sup> According to a senior parliamentary officer who was privy to those proceedings, parliamentary authorities established an internal team which 'made consultations on how the building should look, how many offices and committee rooms it should have and submitted the proposals to the Ministry of Public Works' Building Design Services'.<sup>39</sup> These were dead in the water once the Chinese offered to fund the construction. A senior parliamentary manager recalls this marginalisation:

parliament staff was not involved except at an earlier stage. We submitted proposals [to BDS] but, following the trip to China, we were told that these recommendations will not be taken on board. [We were told] we are going to build parliament our own way. So, we ended there. Then we never heard from them until in 2012, when they said we are done with the building; you can occupy the building.<sup>40</sup>

A senior government technocrat at the BDS corroborates this narrative: the design from China was not similar to the brief they had developed based on parliament's proposals but 'something that was like an off-shelf [design]'. It addressed neither the aspirations of the Lesotho government nor the requirements of the parliament.<sup>41</sup> The 'off-shelf' reference is significant because of the narrative within Lesotho government circles that the prime minister had been shown a model parliament building at a museum in China.<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding the 'off-shelf' design, the BDS was given a chance to look at the design with strict limitations on what they could change. Their one triumph was in getting the Chinese lead designers to agree to add the iconic *mokorotlo* hat design as the roof of the National Assembly chamber (see Figure 2).<sup>43</sup>

The above narrative shows the shift of the decision-making locus from the BDS to China. However, this is contested by Lesotho foreign ministry officials, who insist that the process of validating the designs started in Lesotho rather than China. This is different from the public works' and parliament's narrative. A senior ministry of foreign affairs official asserts:

I don't know what the others are saying and where they get that from because, for the parliament building, what I know is that Public Works have been involved in the designing programme. Whatever the initial designs we had then, they were subjected to the Chinese architects' comments because the constructing company was coming from China. You develop your initial designs in Lesotho then you submit them to Chinese architects for further improvement, then they make their comments, then you bring them back home and I know they were subjected to cabinet scrutiny.<sup>44</sup>

Which of these conflicting narratives is most convincing? The foreign affairs diplomat is of the view that plans that originated in Lesotho 'were initial' and were supposed to be

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36 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 16 October 2019.

37 Interview with a senior parliament manager, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Interview with a senior parliament manager, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 16 October 2019.

42 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

43 Interview with a senior parliament manager, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

44 Interview with a Lesotho diplomat, Maseru, 26 September 2019.



**Figure 2.** The *mokoroto* debating chamber, Maseru, September 2019. (Photograph by author.)

submitted to Chinese architects for ‘further improvement’. This narrative privileges Chinese expertise, marginalises Basotho artisans and supports the notion of displacing the BDS as the primary actor. I was able to corroborate the BDS/parliament narrative in my interview with Maseru city council planning department.

A senior planner who was involved in the initial inter-departmental steering committee<sup>45</sup> to construct a new parliament told me that the ‘Chinese decided on the design of the building’, and that, after funding was obtained from China, the interdepartmental steering committee ceased operations.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, my BDS informants who were close to the process insist that the design concept came as package inclusive of structure design, floor finishes and furnishings. My informants contend that, when the BDS critiqued the concept, cabinet ministers cautioned them by saying, ‘this is a gift for the prime minister so you don’t have to argue about that’.<sup>47</sup>

With the sidelining of the BDS, parliament and the city planning authorities in the design process, further tensions were also evident during the project implementation phase. The project’s donor-centred language of construction and supervision model, labour deployment and opaque accounting model illustrate the entrenchment of Chinese government/actors’ influence through discreetly sideswiping local Basotho bureaucratic institutions and materials.

The Chinese construction firms were not keen to use Lesotho standards in construction. Lesotho aligns its construction policies to those of neighbouring South Africa owing to the availability and proximity of construction materials. The Chinese contractors preferred to apply Chinese standards, which they represented as ‘international’ standards. Remembering

45 This committee was chaired by the clerk of parliament and included officials from different departments such as the National Assembly, Senate, the ministry of public works and Maseru city council.

46 Interview with a senior Maseru city planning official, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

47 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 16 October 2019.

these tensions in aligning the language of construction, a technocrat who was actively involved in the process, told me:

we use South African standards, and the Chinese did not want to relate their standards to ours. They put it under the umbrella of international standards. Sometimes when you see them doing things in a way that you do not believe is correct, they will say this is Chinese standard and it has been signed to conform with that.<sup>48</sup>

The signing referred to by the technocrat refers to prior approval/endorsement by the ministries of foreign affairs and development planning. The BDS would have preferred inter-agency co-ordination from the outset.<sup>49</sup> The sidelining of experts who understood the language of construction weakened the agency of the Lesotho government and undermined in-country systems and procedures. This is contrary to the established best practice anchored on the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action,<sup>50</sup> which enjoin donors to ‘use [recipient] country systems and procedures to the maximum extent possible’.<sup>51</sup> This weakened agency is further illustrated through the project’s donor-centred supervision model. The Chinese Yanjian Group construction firm was being supervised by a Chinese technical design team instead of by the BDS. The role of the BDS was limited to monitoring the design team that was supervising the contractors.<sup>52</sup>

With China calling the shots in project management, the recruitment and incentivisation of labour further accentuated the pattern of local marginalisation. China’s win–win rhetoric in aid interventions is expected to benefit the recipient economy through direct and downstream benefits such as local procurement and employment opportunities.<sup>53</sup> We might expect the building project to provide quality employment to Basotho artisans and sharpen their skills. Indeed, there were Basotho artisans employed at the construction site, but the ‘international standards’ applied by the contractor classified local artisans such as carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers and electricians as labourers at worst and trainees at best.<sup>54</sup> This resulted in these artisans being underpaid.<sup>55</sup> Notwithstanding the ministry of labour’s interventions, these labour conflicts continued unabated.<sup>56</sup> In this regard, the immediate benefits of the project did not fully permeate to the broader strata. On the other hand, the short-term wins for China were self-evident, in creating work for its companies and giving their nationals an opportunity to gain experience in overseas work.

The Chinese-managed parliament building project also bypassed Lesotho’s aid management system. Institutionally, the department of aid co-ordination (DAC) in the ministry of development planning co-ordinates technical and financial resources from development partners, monitors project expenditures and reports on them to parliament. The ¥59 million RMB Chinese aid for the Lesotho parliament building was not in the form of

48 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Although China is not a signatory of the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda, I found that the bureaucrats in Lesotho used it as a benchmark.

51 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, ‘Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action’ (2008), available at <https://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm#:~:text=At%20the%20Second%20High%20Level,does%20not%20work%20with%20aid>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

52 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

53 For a detailed account and assessment of China’s win–win principle in African infrastructure deals, see A.C. Alves, ‘China’s “win–win” Co-operation: Unpacking the Impact of Infrastructure-for-Resources Deals in Africa’, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 20, 2 (2013), pp. 207–26.

54 Interview with a senior government architect, Maseru, 16 October 2019.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

cash reserves.<sup>57</sup> Rather, it was in the form of equipment and materials or, put simply, the building as the final product.<sup>58</sup>

The procurement process did not consult or involve the DAC. Contractors were commissioned in China and paid through Chinese banking channels. This meant that the grant did not flow into Lesotho's banking system.<sup>59</sup> Beyond the apparent economic disadvantage of this approach to Lesotho, the biggest challenge for the DAC was how to account properly for this aid. To show this challenge graphically, a senior DAC official puts it into perspective:

we knew how much it cost, but with the actual expenditure we were never in the picture. We would try to ask how much has been spent? How much is left? [But] they [Embassy of the PRC in Maseru] will keep on saying no, we are contacting our headquarters, but the information never comes forth. Even our parliament is aware of that because I remember at one time, when we were presenting on capital projects before the parliament, by mistake we had written zero in front of the state library [also China aid] instead of dash. They were like, how can you write a zero while we see the building functioning like that.<sup>60</sup>

Lesotho government officials in the ministry of finance would have preferred the cash reserves model of aid delivery to the complete equipment/infrastructure model. The former allows the recipient government to be in control of the tendering, expenditure monitoring and reporting processes.<sup>61</sup> According to a senior official in the ministry of finance, they prefer the cash reserves model because it also stimulates the local economy, since the contractor is obliged to open a local bank account, and the resources flow through the country's reserve bank.<sup>62</sup> In this case, China, as donor, exercised full control of the funding, procurement and construction process. The nominated Chinese construction and architectural firms were not obliged to open local bank accounts nor compelled to buy local building materials. As a result, the project did not directly contribute to the local economy commensurate to its scale. Read together, the project funding and management process affected the appearance of the final product (built using materials from China) and the long-term involvement of Chinese contractors in the parliament building's maintenance.

### **The 'UnBasotho' Finished Product<sup>63</sup>**

The net effect of China's dominance in the design and implementation of the building project was that the final product reflected more the desires of the giver and less the wishes of the recipient. The new building can be read as a concrete expression of China's desire for longevity of political relations with Lesotho. Lesotho is stuck with a building that looks alien and inadequately addresses its legislative accommodation needs. A senior parliament management official told me that 'this [the new building] was not quite what we could have wanted as officers of parliament. We had dreams. We had a vision of what we want as a parliament; unfortunately this is not what we had in mind'.<sup>64</sup> In this section, I illustrate the limitations of China's approach of unilaterally constructing the Lesotho parliament building.

57 Interview with a senior official in public debt and aid management, Maseru, 25 September 2019.

58 Interview with a senior official in the ministry of development planning, Maseru, 26 September 2019.

59 Interview with a senior official in public debt and aid management, Maseru, 25 September 2019.

60 Interview with a senior official in the ministry of development planning, Maseru, 26 September 2019.

61 *Ibid.*

62 Interview with a senior official in public debt and aid management, Maseru, 25 September 2019.

63 A citizen of Lesotho is a Mosotho, in plural they are Basotho, hence my reference/wordplay 'UnBasotho' to denote that which is foreign or not usual practice in Lesotho.

64 Interview with a senior parliament official, Maseru, 17 September 2019.



**Figure 3.** Side elevation of the new parliament building, September 2019. (Photograph by author.)

The first concerns how the building looks from the outside. An architect in the private sector succinctly articulated a running thread of commentary that I was getting from Basotho about how the building looks:

when a building is put on that scale there on top of the mountain coming up like monster big as it may be, foreign, when you see it without any element of Basotho tradition, I think it doesn't do justice to our culture, especially when it is a parliament. But if it was a private property, somebody's private property, one wouldn't mind.<sup>65</sup>

A central aspect in Lesotho's building tradition is the use of sandstone, which is abundant there. It is the signature construction material in Lesotho. In the 1980s, it was used to build a government complex. In contrast, the parliament's outer frame is made of smooth plaster, which has peeled off in Lesotho's harsh temperatures (see [Figure 3](#)).<sup>66</sup> One local contractor also told me that the Lesotho way would have been to use gamazine or marmoran textured plasters,<sup>67</sup> which are adaptable to the terrain and available in neighbouring South Africa. In addition, the use of slates as roofing material is considered new to Lesotho building culture.<sup>68</sup> Ten years after completion, problems in sourcing replacements continue. The use of building materials that are not locally available has led to the continued reliance on Chinese contractors in the maintenance of the building. The architect explained it in this way: 'when you specify sanitary fittings from China, and after some months something mechanical happens and it is not readily available here in Lesotho or in South Africa, it becomes a big problem'.<sup>69</sup>

65 Interview with a private sector architect, Maseru, 16 October 2019.

66 Author's field observation notes, Maseru, September–November 2019.

67 Interview with a local building contractor, Maseru, 3 October 2019.

68 Interview with a private sector architect, Maseru, 16 October 2019.

69 *Ibid.*

The major limitation of the building is that it has failed adequately to accommodate both houses of parliament. Lesotho operates a bi-cameral parliamentary system, which is steeped in its political history, in the form of an elected National Assembly and a Senate largely made up of hereditary chiefs. Since parliament staff were not permitted to visit the site during construction, they could not have seen that the room allocated for the Senate on the third floor of the building was too small to serve as a debating chamber. In addition, senators felt slighted by both the Chinese and the government.<sup>70</sup> The senators, mostly principal chiefs from the royal Moshoeshoe bloodline, refused to conduct their sessions in that room. As a result, Senate debates continue to be conducted at the British-constructed parliament building in central Maseru, and their senate staff occupy the nearby former residence of the colonial resident commissioner along Kingsway Avenue in Central Maseru.

This situation has the unintended consequence of amplifying the intra-parliament conflict between the National Assembly and the Senate – a historic issue in Lesotho politics.<sup>71</sup> The Senate interpreted this as a deliberate ploy by the politicians to marginalise the customary traditional leadership in the governance of Lesotho.<sup>72</sup> One of the senior managers in the Senate felt that it was down to ‘who had more input [in the design process] between the Senate and National Assembly. So, obviously, it was the National Assembly because theirs was just perfect but the Senate’s is not’.<sup>73</sup> The abandoned senate chamber has now been converted into a committee room and is used to convene the National Assembly’s portfolio committee meetings (see [Figure 4](#)).

Further limitations are to do with furnishings. The seats installed by the Chinese contractors in the National Assembly debating chamber were small and insufficiently sturdy. The extent of the problem became clear during an inspection visit by a cabinet minister when a chair broke under his weight. A technocrat recalls: ‘there came a time when one of the ministers actually went [to the building] before the official handover and tried to sit and the chair broke. That is when government took heed of our advice’.<sup>74</sup> The chairs were not suitable for the average Lesotho politician. A lean senior parliamentary staffer had this to say about the original chairs: ‘[Even] I am ... overweight for those chairs, and most of our members ... are not my size [but bigger]. So, they had to be removed’.<sup>75</sup>

After the original chairs were disqualified because of size, the next set was problematic owing to their colour. In the previous parliament building, the National Assembly had green seats, a legacy of British rule (the British House of Commons has green benches). In Lesotho, the colour is considered ‘traditional’ for the National Assembly.<sup>76</sup> However, the new chairs were covered in red fabric, giving rise to insinuations that this was done to align the chamber with the ruling Lesotho Democratic Congress colours. A senior official in the ministry of development planning recalls that:

the chairs, the colours they had to be changed just because the Chinese had brought the colours which they thought were suitable only to find that they were the colours which were coinciding with a certain political party. And after that much waste of dispatching chairs all the way from China to here, they had to be returned [with political elites] saying no, no, no, this colour is for party XYZ. You see we want a neutral colour.<sup>77</sup>

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70 Interview with a senior Senate official, Maseru, 8 October 2019.

71 Interview with a Lesotho politics professor, 7 October 2019.

72 Interview with a senior Senate official, Maseru, 8 October 2019.

73 *Ibid.*

74 Interview with a senior government technocrat, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

75 Interview with a senior parliamentary staff member, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

76 *Ibid.*

77 Interview with a senior official in the ministry of development planning, Maseru, 26 September 2019.



**Figure 4.** The Senate chamber, now committee room, Maseru, September 2019. (Photograph by author.)

Beyond the seat colour problem, the initial arrangement of chairs in the chamber was oblivious to the importance of Lesotho's Westminster parliamentary traditions. For example, there was no demarcation between members' seats and the Speaker's gallery. The senior parliamentary staffer notes that, 'they [Chinese contractors] had made it as if there was no Speaker's gallery and then we said no, you have to make provisions for the Speaker's gallery'.<sup>78</sup> This was resolved by establishing a barrier that demarcates the members from the gallery, removing the green chairs from the gallery and replacing them with brown ones (see Figure 5).

## The Utility of the Parliament of Lesotho to China

Parliament, in its historical and contemporary incarnations, is the soul of the Lesotho political system, hence its utility to China. Its modern history can be traced to 1903, when the British colonial authorities introduced a 100-member advisory council made up predominantly of chiefs. It was presided over by the colonial resident commissioner.<sup>79</sup> At independence, Lesotho elected to mirror Britain's two-chamber parliamentary system at Westminster by assigning elected representatives to the National Assembly and the hereditary chiefs to the Senate.

The executive is drawn from parliament and its leader, the prime minister, has to command a majority in the National Assembly. The house with *de facto* law-making power is the National Assembly.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with a senior parliamentary staff member, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

<sup>79</sup> L.B.B.J. Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho, 1800–1966: A Study of Political Institutions* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990), p. 82. Appointed by the British high commissioner, the resident commissioner was the most senior colonial official in the Basutoland protectorate and had executive and judiciary powers.



**Figure 5.** New National Assembly debating chamber, Maseru, September 2019. (Photograph by author.)

The Senate's powers are specifically limited by the constitution. The Senate is given, for example, a one-day window to discuss the Appropriation Bill.<sup>80</sup> Section 80(1) of the Constitution of Lesotho states that:

[w]hen a bill that is passed by the National Assembly and that is certified by the Speaker of the National Assembly under subsection (2) as an Appropriation bill is sent to the Senate it shall forthwith be introduced in the Senate and shall be passed by the Senate without delay; and if it is not passed by the Senate by the end of the day after the day on which it was sent to the Senate or if it is passed by the Senate with amendments to which the National Assembly does not by then agree, the bill, with such amendments, if any, as may have been agreed to by both Houses, shall, unless the National Assembly otherwise resolves, be presented to the King for assent.<sup>81</sup>

This example is indicative of the subsidiary role of the Senate; this a source of conflict between the hereditary chieftains and the elected politicians.

The most significant role of the parliament of Lesotho in general, and its National Assembly in particular, is to be the main theatre for performing national politics in the kingdom. Only parliament can bring together in one place Lesotho's constitutional monarchy, the executive, the judiciary and members of both houses. In this context, China's commitment to fund the parliament building guaranteed the visibility and prestige that came with being the enabler of this significant aspect of Lesotho politics. At the modest cost of ¥59 million RMB, this is a prime example of Stephen Chan's suggestion that China's African parliament-building projects are inexpensive but guarantee 'visibility for less outlay'.<sup>82</sup> In

80 Interview with a senior parliament official, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

81 Government of Lesotho, *The Constitution of Lesotho* (Maseru, Lesotho Government Printing and Stationary Department, 2018) pp. 47–8.

82 J. Nyabiage, 'How Zimbabwe's New Parliament Symbolises China's Chequebook Diplomacy Approach to Africa', *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, 5 January 2020, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3044402/how-zimbabwes-new-parliament-symbolises-chinas-chequebook>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

addition to the parliament of Lesotho's functional role, its members are to a large extent representative of the political factions in the country. In this sense, it forms an ideal gauge of political opinion in Lesotho.

Basotho perceive China's donation of the parliament building as a means to curry favour with, and even control, the Lesotho political elites.<sup>83</sup> A senior civic society leader surmised that the donation enhanced China's influence over parliamentary decisions. His view is that, 'there will not be any act [of parliament] that will control the Chinese because these guys [members of parliament], where they meet, has been sponsored by the Chinese. [The] Chinese are very clever in this'.<sup>84</sup> The growing close links between the ruling elites and Chinese state and non-state actors are often cited by Basotho. For example, former prime minister Tom Thabane's principal economic advisor was a Chinese national. Others believe that China was using the gift of the parliament building to establish a long-term foothold in Lesotho. A political scientist, for instance, reasoned that this act was not necessarily because 'China was being benevolent but a result of a calculated cost-benefit analysis'.<sup>85</sup> Using these perspectives, I posit that the substantive value of China's interest in Lesotho's parliament comes down to two factors.

First, the building enhances China's image and reputation in the eyes of all the political actors in parliament. This makes it easier to develop relations with subsequent governments. This is so because, in Lesotho, governments are wholly constituted from parliament. This means that China's long-term engagement in parliament provides access to key political actors even before they assume governmental responsibility. Inversely, the members will have been exposed to Chinese soft power through the building. Despite four changes of government since 2007, relations between China and Lesotho have remained stable.

Second, the parliament building is linked to China's quest to secure the interests of its nationals in Lesotho. China now understands its national security interests abroad as inclusive of Chinese nationals and enterprises. This is a policy that evolved after the Libya debacle in 2011, when scores of Chinese nationals were left stranded during the conflict. According to Yoon Jung Park, the Chinese in Lesotho 'make up the vast majority of foreigners in a country with no history of in-migration'.<sup>86</sup> In 2012, the Chinese embassy in Maseru is reported to have assessed the number of Chinese in Lesotho to be around 5,000, more than 70 per cent of the total foreign-born residents in Lesotho.<sup>87</sup>

The executive of a faith-based organisation encapsulated local perceptions of the extent of Chinese emigration to Lesotho:

the Chinese are just all over in this country. They are all over. Believe me there is a very mountainous district called Maloti. You will find the Chinese there. When going to my father's home town in Mokhotlong but in the outskirts whereby you have to leave a car and then walk for three to four hours on foot, you will find a Chinese shop in the midst of those mountains.<sup>88</sup>

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83 Focus group discussion with youth leaders, Maseru, 26 September 2019.

84 Interview with a senior civic society leader, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

85 Interview with a political science scholar, Maseru, 7 October 2019.

86 Yoon Jung Park, 'One Million Chinese in Africa', Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies *Perspectives*, 12 May 2016, available at <http://www.saisperspectives.com/2016issue/2016/5/12/n947s9csa0ik6kmm0bzb0hy584sfo>, retrieved 13 May 2020.

87 J. Cobbe, 'Lesotho: From Labor Reserve to Depopulating Periphery?' Migration Policy Institute Migration Information Source, 2 May 2012, available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/lesotho-labor-reserve-depopulating-periphery/>, retrieved 30 June 2021.

88 Interview with a faith-based organisation executive, Maseru, 25 September 2019.

Given these scholarly and personal accounts of the extent of Chinese presence in Lesotho, the gift of the parliament building can be read as cog in its diplomatic toolkit. The gift places China at the centre of Lesotho's political psyche and projects an image of a benevolent, thoughtful, friendly power. Such an image is targeted in line with China's diplomatic *raison d'être* of cultivating and nurturing links with the political elites.

## **Reflections on the Long-Term Implications of the Chinese-Built Parliament Building**

The method of delivering this gift further sustains and magnifies China's presence in the long run. Recall that China controlled the design, material procurement and construction of the parliament building. Therefore, only the Chinese design and construction firms know in detail the building, and, through them, China has leverage. From observing everyday life in the building and speaking to BDS technocrats and parliament management, I argue that China continuously maintains presence in Lesotho's parliament building through a 'design loop', 'materials fix' and tacit connivance with Lesotho's ruling elites.

The 'design loop' arises because China owns the design, by the China Northeast Architectural Design and Research Institute, of the parliament building. As shown earlier, this happened because the Lesotho ruling elites countermanded plans drawn by Basotho bureaucrats in favour of the new, China-driven plans. When bureaucrats pointed out this anomaly, one cabinet minister was reported to have quipped, 'no, this is a gift to the prime minister. You either do it or I don't know'.<sup>89</sup>

The effect of this approach is that the initial decisions of the Chinese architects and China's conceptualisation of the building will determine subsequent actions in it. One of the world's most established independent regulators in the construction sector, the Health and Safety Executive, points out that designers have huge influence on construction projects throughout their lifespan because their 'decisions such as selecting materials or components of a building can avoid, reduce or control risks involved in constructing a building and maintaining and using it after it is built'.<sup>90</sup>

In other words, there will be no reference to maintenance, or even the demolition, of the Lesotho parliament building without foregrounding the role of the Chinese in its design. The 'materials fix' is a corollary to the design loop, since the specification of materials at design stage ensured exclusive use of Chinese materials and expertise in construction. Let me demonstrate this through a first-hand account from a senior parliamentary official:

all these things that you can see, the plugs and the locks, the windows, the doors. If you look at this door, it is not local. It is a Chinese model. So there is no other company that we can involve that can be able to fit in this. They have to make a special arrangement to make this kind of a door ... So everything came from China to come here. So the Chinese are still involved. They are staying down there.<sup>91</sup>

By saying 'they are staying down there', the official was referring to the Chinese compound at the foot of the Mpilo Hill, where the parliament building is located. This compound was established as a temporary base for the China Yanjian Group workers during the construction period (2007–12). The expressed plan at the time was that the Chinese would

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with a senior government bureaucrat, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Health and Safety Executive (n.d.) 'Are You a Designer? Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015 (CDM 2015) – What You Need to Know', available at <https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/areyou/designer.htm> (paragraph 2), retrieved 13 May 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with a senior parliament official, Maseru 11 September 2019.

train locals and hand over the building to Lesotho after a year of occupation.<sup>92</sup> However, the Chinese were still operating at this base during my research in late 2019. Their official task was to be on hand to maintain the building. The compound precast wall is emblazoned with the words ‘Chinese Technical Team, taking care of the new Lesotho Parliament building’ and a visible China aid logo at its gate. This caption is repeated in Sesotho. The Chinese see themselves as the parliament’s ‘*bahlokomeli*’, which translates directly as ‘care-giver’ but can be contextually defined as ‘maintenance team’. Conceptually, a care-giver ‘assumes responsibility for the physical and emotional needs of one who is incapable of self care’.<sup>93</sup>

Drawing parallels with what the Chinese are doing at the parliament building, the metaphor of one incapable of self-care is striking. This is because the well-orchestrated model of delivering the parliament building makes China indispensable and their footprints omnipresent. A senior parliament manager conceded that Lesotho does not have the technical people to take care of the building and ‘needs to extend the contract for the Chinese technical teams in Lesotho so that they can still assist in taking care of the building’.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, efforts to develop local capacity to manage the building require the co-operation of the Chinese technical team. Another parliamentary official noted that the parliament needs the Chinese to help replace ‘components with the local stuff because even the door locks and bulbs are not so easy to replace’.<sup>95</sup> This means that Lesotho’s artisans are not yet able fully to maintain the building, and the Chinese continue to execute their *bahlokomeli* role, thereby sustaining their presence in Lesotho’s central state building.

Lesotho’s senior government ministers and officials who interact with China at diplomatic level support China’s continued presence in maintaining the parliament building. This was a fortuitous finding, as I searched for informants who were positively disposed towards the Chinese building project in order to provide a balanced perspective. One of these informants is a foreign policy technocrat. He pointed out that Lesotho accepted the gift because they could not afford to construct the parliament building themselves. He rationalised their acceptance of it by emphasising Lesotho’s weak economic position, high unemployment, small private sector and limited tax base.<sup>96</sup> This lack-of-funding rationale has also stymied efforts to take control of the maintenance of the building. For example, the public service ministry has not prioritised the hiring of local artisans to maintain the building, ostensibly because of budget constraints. The government has instead repeatedly extended the maintenance agreement with China. In return, the Chinese technical team is not billed for electricity, water and security expenses at the *bahlokomeli* compound.<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, Lesotho’s government has in the past agreed to the use of the Chinese embassy as the venue for communicating information about the state of the building and its maintenance arrangements. This demonstrates a subservient position, which China is wont to exploit. One graphic example of how China has exploited this pliant disposition is playing ultimate overlord of the parliament building. A senior parliament manager recounted for me a Chinese minister’s recent visit to the building:

one of the Chinese ministers visited our country to visit these projects that the Chinese government are doing. He then requested the Speaker to indicate if there are areas which the Chinese government can further help, so the Speaker raised a number of areas, one of them

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92 Interview with a senior government bureaucrat, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

93 The Free (Medical) Dictionary, available at <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/caregiver>, retrieved 13 May 2020.

94 Interview with a senior parliament official, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

95 Interview with a parliament official, Maseru, 23 September 2019.

96 Interview with a Lesotho foreign policy technocrat, Maseru, 26 September 2019.

97 Interview with a senior parliament official, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

being that the painting has worn off, so the Chinese thought to assist with the paints that can sustain rains and harsh weather condition.<sup>98</sup>

While it would ordinarily be inexplicable that a self-respecting state could suggest that a foreign power funds the painting of its parliament building, the narrative in this article has suggested an answer: to all intents and purposes, the building is Chinese.

## Conclusion

The story of Lesotho's parliament building contributes to understanding contemporary China in Africa and China–Africa relations in practice. For a start, it provides strong pointers to solving Rosenberg and Weinsfelder's puzzle: in funding Lesotho's parliament building, China was interested in neither exporting its communist ideology nor calculating prospective economic returns. It was not even interested in the project's economic trickle-down effect on Lesotho. Rather, the goal was a political investment. The octopus-like grip on the building's value chain was deliberate and meant to guarantee long-term presence. In constructing the building in this manner, China sought to make itself indispensable to the management and maintenance of the Lesotho parliament building. This would grant China continuous access to Lesotho's political system and secure its long-term foreign policy interests.

The public statement of allegiance made by Lesotho then prime minister, Tom Thabane, provides further evidence for this argument. He said: '[w]e have to acknowledge and remember that China has its own wishes and issues and it will need [the] support of friends. I am pledging openly that when China counts its friends, it should include Lesotho'.<sup>99</sup>

Notwithstanding the building's blights, the Lesotho political elites count it as a win because it gave them a trophy in the form of a landmark building and also brought them closer to a major patron in the international system. On the other hand, sidelined bureaucrats and under-credited Basotho artisans feel hard done by. Displacing locals and inserting China's approach in constructing the building flies in the face of China's dictum of non-interference in internal affairs. This showed how investment in Lesotho's most symbolic state building is a manifestation of the PRC's post-Tiananmen foreign policy outreach strategy. In this specific case, China used the parliament building as a gelding technique to sustain its omnipresent influence in Lesotho's political and diplomatic orbits.

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with a senior parliament official, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

<sup>99</sup> H. Mingrui, 'Lesotho's PM Says China Has Shown Commitment to African Development', Xinhua, 26 August 2018, available at <http://www.ecns.cn/news/politics/2018-08-26/detail-ifyxikfc9642775.shtml>, retrieved 14 May 2020.