

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

I first came across the story of the Chinese Buddhist orphanage while I was living in Malawi, producing features for Reuters *Africa Journal*. I was working on a story about orphans at the time that Madonna was adopting her second child, Mercy. At this time Malawi and other parts of Africa, were experiencing a rapid influx of Chinese investment and Chinese nationals - following the formalising of Malawi's diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China. I felt this story would be a fascinating lens through which to view and engage in the debates around the implications of China's involvement in Africa.

Western critics were describing it as China's "colonisation" of the African continent or "China's Scramble for Africa." For many African leaders on the other hand, the feeling was that Chinese trade and investment offer a welcome alternative to a dependency on aid from the West.

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is dependent on donor aid for most of its annual national budget. The former colonial powers have left countries like Malawi reeling in debt. Its new Asian partner offers trade, not aid. But will it treat Africa all that differently to how the West has?

While most debate around "China in Africa" at the time was focused on the so-called "colonization" of her economies and natural resources, this story showed a unique aspect of China's cultural influence on the continent. I was struck by how this orphanage was strangely reminiscent of the Christian missions during the colonial era – only here African children had Chinese names and instead of learning about the West, they were learning about Chinese culture and history. I felt the orphanage would be the perfect metaphor to explore the growing relationship between China and Africa, but also as a mirror of Western colonialism.

As a white South African my ancestry represents the legacy of colonialism on the continent. From this perspective I was drawn to how this story could help me reflect on my own historical context and questions around feeling like an "outsider" or "foreigner" in my own country.

The story is told from the perspective of Enock and his school-friends. When I was first introduced to Enock, I was captivated by the story of this young Malawian boy who dreamt of becoming a kung fu film star like Jet Li. For so long Africa has been influenced by Western culture, but this story showed how the influence of Chinese culture was shaping the minds and imaginations of a group of African children. I was drawn to how this story could enable me to look at the growing China Africa relationship through the personal dynamics of the Malawian children growing up within the Chinese culture in the family like setting of the orphanage.

As one of the first generations of African children to be raised within the Chinese culture, I was curious to know how this upbringing had impacted their identity, especially the younger children who came from their home villages at the age of five with little time to know their Malawian culture.

I discovered that while Enock, at the age of 12, had already travelled extensively to nearly every corner of the world, he had little recollection of his personal background. He didn't know much about who his parents were, how his mother died and had never seen a photograph of his parents before. So the early stages of my filmmaking with Enock involved initiating this process of reflection into his past.

As filming progressed I was interested to see how Enock and his friends were starting to question their Chinese upbringing and formulate their own ideas and identity's. Especially Enock, who challenges the monk in surprising ways. Some of the reasons Enock gives for not wanting to go to Taiwan to study; resonate with some of the questions being asked within the greater development debate. While there is the expectation from the monk that the students go overseas to gain skills and experience and then bring them back to develop the country, Enock questions how they will be able to develop the country if they come back as "outsiders".

I feel Enock's internal conflict of trying to hold onto his own culture and then the sacrifices that come with embracing the opportunities afforded by the Chinese, in many ways reflects the dilemma around the future of the African continent. If our identities and bonds with our communities are fractured, can we aid true development? Or are we simply perpetuating the cycles of the past on a continent that has a long history of foreign conquest and domination?

-Nicole Schafer