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# Eat Bitter

TWO MEN. TWO CULTURES. WHATEVER IT TAKES.



A DOCUMENTARY BY PASCALE APPORA-GNEKINDY AND NINGYI SUN PRODUCER MATHIEU FAURE  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MATHIEU FAURE AND STEVE DORST EDITORS HANNAH CHOE AND MATHIEU FAURE  
CINEMATOGRAPHERS ORPHÉE ZAZA EMMANUEL BAMOY SOUND ENGINEER AARON KOYASSOUKPENGO

## 'Eat Bitter': A Conversation with Ningyi Sun and Pascale Appora-Gnekindy

Miriam DRIESSEN,  
Ningyi SUN,  
Pascale APPORA-GNEKINDY

**T**ouching, absorbing, and, at times, hilarious, the 2023 documentary *Eat Bitter* reveals the human face of Chinese involvement in Africa. Set in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, the film follows Thomas Boa and Jianmin Luan, two men whose lives are intertwined by sand. Thomas dives for sand in the Ubangi River. Jianmin, the site manager of a Chinese construction firm, buys the material from a sand dealer and uses it for making cement. Thomas and Jianmin only occasionally cross paths. Even so, their lives are connected by shared feelings of compassion, pain, longing, and joy.

Film directors Ningyi Sun and Pascale Appora-Gnekindy bring out beautifully the commonalities in people and their struggles to create better lives for their families, their search for autonomy and freedom, and their longing for companionship and intimacy. Artfully and sympathetically crafted, *Eat Bitter* bears witness to the everyday lives impacted by China's growing global presence.

**Miriam Driessen: Why did you decide to follow the lives of Thomas Boa and Jianmin Luan?**

**Ningyi Sun:** It took us two months to decide to follow Thomas and Jianmin, with me focusing on finding a Chinese character and Pascale on finding a Central African one. I talked with a few Chinese workers, but we could not settle on whom to focus for this film until I was introduced to Jianmin through his boss, Madam He. She had lived in Bangui for more than 30 years and founded a Chinese–Central African construction company there. Jianmin was honest about his goals and challenges. He mingled with locals and expressed affection towards his wife. Most importantly, he did not mind our camera! Through Jianmin, we aimed to showcase the life of a Chinese construction manager in Central Africa and to convey what it meant for his closest family members when he was away for a decade, striving to provide a better life for them back in China.

**Pascale Appora-Gnekindy:** Whether we live in a 'developed' or 'emerging' part of the world, regardless of our social environment and background, everyone shares the same goal in life: to live happily with our family. However, we often create stereotypes of each other and overlook what is truly essential: our common humanity. By following





### Eat Bitter

(Top) Thomas praying in a canoe on the Ubangi River. (Middle) Jianmin talking with his wife in China. (Bottom) Jianmin eating with colleagues.



Thomas and Jianmin—two individuals who might be considered ‘unimportant’ or ‘social failures’—I wanted to give voice to the voiceless, demonstrating that every person possesses inherent worth. Their lives reveal that, regardless of culture or origin, we all face similar challenges and are willing to make sacrifices for the wellbeing of ourselves and our families.

**MD: What did you learn from the two protagonists and the making of this documentary on a personal and professional level?**

**NS:** I have experienced tremendous personal and professional growth while creating this documentary. In 2020, I was working in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, as a United Nations volunteer. I was approached by a filmmaker based in Washington, DC, about potentially making a film set in the country, as not many people know much about it. I was excited but also unsure if I could do this as I had not studied filmmaking. I do have a deep-seated passion for storytelling. Eventually, I took the opportunity and learned documentary filmmaking from scratch by making *Eat Bitter*.

I embarked on a journey of learning, delving into directing, producing, editing, and cinematography. Weaving the life stories of our two protagonists into one film taught me that, despite differences in cultural and social backgrounds, people share universal desires for independence and romance. Collaborating with an international team comprising filmmakers from the United States, France, the Central African Republic, and China nurtured compassion within me. After completing *Eat Bitter* it became clear to me that filmmaking was my passion, and I am determined to build a career in this field.

**PAG:** Working on *Eat Bitter* taught me the importance of appreciating others for their true values. Before making films, I was a computer scientist in a telephone company in Bangui for seven years. During this time, I made short videos with friends and family with a camera, until Ateliers Varan in Paris launched a call for applications to train in filmmaking. After a seven-week workshop, I made my first short film, *Mes Yeux pour Entendre (My Eyes to Hear)*, in 2018. I met Ningyi in 2020 after I had made a second short, *Deux Soeurs (Two Sisters)*. This is where our long and valuable collaboration on *Eat Bitter* began. She told me about the project, which initially was just a short report on sand workers. By spending more time with our protagonists, we quickly realised that a great story was hidden behind it and that is how we have *Eat Bitter* today.

Over the two years of production, I spent more time with my protagonists than with my own family. I learned to ‘sit on the ground and eat with them’, realising the significance of human relationships and acknowledging that everyone’s life has its challenges. Despite the difficulties, this does not prevent us from finding joy in life.

The most rewarding aspect of the production was the teamwork. Working with six people—two women and four men from four different cultures—presented a real challenge. This experience taught me the true essence of teamwork: understanding



and appreciating each other's perspectives to enhance collaboration. Despite the stress and pressure, it was a period of tremendous learning. We all grew and gained valuable insights from each other. If given the opportunity to work with the same team again, I would embrace it without hesitation.

**MD: Sand and its materiality are central in the documentary. Was this a conscious choice? Did sand inform some of the artistic decisions you made? If so, how?**

**NS:** In the early stages of the project, I envisioned capturing the picturesque scene of local people extracting sand from the centre of the Ubangi River and bringing it to the shore—a visually captivating image. However, I was encouraged by one of the executive producers to delve deeper into understanding the local sand trade and its significance. It became apparent that sand symbolised economic prosperity in the region. Subsequently, I conceived of the idea of creating a short documentary, collaborating with a co-director from the Central African Republic, to explore the sand supply chain in Bangui. This concept evolved as we expanded the scope of the film into a feature-length production. We remain steadfast in our belief that sand represents the country's progression towards modernisation, influenced by the involvement of foreign stakeholders such as the Chinese.

In the Central African Republic, sand could be seen as a symbol of money and power as the supply chain involves local labour, sand dealers, and buyers from both the Central African Republic and the foreigners working in the construction industry in the country. It represents capitalism and globalisation. However, at the bottom of this chain are the locals who work in the most traditional way: the sand divers, known as *Tombutu*, dive underwater to carve out sand from the bottom of the river with their bare hands. The sand supply chain therefore represents modernity and tradition and how the two coexist in the country.



**PAG:** Sand serves as the common thread connecting Jianmin and Thomas. It is an integral part of both men's lives. For Thomas, diving for sand and selling it are essential for earning a living. We witness his determination to earn extra money, even risking venturing into areas under rebel control to prepare for his children's Christmas party. Similarly, Jianmin's ability to complete his projects on time directly impacts his ability to provide for his family and plan for retirement. Sand is indispensable for construction with cement, highlighting the interdependence between their work. In this dynamic, sand takes centre-stage, symbolising the crucial link between their livelihoods.

**MD:** You shot this film during the Covid-19 pandemic. How did the pandemic affect, if at all, the production of the film, from its conception to its release?

**PAG and NS:** We started shooting in October 2020, right in the middle of the pandemic. However, our work was hardly affected. In Bangui, the impact of Covid-19 was not immediately visible as life continued as normal. The disease was known as the 'white people disease'. Those who fell ill of Covid-19 believed it was malaria, due to comparable symptoms. Most people were young and recovered fast. However, Covid-19 affected Jianmin's work significantly. His construction projects relied on importing

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(Previous page)  
Jianmin with Central  
African colleagues.  
(Above) Thomas  
collecting sand.

materials from outside the country. With flights suspended, it became challenging to procure the necessary materials, ultimately affecting the deadlines for the projects he was responsible for meeting.

**MD:** You chose to highlight the commonalities between Thomas Boa and Jianmin Luan. However, the film also hints at differences between the two protagonists. For instance, early in the film Thomas expresses doubts about the mutually beneficial nature of the relationship between Chinese and Central Africans, comparing Chinese nationals to ‘white people’. Did you sense power asymmetries in the relationship between the Central African and Chinese characters in the film? If so, can you give one or two examples?

**NS:** Thomas had limited contact with Chinese individuals before our project. He shared a common view among Central Africans that Chinese workers may be like ‘white people’, as they appear to earn more money. It is understandable that Central Africans harbour frustration towards expatriates in their homeland, as it seems that expatriates gain materially from their activities while many locals still live in poverty. However, the Chinese workers have travelled to the African continent for a reason: they seek to earn enough to support their families back in China. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that they would receive higher salaries to compensate for the sacrifices they make by being away from their families for extended periods. It is a fact that foreign labour—notably, the Chinese and Lebanese in Bangui, especially if in management positions and immigrating for higher earnings—often receives higher salaries.

Additionally, since the Chinese characters in this film are the buyers of sand, they hold an advantageous position as they can select their suppliers. A more systematic study would be meaningful if we examine the asymmetry in Chinese–Central African relationships, considering specific clauses in the contracts of large-scale infrastructure projects or in foreign–Central African relationships from the perspectives of international aid and the country’s colonial history.

**PAG:** One instance of asymmetry I observed was when Jianmin welcomed new Chinese workers. Their conversation implied that there was a lack of qualified local labour. He also hinted in the film that he and his colleagues did not perceive the locals as hardworking. For example, the Chinese are willing to work late in the evening or even at night, which locals do not normally do. Also, there are few specialists in his field, or perhaps he does not know them. Therefore it appears to them that there is not enough qualified labour.





**MD:** What do you hope viewers will take away from *Eat Bitter*?

#### Checking Sand

**NS:** This film offers a chance for the audience to dive into the ordinary lives of a Chinese and a Central African, which hopefully will inspire a nuanced understanding of these two communities.

Screenshot from the movie showing one of the main characters, Jianmin, at work.

**PAG:** It invites viewers to step into the shoes of Thomas and Jianmin and encourages them to momentarily set aside their own identities and envision themselves in the role of each protagonist. By so doing, they will hopefully experience the weight of the stereotypes we often impose on one another. The Chinese community is generally considered to be closed and inaccessible. However, Jianmin indicated an interest in locals. He spent our national holiday, Independence Day, with his Central African workers. He also celebrated his birthday with locals. As for sand workers like Thomas, they have a low status. They are considered failures of society. However, we discovered that some of them have diplomas or other talents, like Thomas. I remember that during the first screening in Bangui, an expatriate said: 'I now look at these fishermen with different eyes.' ●