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View inside Dragon City

Launched in 2000, this is among the more successful Chinese-run malls and is one of the primary entry points to buy affordable products in bulk. Initially reserved exclusively for those making wholesale purchases, the mall has bowed to heightened competition and partial market saturation to accept retail sales. In parallel, a growing number of non-Chinese tenants also feature more prominently inside the mall, reflecting some of these changes
Source: Mark Lewis, 2019.

Pragmatic Living in Motion: Two Chinese 'Migrants' and their Meanderings in the 'City of Gold'

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This essay unpacks the personal stories and experiences of two Chinese individuals who have lived in Johannesburg for a considerable time. It offers contextualised glimpses about ageing and living in a city in which inequality, excess, violence, and the mundane coexist in a complicated tension. By using 'pragmatic living' as a lens for social inquiry, the essay pursues two aims. One is to challenge more compartmentalised ways of examining such lives, which often transcend migrant, diasporic, transnational, and localised characteristics; the other is to find ways to discard or cut across rigid analytical binaries.

Johannesburg is often portrayed as rough and unsafe, with deep-rooted inequalities visibly entrenched in the urban landscape (Murray 2011). Its partial identity as both a trading hub and an arrival city resonates with images of hustling, cut-throat competition, and the cash economy (Zack and Govender 2019). It is within this context that many Chinese migrant-entrepreneurs have sought to take advantage of existing (or new) business opportunities and explore possibilities for a better life. As a symbol of late capitalism, the advent and proliferation of Chinese-run shopping malls—largely concentrated along the southern edge of the inner city—have come to embody the high level of Chinese involvement in wholesale trade during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Lin 2014; Huang 2021).

At the same time, the Chinese presence in South Africa is complex, sparking much scholarly interest over the years. There have been several waves of Chinese migration, raising questions about identity, forms of attachment, and belonging (Huynh et al. 2010). The Chinese presence includes 'local' Chinese—those born in South Africa—many of whom grew up during the Apartheid years and were subjected to racial discrimination (Park 2008). Their grandparents or even great-grandparents were attracted by the goldrush towards the end of the nineteenth century but were not allowed to work in the mines due to racially exclusionary laws. Instead, they opened grocery stores, restaurants, or gambling dens (Yap and Man 1996; Accone 2004). During the 1970s, the Apartheid regime—which rendered the government isolated internationally and desperate for foreign investment—granted Taiwanese industrialists preferential treatment (tax incentives and status as 'honorary whites'), convincing some to set up factories near the former so-called homelands (Hart 2002). After decades of controlled mobility (both

domestically and internationally), the People's Republic of China (PRC) undertook economic reforms and began opening-up from the late 1970s, while the issuing of passports was liberalised in 1986; both made it possible for mainland Chinese to migrate overseas on their own initiative (Nyíri 2020: 43). Mainland Chinese started arriving in South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the gradual demise of Apartheid generated new possibilities, especially due to the dearth of affordable manufactured goods. Owing to China's emergence as a global manufacturer, many of these early pioneers and adventurers made a fortune through the importation of textiles and other everyday products. The prospect of quick economic gains—achieved largely through bulk sales—acted as an attractive pull factor. While until this point the Chinese presence remained limited, with a considerable proportion of the local Chinese and Taiwanese even deciding to leave South Africa during the 1990s, the influx of new migrant-entrepreneurs in the early 2000s quickly brought numbers to somewhere between 350,000 and 500,000 people (based on rough estimations; see Park 2012).

Today, Johannesburg appears far less attractive than a decade ago. Initial stories of success and rapidly made fortunes have gradually morphed into a reality of reduced profit margins and (a somewhat self-induced) market saturation. Due to factors ranging from a prolonged economic slump, unfavourable exchange rates, and a partially hollowed-out state to persistently high crime rates and recurrent anti-foreigner sentiments, many Chinese seem to be reconsidering whether staying in South Africa is a viable option. Meanwhile, personal circumstances and living conditions vary significantly. Whereas earlier migrants (including local Chinese, Taiwanese, and early mainlanders) are generally better off and tend to live in upmarket suburbs, the bulk of the newcomers have less capital, fewer networks, and lower education levels. This is also reflected in their occupations—from those active in the corporate world, others running businesses, to the ones working in shops inside the Chinese-run malls. How their relationship to the country, city, and neighbourhood unfolds is contingent on a combination of all these criteria. Moreover, the way they navigate Johannesburg's urban landscape is shaped by a series of shifting 'strategies and tactics', which manifest in varying forms of (in)visibility (Harrison et al. 2012).

In my research on Johannesburg, starting in 2009, I studied the ways in which different Chinese spaces—or at least those perceived as such—have materialised, changed, and become entangled with the underlying realities of the city (see, for instance, Dittgen 2017; Dittgen et al. 2019). Over the course of my fieldwork (both individually and in collaboration with others—for example, with photographer Mark Lewis, whose photos accompany this essay), I met several key individuals who were often gatekeepers and who, throughout the years, offered me access to the different layers of these 'spaces'. I kept in touch with a few of them, observing how some of their initial thoughts, habits, ideals, or goals changed, were dismissed, or became more firmly entrenched. Simultaneously, these periodic conversations allowed me to gain a more nuanced sense of how these people reflected on some of their life decisions, roads not taken, as well as everyday

doings, alongside hearing about their joys, concerns, hopes, and frustrations. Many of the thoughts expressed during these exchanges resonated closely with a certain idea of pragmatism in which navigating everyday life requires ‘learning to expect and manage uncertainty’ (Wills and Lake 2020: 3). To link pragmatist thinking with ways of living, this essay explores the notion of ‘pragmatic living’ from a particular perspective and as unfolding within a specific context.

First, it is necessary to provide a few preliminary remarks on what I mean by ‘pragmatic living’, which requires diving into the scholarly literature on pragmatism. For ‘first-generation’ pragmatists such as John Dewey, *experience*—referring both to the experiencing subject and to the object of experience—plays a crucial role in the pragmatic maxim (despite subsequent debates about its conceptual validity). It is ‘a process through which we transact with our surroundings and meet our needs’ while being also ‘shaped by our habits of expectation’ (Legg and Hookway 2021). As such, experience actively mediates between ideas and outcomes. Depending on circumstances or the ‘provocations of life’, these ideas can evolve, pushing people ‘to inquire into new ways of thinking and acting’ (Wills and Lake 2020: 11), especially in a setting in which ‘visions of urban futurity cede ground to tentative experiments in managing what cannot be confidently foreseen’ (Zeiderman et al. 2015: 283). If this dynamic interplay can, in ideal scenarios, be tied to personal preferences or desires, in most cases, pragmatic living requires compromise and experimentation. Furthermore, it also speaks to ‘a willingness to bracket prior expectations and foundational assumptions, [as much as] an openness to and tolerance of multiple perspectives’ (Wills and Lake 2020: 16). If an elaborate unpacking of the concept itself exceeds the limits of this essay, it is nevertheless worth stressing that pragmatic living is deeply entangled with both modalities of power—understood here ‘as a relational effect of social interaction’ (Allen 2003; 2008: 1614)—and a dynamic space–time dialectic (Massey 2005). Ultimately, ‘the possibility for the unexpected’ (Wills and Lake 2020: 4) becomes an integral part of pragmatic living. As such, using pragmatic living as a lens for social inquiry challenges more compartmentalised and often rigid ways of examining these lives, which transcend migrant, diasporic, transnational, as well as localised characteristics. In what follows, some of these underlying elements are explored primarily through the personal stories and experiences of two Chinese individuals who have lived in Johannesburg for a considerable time, offering some contextualised glimpses into ageing and living in motion.

Spatial Geographies of the City Reconsidered

Mei, originally from a major city in central China, and Haoyu, from China’s southern coast, have been based in Johannesburg since the mid and early 1990s, respectively, witnessing first hand the political transition at that time [Both are pseudonyms and, to the best of my knowledge, they do not know each other]. I met Mei in 2010, when



Shifting Urban Realities and Perceptions

View towards Hillbrow (in the background), one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in Johannesburg. Celebrated as the centre of cosmopolitan life between the 1960s and 1980s—albeit officially restricted to white people during Apartheid—Hillbrow from the 1990s has become largely associated with crime, overpopulation, a lack of municipal services, and a sizeable concentration of foreign nationals from different parts of the continent. Source: Mark Lewis, 2016.

conducting research on Chinese shopping malls and wholesale activities, and Haoyu in 2016, when focusing more specifically on the dynamics of change along Derrick Avenue, the main street of Johannesburg's primary Chinatown. Now aged in their mid to late fifties, both chose distinct paths (one is a businesswoman, the other an architect/designer) and priorities, while at the same time entertaining a shifting relationship with the (so-called) Chinese spaces and the city as a whole.

In contrast to many of the more recently arrived Chinese migrants, both are financially stable and hold South African ID (while also keeping their Chinese passports). Mei thrived financially after establishing a successful logistics company focusing on imports and exports between China and South Africa. Her initial decision to come to Johannesburg, aged 27, was to join her mother and sister. Following the death of her father, a professional singer whom she often accompanied to concerts throughout China, and her first marriage ending in a divorce, Mei had no reason to stay in China. At first, Mei lived with her family in Johannesburg but soon married a white South African to legally stay in the country. As part of this marriage of convenience, as she refers to it, she moved to an upmarket neighbourhood, and substantially improved her English during that time. This marriage did not last, but soon after, she married a US citizen, her current husband. Originally from a poor background, Mei repeatedly mentioned how driven and eager she was to become rich and be part of the upper class. Johannesburg's complicated dialectic between race and class—still manifest in the spatial make-up of the city—raises questions about where Chinese people (especially when successful) situate themselves in South African society. Back in 2010, during one of our first conversations, Mei shared some general thoughts about this:

People, they look at you because you're a foreigner. But they're very nice to you, at least to me. Chinese people, however, have a common problem that they don't treat black people equally. In China, there is less difference, so when Chinese people come to South Africa, they automatically fit themselves into the white category, instead of associating themselves to people of colour. Often, they're not friendly to black people, and it creates a lot of misunderstandings. (Interview, November 2010)

Over the years, Mei regularly invited me to her house either to share a meal or to play cards with her and some of her friends, many of whom were part of a Chinese women's business association. Successful and mainly involved in wholesale trading, they all followed a similar upward class trajectory, which was mirrored by their lifestyles and spatial practices in the city. Comparable with many in the middle and upper classes (and irrespective of racial background), Mei's guests all shared an aversion to or at least strong discomfort about specific neighbourhoods in Johannesburg that were considered unsafe and largely inhabited by poor black people. At the same time, quite a few of those who arrived in the city in the early 1990s started from rather humble beginnings, often hawking in the same neighbourhoods they now avoid.



Chinese New Year

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese New Year celebrations in Chinatown attracted visitors from all over Johannesburg, to eat and to follow the festivities (dragon dances and fireworks). The buildings in the background predated the arrival of the Chinese, but the flats were gradually subdivided into smaller units to accommodate the until recently significant demand from Chinese migrants. Most of these tenants work in the Chinese-run malls and are looking to stay in a place of relative familiarity. Source: Mark Lewis, 2018.

While proudly Chinese, Mei's strong attachment to 'Chineseness' gradually took on a more clearly discernible class dimension as, over time, her mental map of no-go areas expanded from downtown Johannesburg and surrounds to several so-called Chinese spaces, including Derrick Avenue in Cyrildene:

I don't go there anymore. I don't feel safe ... [P]eople will follow you. And, I have everything I need in Rivonia: groceries and restaurants, and you see far more corporate Chinese going there as well. Along Derrick, the Chinese are rude and they have no manners. (Interview, March 2022)

Johannesburg has two Chinatowns: one close to downtown, in decline, and linked to an earlier wave of migration going back to the turn of the nineteenth century; the other in the eastern suburb of Cyrildene, which only began developing from the 1990s. About 10 years ago, several Chinese restaurants and shops also started to cluster along Rivonia Boulevard near Sandton, the city's main financial district, and several upmarket northern suburbs. The partial split in terms of clientele between Derrick Avenue and Rivonia Boulevard points to a growing class differentiation between mainland Chinese migrants who live in South Africa. This echoes Goodman's (2014: 189–90) argument about class considerations in China being increasingly tied to lifestyle concerns and housing preferences, and subsequently reinforcing forms of class identity. Initially, though, I would frequently meet Mei in Chinatown in Cyrildene, where she was a regular at dinner functions and events organised by various Chinese associations and was often asked to deliver a song. While not a professional singer, Mei gathered fame among the Chinese in Johannesburg (especially for her repertoire of traditional songs) and told me many times she had performed on stage during former president Jacob Zuma's third wedding.

Haoyu, on the other hand, has continuously lived in Chinatown near the main activity strip, in the same freestanding house he bought in 1991. On a day-to-day basis, his engagement with the street is limited; he mostly stays inside (preparing food, checking on his 13-year-old son's study progress) or spends time elsewhere. His engagement with Chinatown materialises in a more structural way. For example, on request by one of the richest Chinese businessmen in Johannesburg and as someone who is deeply involved in community matters, Haoyu agreed to design the archways now standing at each end of Derrick Avenue. He refused to charge for the work, with the gates primarily financed through community donations, and told me this was his contribution to the shaping of an attractive Chinatown. In parallel, property prices within Chinatown and its immediate surrounds had soared, triggered by the high demand from Chinese newcomers (at least until a few years ago) looking for a place of (transient) attachment and familiarity:

It's difficult for white people to accept this kind of lifestyle. Only Chinese can accept this. It's too noisy, crowded and things just work differently ... Over the years, I received many offers to sell my house. The neighbours wanted to pay 4 million [ZAR] to tear down the house and build a block of flats. My wife didn't want to sell, so we kept the house. Today we wouldn't get 4 million anymore, maybe 2 million [ZAR, or roughly €125,000]. There is much less demand now. (Conversation with Haoyu, October 2021)

The gradual transformation of the built environment along Derrick Avenue generated continued objections from adjacent residents who feared that Chinatown—perceived as dirty and chaotic—would spread and disrupt the largely residential suburb. The main concern was the street and its immediate surroundings negatively impacting on the area's property values. At the same time, the high demand among Chinese to either rent or buy property pushed prices up, even if in a spatially confined manner. With Cyrildene not high on the city administration's list of priorities, eventually, the Planning Department agreed to develop a precinct plan, trying to find a balance between the altered urban fabric and demands to limit Chinatown's expansion. As a long-term resident of the area, Haoyu disagreed with the city's vision and form of engagement, stressing the need to consider a far more pragmatic approach to urban change:

[T]o develop the area, attention needs to be paid to the economic base. So far, it has developed organically without any plans in place ... The main thing to note is that this area has slowly been changing and even if it looks the way it does, this should be seen as positive and can be used as a foundation to develop it to be better, in a holistic and sustainable way. Whatever plans the city has, they are not communicated effectively with the Chinese community and not much effort seems to be made to understand our needs. There is also a disconnection about the way development should proceed between CoJ [City of Johannesburg] and the Chinese community. For them, there must be a plan before the area can be developed, and since it is not a priority area, nothing happens and we have this organic form of development, which looks chaotic. If this area is not a priority for CoJ, why don't they then support community efforts? Cyrildene has faced ups and downs; no-one can control that. (Interview, August 2019)



Street Scene in Chinatown

An informal waste collector pulls his trolley along Derrick Avenue, which has undergone the most visible transformations in the built environment. Often reduced to the representation as an ethnic enclave, partially informed through its prevalent spatial markers and demographics, the street's composition is far more diverse and connects to the city in manifold ways. Source: Mark Lewis, 2017.

While staying in Cyrildene, Haoyu also designed and built a house in an upmarket gated estate halfway between Johannesburg and Pretoria. Finalising the project has taken much longer than expected as he aimed to import some of the material from China (partly to save on costs), which has been delayed due to the pandemic. While construction was stalled, he received a monthly fine from the estate's management without being able to establish a direct channel of communication with the body corporate to explain himself. While Haoyu generally tends to resonate more in terms

of class than racial dynamics, in this instance, he was adamant that being Chinese had triggered this treatment. While he envisaged this new estate as his eventual place of retirement, these challenges have dampened his eagerness to move there.

If pragmatic living, through the lens of experience, is about meeting needs and expectations, in practice, this can result in deciding what spaces to engage with. Alternatively, it can also mean that some options simply appear outside the sphere of what is deemed possible or acceptable. For the Chinese newcomers who work inside the Chinese-owned malls and whose capital and networks are scant, spatial and



Trading in Context

Outside view of one of the many Chinese-run malls situated in the Crown Mines area, to the south of Johannesburg's inner city. Security is a prominent feature with, in this case, vehicles controlled upon entering and exiting the premises and the presence of a nearby watchtower. In more recent years, some of these malls have tried to attract tenants through a combined live-work(-play) offer, advertised here as a 'Chinese celebrities apartment' (华人名人公寓). Source: Mark Lewis, 2017.

residential dynamics are largely informed by the goal to save money and limit risks and expenses. As a result, many resort to sharing accommodation in Chinatown or within the premises of those malls that offer residential possibilities. In Mei's and Haoyu's cases, because of their upward economic mobility, pragmatic living is closely entangled with shifting class dynamics and becomes, to some extent, a question of convenience and personal preference. If Mei's evolving engagement with the city could be reduced to opportunism, within a pragmatist mindset, these different stages of her residential journey can be 'understood as [an] active mediation between ideas and outcomes' (Wills and Lake 2020: 11).

Work, Ageing, and (Long-Term) Possibilities

One day, Haoyu and I drove through the inner city on our way to visit some of the Chinese-run malls in the mining belt. Stuck in traffic, he pointed to the adjacent street and casually mentioned that many years ago he was mugged in that spot. I asked him whether this incident had sown doubt about his decision to stay in South Africa, to which he replied:

This was in 1991 when I arrived in South Africa. China was still very poor then and only opened up recently; it was still very difficult to get out or to come in. So, no one can really know what the world outside is like. My uncle from Hong Kong, a businessman, told us that he travelled to many places in the world and South Africa is the best option: the weather is nice, houses are big and very cheap, highways are good, electricity, everything is cheap ... I didn't know how fast China was going to change. I was still working in China, so never felt I can't go back, but I could not go to Europe or the US. Lots of people applied for SA [South African] passports; this helped to get a visa for the US, Europe, or Australia. I didn't need it as my work was in China. (Interview, September 2020)

His uncle, who had invested a sizeable sum in South Africa, was granted 19 immigration permits, which he offered to his extended family. Haoyu's wife decided to accept and migrated to start her own business in Johannesburg. Haoyu, aged 28 at the time, was not particularly drawn to South Africa as he had a job in China and did not want to give it up. However, since the couple wanted to start a family, he eventually joined her. Over the years, while based in Johannesburg, he continued to primarily work on projects in China, periodically flying back to design and oversee the construction of developments (mainly towers and commercial spaces). Because his studies had coincided with the

Tiananmen protests, he never received his final diploma and struggled to have his degree officially recognised in South Africa. Occasionally, Chinese businesspeople in Johannesburg and beyond do hire his services to design projects, mainly for commercial purposes, but he has not managed to work for a South African firm.

In contrast, Mei, as an entrepreneur, thought it was less complicated to set up a business in South Africa than in China. At various points, she imported high-end furniture, ran a tourist agency, a logistics company, and explored possibilities in relation to solar energy, while acknowledging that some of this ease, at least at an early stage, was linked to her husband being white. More importantly, though, singing put her in contact with a lot of Chinese businesspeople, opening doors and widening her pool of potential customers. Eventually, she acted as the secretary-general of a well-connected Chinese businesswomen's association, with about 100 members in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and even Mozambique, and largely involved in charity work targeted at local initiatives. It was through this that she met former president Zuma's third wife, as well as other political leaders. In business, she often combined the two networks, trying to team up with those having access to government projects (and ticking the right affirmative action conditionalities) while making use of her Chinese connections to gain information about certain industries or contacts at specific factories back in China. A few years ago, she had a car accident that continues to affect her health, putting a lot of her decisions and priorities into perspective. For some time, she had been thinking about moving to the United States, where her mother, sister and her eldest son (from her first marriage) all live and where her two sons from her current marriage recently enrolled in a private high school:

You know I always tell you that I love money. But I actually don't need all the things I have, all these bags, clothes, the big property. It doesn't matter really ... Our plan is to sell the house and the farm, scale down and then move to Florida. There is no one left here besides the two of us [referring to her husband]. I cannot retire yet, there are a lot of expenses, so I want to buy a small place here, keep a link. Try to do some business between South Africa and the US. [Because of Covid-19, she let go of her travel agency and is now solely focusing on her logistics company.] I have spent half my life here; South Africa is all I know workwise. And, no, to answer your question, I don't want to go back to China; there's nothing left for me there. (Interview with Mei, March 2022)

For both Mei and Haoyu, looking ahead is still less about the specifics of retirement (even if this has increasingly come up in conversations) and more about adapting to changing circumstances, in both practical and emotional terms. For example, due to the pandemic and stringent quarantine rules in China, Haoyu has not managed to



Textured Neighbourhood Experiences

Elderly couple selling vegetables in Derrick Avenue. A walk along the street reveals a complex reality in terms of gender, age, and family dynamics—beyond the area's reputation as merely host to transient migrants working in the numerous Chinese-run malls in the southern parts of the city. Source: Mark Lewis, 2017.

travel back to work. After decades of being focused on China for work prospects, he half-heartedly started working part-time for a locally based Chinese investment company. He said it was odd that both he and his wife now worked for others—‘something which we have never done before’ (Conversation with Haoyu, March 2022).

Some time ago, his wife had returned to China so their son could attend primary school and receive a Chinese education. As a result, Haoyu’s wife had to give up her own business. On returning to South Africa, and with their son now enrolled in a private high school in Johannesburg, she felt it was ‘easier’ to work for someone else rather than start afresh. She manages a friend’s shop in one of the Chinese-run malls, working seven days a week.

Becoming gradually more open to new options, Haoyu recently travelled to Zambia to design a project for a Chinese friend—his first visit to a country other than China or South Africa. Besides spending a few days in Lusaka, he drove to the Copperbelt in the country's north, seeing lots of work opportunities and even pondering whether he should buy a property and stay a few years in Zambia. He will probably end up retiring in South Africa, as he often mentions that his wife feels comfortable there. Meanwhile, he is concerned about his son's level of English proficiency, wondering whether he will manage to enrol in university or find employment in an environment dominated by English. Despite having resigned himself to remaining in South Africa, Haoyu still feels restless:

*It is not always easy in South Africa. Work is easier than life; I still often compare China with South Africa. But, whatever, we live here now. I accept it, I just need to find more company and keep busy.
(Conversation via WeChat with Haoyu, April 2022)*

Overall, these two accounts point to a form of pragmatism that is characterised by an intricate time–space dimension, with Mei generally pleased about living in South Africa yet planning to leave, and Haoyu, although somewhat disgruntled, ready to stay put. In these two instances, aspirations of moving to an upmarket gated estate or pursuing an upper-class lifestyle point to the idea of what Lauren Berlant (2011) called 'cruel optimism' where desires become obstacles to personal (and social) flourishing. The pair's evolving spatial footprint in Johannesburg mirrors a more general upward class mobility, comparable with the emerging black middle-class (Southall 2016); other spatially informed dynamics, of relocation or (reluctant) immobility, are closely tied to family matters. If ageing as well as shifting priorities can affect levels of mobility, in Mei's and Haoyu's cases, the latter is also shaped by more tangible factors such as travel restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic and health-related issues.

Pragmatic Living as Method of Inquiry

One could argue that living in general is imbued with a fair amount of pragmatism. This includes striving for sufficient financial stability, finding the right work–life balance, as well as bringing risk factors to an acceptable level. As such, 'pragmatic living' materialises in different and malleable ways, not only influenced by power dynamics and contextual and temporal circumstances, but also contingent on aspects such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, citizenship, and duration of stay. The narration of Mei's and Haoyu's reflections and experiences is by no means meant to be representative of a

wider reality of Chinese migrant lives in Johannesburg, but rather, an attempt to open a discussion about how pragmatic living, from a conceptual standpoint, can serve as a productive way to broaden the analytical lens.

Having met both Mei and Haoyu in connection with specific research interests, I at times inadvertently also ended up associating them with specific activities or locations. As obvious as it seems that people are irreducible, carry complex and layered personalities, can change their habits, ideas, and at times even their outlook on life, in scholarly work, we often tend to stubbornly stick to rigid frames and categories of analysis. Moreover, within the academic literature, exploring the interplay between migration and the life course, migrant lives tend to be studied through a causality perspective based on combined readings of trajectories, transitions, sequences, and turning points (see, for instance, Wings et al. 2011). While useful in building a sequential and time-sensitive portrait, migrants and migrant practices continue to be viewed through a separate analytical framework and, as a result, are ‘conceived of as categorically different from the practices and dynamics of non-migrants’ (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018: 22).

To approach migrants as complete social actors poses the combined challenge of ‘discard[ing] the binary between migrants and non-migrants [while] keep[ing] in focus the migration experience’ (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018: 5). As argued by Barnett (2020: 277) when reflecting on pragmatism, it is therefore ‘not simply a matter of arriving at an agreed set of criteria against which one might judge the value (not utility, surely) of knowledge claims[, but] a matter of slowing down and thinking about how criteria work’. This comment is also relevant to scholarly interest in Chinese mobilities and migration to the African continent (or elsewhere), with research focused on temporalities and forms of attachment to a specific context often tied to analytical categories, from ‘sojourners’, ‘settlers’, or ‘drifters’ to the notion of ‘in-betweenness’ or ‘liminality’ (for example, Park 2010, 2022; Giese and Thiel 2014; Wang and Zhan 2019; Driessen 2020). Using pragmatic living as a method of social inquiry can potentially unearth and cut across different perspectives, imaginations, and forms of experimentation, ‘in which the extension of interactions across time and space enhances the collective capacity to address a wider web of issues’ (Barnett 2020: 279–80). ●