

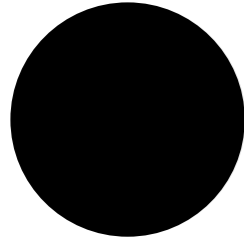
SHIFTING URBANITY AND GLOBAL CHINA IN CONVERSATION: VIEWS FROM JOHANNESBURG AND LUSAKA

PHOTOGRAPHS
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In major cities, the perpetual quest for money and profit tends to translate not only in an accelerated circulation of commodities, a sustained individual hustle, but also in a continuous production and alteration of the built environment. In Johannesburg and in Lusaka, similar observations can be made when focusing on the spatial materialisation of a multifaceted and layered Chinese presence. Largely driven by an economic impetus, these different forms of global China have left a more or less tangible imprint on the urban fabric, with direct connections to specific sectors and phenomena in each of these two cities.

Through a combination of photographs and text, this chapter offers a multi-sited and flexible reading of some of these Chinese features, both in relation to places and lived experiences. In parallel, it reflects on the spatial and social ‘thickness’, derived from Clifford Geertz’s (1973) interpretation, in these two urban environments. The essay draws on a larger and collaborative research project centred around the reciprocity and dynamic tension between forms of Chinese involvement and urban shifts in Johannesburg and in Lusaka. With Chinese spaces in urban Africa often framed as exotic, different, and operating in parallel to the host society, the project’s underlying aim has been to disrupt and (re)imagine how this interplay is currently conceived, studied, and conceptualised. As such, it explores the differentiated ways in which these spaces have come into existence, how they are shaped by contextual realities, and are largely entangled in complex city-making processes.



JOHANNESBURG



Figure 8.1. Portrait of a family operating a small shop in the first Chinatown, an area which is mainly associated with the initial wave of Chinese migration to Johannesburg in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since the 1990s, many businesses have closed, and most who are familiar with this small space near the inner city refer to it with nostalgia. Nevertheless, people still live and work here. 2017. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.2. Allen Shon, a photographer who has lived in the Cantonese Club on Commissioner Street for many years and has witnessed changes that have taken place in first Chinatown. 2017. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.3. 'Made in China' cardboard boxes are the quintessential item linked to Chinese malls, but they also emerge in secondary locations where the products are sold. 2019. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.4. Dragon City, one of the busiest Chinese-run malls in Johannesburg, is a space of constant movement, whether of commodities, customers, traders or vehicles. It has become known as one of the main access points for entrepreneurs interested in accessing affordable goods in large quantities. 2019. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.5. Product display has, over the years, received more attention as the range of customers has expanded. This is partially related to a saturation of the market, increased competition and a changing demographic of shopkeepers in a number of Chinese-run malls. 2019. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.6. As a way to attract shopkeepers, some malls decided to build accommodation on site to provide a combination of work, life and play. China Cash & Carry, located in Crown Mines, has been the most active in this regard. 2017. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.7. Some of the new mall developments in Crown Mines have tried to offer a more complete shopping experience by installing attractions for children, though with limited success. 2017. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



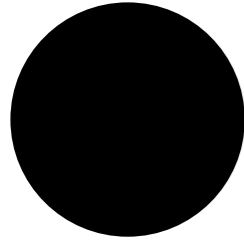
Figure 8.8. Tony Nong, designer of the archway in the background, stands in front of his creation in Derrick Avenue, Cyrildene. This second archway, delayed due to a dispute with City Power over the removal of an electricity pole, was eventually finished in 2019, six years after the erection of the first one. 2019. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.9. A stroll through Derrick Avenue in Cyrildene reveals a complex and layered street life in terms of age, gender, origin and family structure. 2017. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.10. Besides functioning as an entry point for Chinese migrants, as a privileged site for Chinese and Asian cuisine, and as a source of supply for fresh produce and condiments, Derrick Avenue is also a space of intimacy. 2018. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



LUSAKA



Figure 8.11. Workers at a Chinese construction site for a new mall. Rather than directly involving themselves in trading activities, owners and developers increasingly opt to rent out commercial space. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.12. Vertical modernity envisioned for Lusaka by SunShare, a private family business from Fujian, China. The company has inserted new landmarks into Lusaka's evolving cityscape and has erected numerous billboards advertising its buildings. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.13. Along the transit route of the Great North Road (leading towards Tanzania), Chinese-run enterprises aiming to benefit from passing traffic have gradually emerged. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.14. Back view of the SunShare Tower. Dwarfing its surroundings in terms of size and design, the building was conceptualised as a symbol of modernity and serves as a tangible illustration of the company's architectural capabilities and ambitions. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.15. Inside view of the manager's private office at the SunShare Tower. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.16. Since its launch in 2012, the Lusaka East Multi-facility Economic Zone, located near the international airport, has been struggling to attract businesses. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.17. Durban Kambaki is a senior manager at Good Time Steel, a Chinese company mainly producing steel from scrap material, which is increasingly used in local construction projects. After studying in China, he was involved in running the Zambia China Old Students Association for several years. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.18. Founded in 2005, Good Time Steel was the first steel manufacturer in Zambia. Besides supplying the local market, the company also exports to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Burundi and Zimbabwe. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.19. The JCS food market has developed into one of the main spaces for Chinese food in Lusaka, attracting mostly Chinese customers, and, increasingly, other foreigners and locals. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8.20. An unfinished road and a billboard showcases the planned development of phase 2 of the *Kingsland City* project, to be located in a forest reserve with one of Lusaka's few ground aquifers. 2020. Photograph by Mark Lewis.

In early March 2020, Erwin Pon, the chairman of The Chinese Association (TCA) in South Africa, appeared on a few locally televised news reports to comment on fears related to what was, at the time, the still-limited spread of the coronavirus. One of these interviews took place in Derrick Avenue in Cyrildene, Johannesburg's main Chinatown. Even before the pandemic reached South Africa, its reputed genesis in the Chinese city of Wuhan triggered a direct association with, and prejudice against, Chinese people and spaces, irrespective of their location. On several occasions Mr Pon, a South African-born Chinese citizen, spoke out against the propagation of xenophobic remarks, anti-Chinese discrimination, stereotyping and broad generalisations.

In another instance, a group of well-connected Chinese businessmen and association leaders met with the South African Jewish Board of Deputies at China Mall, one of the more successful Chinese-run malls in the south of the Johannesburg conurbation, to showcase a broad support base and signal their firm position as part of the local economy. Once Covid-19 infections started to soar, triggering a strict lockdown, with severe consequences on the economy and personal livelihoods, several Chinese associations started donating protective equipment and food parcels, backed by photographs uploaded onto various social media platforms.

Around the same time, Chinese migrants in Lusaka also featured on social media, though for different reasons. Following rumours that some Chinese businesses were not adhering to the prescribed lockdown measures, Lusaka's mayor posted videos of himself shutting down a barbershop and a restaurant for discriminating against Zambian customers, and challenging the managers of a cement factory where local workers had been instructed to live on-site with no outside contact during the pandemic. While reprimanding

one of the managers for abusive treatment of workers, he referred to him as 'Chinaman'. As these videos circulated widely on social media, the Chinese embassy and the Zambian central government (led by former President Edgar Lungu) demanded an apology from the mayor for using a derogatory term, revoking business licences and physically entering the premises – which he delivered a few days later. Both the initial incidents and the mayor's unreserved apology sparked angry reactions among many Zambians, who claimed it pointed to a loss of sovereignty in their own country, and created a sense that their own government was more concerned about keeping Chinese interests satisfied than catering to the needs and priorities of its own citizens.

Contrary to South Africa, where the Chinese were initially portrayed as potential carriers of the virus, in Zambia this imaginary, at least from the Chinese side, was associated with locals. The Chinese population in South Africa is, of course, not only much larger than the one in Zambia (approximately 350 000 versus about 20 000), and socially more embedded and layered, it also comprised different waves of migration, with the earliest going back to the late nineteenth century. Though anecdotal and referring to a specific period, these recent events nonetheless provide indications about the ways in which Chinese people and spaces feature in their respective host environment, and how the people are perceived locally. This chapter builds on a larger and collaborative research project centred around the reciprocity and dynamic tension between forms of Chinese involvement and urban shifts in Johannesburg and Lusaka. It is set up as a twofold conversation: between two cities, but also between disciplines and methods, bringing together an urban geographer (Romain Dittgen), an architect and urban designer (Gerald Chungu),¹ and an urban photographer (Mark Lewis).

In Johannesburg and in Lusaka, forms

of Chinese involvement, while diverse and layered, are nonetheless dominated by two areas of economic involvement that play a sizeable role in each of these two cities. As a major commercial hub in sub-Saharan Africa, Johannesburg is both an important arrival city for migrants and a significant platform for cross-border trade centred around fast fashion (Zack and Landau 2021). At the lower end of the market, this phenomenon is largely associated with Chinese migrant-entrepreneurs, and, from about 2000–2013, it led to the emergence and mushrooming of Chinese-run malls, most of which are clustered in the southern parts of the conurbation (Huang 2021). In Lusaka, a generalised effort towards urban development has resulted in the multiplication of construction companies as well as an expanded offering of various building materials. In recent years, Chinese features have become a tangible part of the city's shifting urban landscape, both in terms of spatial markers and with regard to the actual process of building. In both cities, the perpetual quest for money and profit frequently manifests not only in a sustained individual hustle, an accelerated circulation of commodities, but also in the production or alteration of the built environment. However, given the nature of contextual realities, distinct histories of arrival, and association with specific forms of economic involvement, the spatial translation of activities and people is tied to different logics, rhythms and patterns, whether clustered or scattered, pervasive or localised.

Through a visual and multi-sited conversation, this essay offers 'a succession of fragmentary glimpses, a freed association of reflective and interpretive field notes' (Soja 1989, 223) of some of these Chinese features, in terms of places as well as lived experiences, while reflecting on the social and spatial layers in both of these urban environments. As outlined

by Filip de Boeck and Sammy Baloji (2016, 22), photography as a medium helps 'construct an analysis or a narrative of the paradoxes of urban life as an oscillation between the simultaneous character in which life in the city unfolds'. With Chinese spaces in urban Africa often framed as exotic, different, and operating in parallel to the host society, the project's underlying aim has been to disrupt and (re)imagine how this interplay is currently conceived, studied and conceptualised. It explores the differentiated ways in which these spaces have come into existence and are largely entangled in complex city-making processes (Dittgen and Chungu 2019). As a result, we have adopted a more encompassing framework of analysis to examine how urbanity emerges, exists, and is altered, with 'Chinese' aspects becoming a constituent component of a wider complexity.

Achieving success in wholesale trading, especially in affordable goods, requires selling fast and in large quantities. From a Chinese perspective, initial profit margins in Johannesburg were high, given the joint reality of a high demand and dearth in supply, both in South Africa and in neighbouring countries. Attracted by these appealing business opportunities, growing numbers of Chinese migrants flocked to Johannesburg from the late 1990s up to about 2010 and became involved in trading activities, renting shops in the fast-growing number of Chinese-run malls. The business model was simple and straightforward. Chinese entrepreneurs with connections to factories in China imported cheap apparel in bulk, turning these malls into privileged spaces of supply for those unable to source directly from China, thereby acting as a distribution chain at local and regional levels (Lin 2014; Dittgen 2015). However, since 2010, market realities have gradually shifted. From the delayed consequences of the global financial crisis and unfavourable exchange rates to an over-saturation of the market – partly caused

by their own success, partly due to increased competition from growing numbers of local and formal franchises selling affordable goods equally sourced from China – business inside Chinese-run malls has subsided. Of approximately 20 such malls, several have either closed or function half-empty with many shops left vacant, while only a handful have managed to remain competitive, or even expand. A prominent example of the latter, Dragon City, operating since 2000 along Main Reef Road in Johannesburg, quickly became one of the main commercial premises and access points for entrepreneurs seeking to purchase fast fashion from China in large quantities. In 2019, the mall was in the process of being listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, and the ownership developed plans to build another commercial site, largely dedicated to retail activities. In parallel, many shops in most of these malls have increasingly (and probably reluctantly) opened up to retail practices and different designs as part of their business strategy and adaptation to a changing business environment. Visually, Chinese-run malls have shifted from being *containers* replete with boxes and a few visible samples, to gradually aiming to become more appealing to end-consumers with product display, decoration, and music blaring from various shops. This has been partially driven and accompanied by demographic shifts. For instance, research conducted in 2010 revealed that tenants inside China City near Ellis Park stadium, the first of these malls to open in 1995, were all Chinese. Ten years later, half of these had been replaced by non-Chinese tenants (and subtenants), such as Ethiopians, Senegalese, Pakistanis or Turks, all trying their luck in an increasingly constrained business environment, and reflecting a far more layered and evolving commercial set-up (Dittgen and Zack 2019, 87–90).

In terms of residential location, a large proportion of the Chinese who work in shops

inside these malls, especially employees, live in and around Derrick Avenue in Johannesburg's eastern suburb of Cyrildene. Initially a high street in a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood, the main artery and immediate surroundings have gradually evolved into becoming Johannesburg's principal Chinatown. Though nowadays primarily associated with a Chinese footprint, the area has not been static, and continues to evolve. It provides a more familiar and less monotonous living environment than for those who live in flats within the premises of some of the Chinese-run malls in Johannesburg's south. Additionally, Derrick Avenue also acts as a wholesale and retail selling point for fresh vegetables (to a large extent produced on Chinese-managed farms outside Johannesburg), rice, cooking utensils and various condiments. More broadly, Chinatown is construed as a combined reality of concurrently transient and 'structural temporalities' (Tomich 2011). Tony Nong, a trained architect, has been a long-term resident of the area and designed the archways located at each end of Derrick Avenue, adding a quintessential Chinese spatial marker to the area. Recently, he made plans to leave the neighbourhood and move to an upmarket gated community in the northern part of Johannesburg. Similar to Tony's ambition of leaving the area, many Chinese migrants have come and gone, relocating to other areas in the city, to neighbouring countries, or back to China. From the street perspective and dynamics, this has also resulted in the frequent surfacing and closure of businesses. In parallel, since the beginning of the pandemic, most shops along Derrick Avenue have adapted to operating in a Covid-19-imposed 'new normal', either with clear acrylic screens shielding off parts of the interior or, at the entrance, body temperature tests for customers. In the meantime, several shops have closed down, with 'To Let' signs in the windows, most likely linked to prolonged lockdown restrictions and the subsequent loss of income.

In contrast to Johannesburg, where Chinese features can, to some extent, be tied to specific neighbourhoods and areas (Harrison, Moyo and Yang 2012), in Lusaka the Chinese presence emerges in a far more pervasive and scattered form. Even so, the nature of Chinese involvement is closely entangled with the shifting built environment, given its participation in the capital's sustained construction boom. As part of this broader process of urban change, Chinese economic actors, whether directly as contractors, developers and those involved in the sale of building material or, indirectly, as entrepreneurs setting up their own businesses, have emerged as a visible feature of the urban landscape (Chungu and Dittgen 2021). Chinese companies largely dominate the higher ranks of the construction sector, whereas the lower ones are the operating ground for smaller Zambian firms with more limited financial means.² In reality, though, many of the small- and medium-sized Chinese private companies are not officially registered and operate as subcontractors for bigger Chinese firms or for private customers (Kragelund 2009, 654–655). As a result, Chinese actors are involved in different types of construction projects, ranging from bilateral deals (such as the Heroes National Stadium, the extension of the Kenneth Kaunda International Airport, or the Lusaka East Multi-Facility Economic Zone) to private commercial and residential initiatives at various scales of investment. At the same time, the degree of involvement and level of influence on the built environment differs depending on the type of project and the nature of funding, as opposed to simply relying on the presence of Chinese people or the visibility of Chinese cultural markers. In many instances, Chinese companies act as the contracting party, implementing projects designed and financed by others, and, as such, operate as service providers in the ongoing

process of city-making. A number of state-owned enterprises both at national and provincial level, as well as some private companies, have been established in Zambia to respond to construction tenders, with a growing preference for private clients, as the national government frequently defaults on payments. Most of these are structured around a residential compound, or 'China House', combining accommodation, offices, sports grounds, company kitchen and vegetable garden in one location (Lee 2017, 99–102). In Lusaka, 'Chinese' social spaces such as restaurants and casinos are limited and largely scattered in different, mostly upmarket, neighbourhoods. One notable exception is the JCS Food Market, a former wholesale depot and selling point for mushrooms produced by Jihai Agricultural Company, which has gradually been transformed into a market space. One side, run by Zambians, is dedicated to the sale of vegetables, fruit, seafood, meat and other staple foods, while the other side hosts a number of food stalls with a range of cuisines from different parts of China, and is managed by Chinese migrant-entrepreneurs. Though most patrons are Chinese, whether workers from construction sites or Huawei engineers, the location is becoming increasingly popular among other foreigners as well as local people, warranting a continuous expansion of the site.

Over the past 20 years, Lusaka's rapid urban growth has been driven by simultaneous trends of densification, land-use change, and sprawl, resulting in an increased demand for residential and commercial projects. Chinese entrepreneurs and companies have responded to these opportunities in different ways, with self-initiated development projects largely guided by the same principle: land value gains and varying degrees of speculation. Furthermore, the increased use of materials perceived as 'modern', such as composite aluminium cladding and

reflective glass for external use, can directly be tied to the Chinese presence in the construction industry (Chungu and Dittgen 2021, 14–15). One company, SunShare, embodies several of the abovementioned characteristics and ambitions. Present in Zambia since 2010, this Fujianese family business started as an importer and retailer of construction materials, before manufacturing these locally. Gradually, it branched out into selling furniture and providing interior design, before becoming involved in agriculture and, most notably, property development. SunShare built a shiny glass-clad ten-storey office tower, hosting the company's headquarters, which has become a landmark and symbol of modernity in the emerging commercial precinct near Manda Hill. In 2017, SunShare announced plans to build *Kingsland City*, a mixed-use and upmarket development on the outskirts of Lusaka. Located within a forest reserve, on land leased from the Zambian Air Force, the 583-hectare development has been envisioned as the locus of a new city, operating in parallel to the existing one. From the start, the project has, however, been marred by controversy. The latter ranges from allegations of corruption to environmental stresses caused by additional pressure on underground water reserves and porous sewage systems due to its location above one of the city's few groundwater aquifers (Mafa and Mukela 2019).

In spite of their differences, Johannesburg and Lusaka are both driven by 'worlding' aspirations,³ while remaining spatially fragmented, scarred by deep inequalities, and underpinned by geographies of uneven development. Considering this complex reality, the nature and location of foreign capital (in this case Chinese), the degree of spatial alteration, as well as the visibility of cultural and 'ethnic' markers, are all tied to the specificity and the structure of the host city in which these

dynamics unfold. In each case, different Chinese actors have plugged into existing opportunities and become entangled with broader economic trends of trade and urban production. At the same time, these different sectors – fast fashion and construction – carry distinct value networks and dependencies. Notwithstanding a limited number of Chinese-run factories in South Africa, the focus of many Chinese migrant-entrepreneurs in Johannesburg is largely situated at the end of the supply chain, and focused on end sale and distribution. In Lusaka, Chinese involvement in the process of urban change in its various forms points to a deeper penetration of the value network in the building industry (from construction material to finished product). Even so, Chinese capital and involvement also seem to play a far more politicised and influential role in Zambia than in South Africa (at least in recent years), which might to some degree explain the distinct reactions in relation to Covid-19, referred to above. While Chinese actors have, in different ways, become either accidental or active participants in the shaping of urban dynamics in both cities, the long-term sustainability of Chinese commitment is not guaranteed. Altogether, this phenomenon needs to be considered against a reality of increasingly difficult economic environments, whether in the form of limited economic growth and mounting unemployment in South Africa, or a considerable debt crisis in Zambia, alongside the real and assumed contributions to the economy from Chinese actors. In essence, exploring Johannesburg and Lusaka 'through [an] elsewhere' (Robinson 2016) – in this case, through the lens of Chinese features, people and activities – enables approaching the interplay between migrant spaces and the host society (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018), which is itself part of a broader analysis about urban change in these two cities.

- 1 We wish to acknowledge the contribution of our close friend and colleague, Gerald Chungu, who unexpectedly passed away towards the final stage of our research project. We lost not only a creative scholar, architect and designer with a wide-ranging skill set, but also (and foremost) a remarkable person. Although this essay was produced without his direct involvement, he contributed integrally to the broader intellectual framing of the research project, the data collection process in both cities, and led the thinking about forms of Chinese involvement in Lusaka.
- 2 Information drawn from the register of contractor profiles of the National Council for Construction in January 2020, referring to general building activities, civil works and road construction.
- 3 For further discussion on the concept of 'worlding', see Simone (2001) and Ong (2011). According to AbdouMaliq Simone, worlding points to 'a state of being "cast out" into the world' and he likens it to 'a process inherent in the very formation of African cities themselves' (2001, 17, 18), while Aihwa Ong refers to 'worlding practices [as] constitutive, spatializing, and signifying gestures that variously conjure up worlds beyond current conditions of urban living' (2011, 13).

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