

(Un)writing “Chinese Space” in Urban Africa.

Of City-Making, Lived Experiences, and Entangled Processes

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As different forms of Global China have emerged and expanded throughout the African continent, this phenomenon has also materialised spatially. Particularly visible in urban environments, Chinese investments, entrepreneurship, and a multifaceted presence have contributed to shaping the morphology of the urban fabric at different scales, whether by altering the existent built environment or by adding new features. The production and manifestation of these different types of spaces, transient or structural, isolated or clustered, are not only informed by the varieties of capital and people involved, a range of ambitions and practices, but also by the nature of contextual realities. Trade, as a primary focus of Chinese migrant-entrepreneurs, has led to the appearance and multiplication of shops, at times concentrated along streets, in marketplaces, or inside shopping malls. In parallel, the presence of restaurants, hotels, and even casinos in cities across the continent varies in quantity, price range, and cuisine, depending on the number, origin, and socio-economic status of Chinese migrants, but also the receptiveness and purchasing power of a broader non-Chinese clientele. Corporate businesses tend to be spatially more selective and confined to bigger cities, with their offices accommodated in modern-looking buildings, often in proximity to central business districts. Similarly, living spaces differ in relation to occupation, but also depend on the context itself, leading to different residential logics. In addition to spatial markers playing host to economic activities and reflecting forms of dwelling, the production of (urban) space itself has become an important economic focus. Significant investment, both public and private, has been directed towards the provision of infrastructure, from building intra- and inter-urban transport networks (roads, railway lines, airports, or ports), to the construction of stadiums, government buildings, or special economic zones. More recently, Chinese companies have also ventured into property development, with projects ranging from smaller building complexes to the conceptualisation of entire new cities, driven by expectations of a rising demand for housing amidst hopes of a larger solvent middle class in the future.

Inserted on top of or adjacent to the existent urban fabric, Chinese spaces can be likened to external grafts, triggering questions about their level of impact in altering cities, whether in relation to the material or urban practices. Within the broader context of growing relationships between

China and Africa this has also led to discussions about the spread or the replicability of a so-called “Chinese urbanism” to Africa (e.g. Hulshof and Roggeveen 2014; Kuo 2015; Harrison and Yang 2015), as well as accounts on the role of entrepreneurs in reshaping Africa, including its urban environments (e.g. French 2014; Pilling and Feng 2019). Yet, at the same time, there is a reciprocity and dynamic tension in terms of influence between Chinese entrants and the host environment(s), which requires adopting a broader unit of analysis. The metaphor of the graft (drawing inspiration from Magrin and Van Vliet 2005), a foreign *tissue* either accepted or rejected by the receiving *body* while simultaneously forming an integral part of the bigger structure, is also applicable to the study of “Chinese spaces”¹ in urban Africa. This special issue aims at (re)imagining how this interplay is being conceived, studied, and conceptualised, exploring the differentiated ways in which these spaces come into existence, are entangled in complex city-making processes, and are altered by textured realities in host societies. This thinking process, focused on the interrelation between built environment and lived experiences, will be gradually outlined throughout the remainder of this introduction.

In Lusaka, Zambia’s capital, the Chinese foothold is to a large extent tied to the construction industry, and Chinese firms have progressively become dominant players in this sector. Owing to a considerable number of projects being carried out by various Chinese contractors, recognisable through company banners with Chinese characters, many of these projects come to be identified as “Chinese,” at least at some stage in their building cycle. This characterisation remains nonetheless partial, insufficient, and subject to multiple interpretations, as different aspects such as funding, design, shape, construction process, as well as function(s) and usage are considered neither independently nor holistically. For instance, the ongoing development of a large mall and office complex in a fairly central neighbourhood in Lusaka by a listed Chinese state-owned enterprise is an illustration of how different project components can easily be concealed. From the outside, the construction site is sealed off by a temporary perimeter wall, plastered with

1. The use of quotation marks indicates that the Chineseness of these spaces is far from straightforward and often constructed in complex ways, as will emerge in the course of this introduction. However, for ease of reading, it will only be used when this aspect is being emphasised.

the company's ambitious commercial, property, or business developments in various parts of the world (either planned or completed). While transient and only apparent for the duration of the construction phase, these visual markers are visible to all passers-by and are conducive to establishing a specific cognitive association with China (at least in the short-term). In reality, however, Chinese involvement is minimal given that the project is fully funded by the Public Service Pensions Fund, designed by a team of local firms, and operationally modelled on a typical South African mall. Other ways of shaping the built environment are more discreet. Aside from larger projects being realised by all sorts of contractors,² many residents in Lusaka, irrespective of their socio-economic standing, build or extend their own homes. This results in a substantial demand for construction material and equipment (beyond bricks and mortar), and a number of Chinese entrepreneurs have seized this opportunity to open businesses that specialise in selling products such as stainless steel, doors, aluminium windows, or roofing, as well as entire bathroom or kitchen designs.³ In contrast to development projects that are conceived, financed, built, and sometimes even occupied by Chinese, in these two aforementioned instances, Chinese actors become service providers, alternately through the act of building or by providing access to material, and contribute to the realisation of ventures imagined by others.

These growing complexities, entanglements, and multiple forms of shaping the city, whether in Lusaka or elsewhere on the continent, raise numerous questions about the causal role of a Chinese influence (whether in terms of capital, people, or interests) on urban environments. It means assessing how the functionality of these spatial markers is closely linked not only to fluid and differentiated ideas, rationalities, and perceptions, but also to specific forms of temporality (Ferme and Schmitz 2014). Furthermore, to what extent do "Chinese spaces" act as shadows or mirrors of their host society, as reflections of a transient urbanism or, instead, are generative of alternative forms of urban dynamics? In light of a wide range of tangible footprints (with a more or less visible "ethnic" imprint on the city) and the breadth of people evolving in and around them, it becomes increasingly difficult to exclusively tie their spatial identity to the human presence, function, or atmosphere. As a result, it requires decoding how the use of space is negotiated, as much as how places and lifestyles are periodically reconfigured.

Analytical directions and spatial concerns

Within the burgeoning academic literature dealing with various aspects of the Chinese presence in Africa, the place and role of the *urban* and *space* more generally as an integral part of this engagement has often remained unclear. The growth in the number and depth of themes and topics of analysis has been paralleled by recent debates "to more systematically consider questions about the nature of scholarship on these themes [i.e. ties between Africa and China] and their relation to established academic disciplines" (Alden and Large 2019: 1). Publications focused on the epistemology of studying and framing these interrelations have pointed towards the necessity of situating the research focus within broader theoretical understandings of global phenomena (Sautman and Yan 2008; Monson and Rupp 2013), allowing analyses to transcend "the limiting confines of methodological nationalism in diverse ways" (Alden and Large 2019: 5). Alongside a push towards reinserting "African agency" back into the research process (e.g. Mohan and Lampert 2012; Corkin 2013), Monson and Rupp have also emphasised the importance of close-up, fieldwork-based studies, centred on the everyday (both past and present) as a way to

understand how "engagements [between Africa and China] are negotiated – and their meanings articulated – by multiple actors in diverse geographical and cultural contexts" (2013: 26). Provocatively they asked, "What may be omitted when China and Africa are lifted out of the context of global historical dynamics as isolated *players*: what specific realities are diminished or made invisible by this move, realities that may be critically important for understanding historical and contemporary phenomena?" (Monson and Rupp 2013: 24). Yet, similarly, given that so many of these engagements unfold in relation to complex urban phenomena, what happens when this omission concerns analytical reflections on space?

While there has been an increase in empirically-focused research outputs, frequently conducted in urban settings across the continent, spatial dynamics as a key component of analysis have often been neglected. This can be observed in two different ways. Harrison, Moyo, and Yang's assessment about the spatial dimension not being ignored, but "generally not be[ing] fore grounded or theorised" (2012: 905), is not only observable in relation to their research on Johannesburg, but is also valid for other cities in Africa. If ethnographic studies have offered detailed accounts on various themes such as migrant strategies, work relations, social interactions, and everyday lives (e.g. Haugen and Carling 2005; Kernen 2009; Park 2010; Mohan *et al.* 2014; Huang 2015; Liu 2017), space and the urban context tend to be reduced to *blind spots* or pre-configured *containers* on top of which these complex and layered interactions unfold. Secondly, as much as "Chinese capital [is] singled out and problematised [while being] widely perceived as *unnatural* in a neoliberal world order that otherwise naturalises the market" (Lee 2017: 1), similar comments can be made about spatial aspects. In urban Africa, Chinese spaces (or those perceived as such) are often either directly or subconsciously framed as exotic, different, and operating in parallel to host society. In research, this has led to privileging framings of difference or othering as analytical entry points, alongside using specific conceptualisations and establishing associations with particular imaginaries. For instance, market and mall spaces, as well as Chinatowns, are largely presented as reflections of informality and low-end globalisation; newly-built cities as symbols of modernity and urban futures (with related questions of access and exclusion); and large infrastructure projects (e.g. airports, government buildings, stadiums, or special economic zones) as mirrors of bilateral deals, soft power, and the political economy. As a result, analyses centred around Chinese spaces run the risk of becoming imprisoned within fixed analytical categories, failing not only to fully take into account spatial adaptations and gradual social changes, but also to consider them as integral parts of broader urban realities.

Entangled, messy and in motion: A dialectic relationship between the built and the lived

In a recent book entitled *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City*, Richard Sennett (2018) explores the dialectical tension between *ville* and *cit  *, the former broadly referring to the physical fabric, the latter to the ways in which people dwell in this specific place. While acknowledging that "experience in a city (...) is rarely seamless, [and] often full of contradictions and jagged edges," he stresses the need to consider the reciprocity between

2. Building contractors in Zambia are mainly composed of a mixture of Zambian, South African, and Chinese companies, with the latter dominating in terms of project value.

3. At the same time, many Zambians have also taken advantage of this demand by directly traveling to China to buy materials, which they then sell locally.

the built and the lived; namely, not only how dwelling derives from making, but also how making is derived from dwelling (Sennett 2018: 2, 13-14). Applied to the Chinese involvement in city-making processes in urban Africa, this complex relationship between built fabric and lived experiences has also started to emerge in research, as illustrated by three contextualised examples from Luanda, Accra, and Johannesburg.

Kilamba Kiayi, a massive housing development of 750 apartment buildings (or 20,000 flats) located about 20 kilometres south of Luanda, has evolved into one of the spectacles and by far the most visible example of Chinese-led new city-building in Africa. Negotiated as part of a broader oil-backed credit system between Angola and China, this public-privately developed satellite city is not only a materialisation of a “resources for infrastructure” deal (Benazerf and Alves 2014), but also illustrates the post-war reconstruction effort undertaken by the Angolan government (Croese 2011; Power 2012; Soares de Oliveira 2015). With initial prices out of reach for the vast majority of the population, the bulk of apartments remained empty for a few years, leading to numerous media reports of a Chinese-built ghost town (e.g. Redvers 2012), until becoming accessible to the middle class after the introduction of a subsidised rent-to-buy scheme (Cain 2014). Among the considerable interest in Kilamba as an object of research, two recent papers have more specifically engaged with the aforementioned (and often ignored) tension between built environment and lived experiences. In her work, Gastrow illustrates how Luandans have specifically focused on the concrete materiality of these new buildings “to critique what they s[ee] as the inappropriate pact between international capital, represented in their eyes primarily by Chinese investors, and their own government” (2017: 383). She argues that the “foreignness” of these structures is not only used by Luandans as a form of indirect political dissent, aimed at rejecting the current political regime, but also embodies the potential threat of physical and aesthetic displacement, given that, apart from the economic inaccessibility, the design is perceived as unsuitable and ill-adapted to current ways of life (Gastrow 2017: 384, 387, 390). Buire, on the other hand, looks at those living in Kilamba, referring to Lefebvre’s theoretical triad of conceived, lived, and perceived space as a way to explore how the case of “Kilamba [both] highlights the performative power [and] the inconsistencies of the idea of the middle class” (2017: 26). This tension is reflected in the spatial practices of the new residents, the latter “display[ing] daily efforts to conform to the lifestyle they think is appropriate for middle class,” but at the same time facing material constraints that require “the necessity to retain some survival and cultural practices.” As such, and in spite of Kilamba having been conceived externally, it shows how the incremental appropriation by its residents has “led to a social space that keeps re-inventing itself” (Buire 2017: 26-7, 29).

Moving to Accra, Giese and Thiel explore the expanded role of female Ghanaian head porters within the reordering of spatial and power relations in the capital’s main urban market place, unintentionally facilitated by the arrival of Chinese traders (2015: 446). Formerly excluded groups and actors, having migrated from Northern Ghana to the coastal capital, were able “to renegotiate their economic and social positions through their relationships with these Chinese entrepreneurs,” effectively circumventing entrenched pathways and forms of gate-keeping enacted by more established head porters. In this line of work, where spatial positioning is crucial, Giese and Thiel highlight forms of encroachment by some of these female head porters, either in front of or even inside the unused sections of Chinese shops. This is tolerated by the Chinese shopkeepers due to a combination of passivity, unfamiliarity with local customs, and forms of social hierarchy, alongside the

desire to avoid potential conflict with their Ghanaian social environment (Giese and Thiel 2015: 453). At the same time, the “appropriation, co-possession and re-signification of these places” also serve a mutual interest; shelter and safety for the head porters, and “undisrupted access to reliable carrying services” for the Chinese shopkeepers (*ibid.*: 455-6, 460). Viewing space as socially constructed and dynamic, their paper “adds a different perspective to the general discussion on migrant place-making” (*ibid.*: 461).

In Johannesburg, Dittgen examines how different forms of (private) Chinese capital have become active, although accidental, participants in the making and shaping of a multifaceted urbanity (2017: 979). Based on a diverse range of Chinese spaces – shopping malls, a Chinatown, and a project for a newly built city (the latter two examples are explored in more detail in this issue: see photo essay and paper on Modderfontein by Reboredo and Brill) – this combined analysis challenges the manner in which spaces of Chinese capital are often squeezed into rigid and pre-defined categories, either as manifestations of modernity or of economic backwardness. In the context of a globalising metropolis of deep-seated contrasts and uneven development, the study of these diverse Chinese urban spaces not only allows for an alternative, differentiated, and multi-layered reading of centrality, but also highlights the necessity of non-linear and different interpretations of modernity and development. Dittgen argues that neither of the cases studied fit neatly into either category, but that both instead “speak to urban realities and futures, not only at city-wide level (...), but also at a more local scale, through understanding how Chinese economic actors are negotiating their place and are navigating the city’s competitive space economy” (2017: 995).

Whether appropriated, incorporated into wider narratives (even if this means rejection as in Gastrow’s case), or as tools to read urban complexity, these aforementioned examples approach “Chinese” spaces as relational, entangled with contextual realities, and evolving. In all of these cases, “something called *China* unquestionably exists, but – more importantly – there is a multitude of expressions to denote different aspects of China and Chineseness” (Chun 1996: 992).

(Un)writing as method

The underlying aim of this special issue is to disrupt the manner in which reciprocal forms of influence between Chinese dynamics and urban environments in Africa have been studied. Difference or ethnicity as entry point, even if socially constructed, as well as a predominant emphasis on questions of *assimilation* or *integration*, contribute to ascribing all things “Chinese,” whether people, capital, or spaces, to a separate unit of analysis. In light of various entanglements we suggest a paradigm shift that discards the binary between these two *sides* while at the same time engaging with queries about Chinese specificities. Drawing on Çağlar and Glick Schiller, “migrants [and associated spaces] must be approached as social actors who are integral to city-making as they engage in the daily life of cities through different and varied forms” (2018: 5). Adopting an encompassing framework of analysis helps not only to view spatial dynamics and practices as coeval (*ibid.*: 22), but also to examine how urbanity emerges, exists, and is altered, with “Chinese” aspects becoming a constituent element of a wider complexity. Un-writing as a method is meant here to unfold as a sequential process. *Unwriting* first requires a move away from seeing and examining Chinese spaces as spectacles, focusing instead on how they are embedded within contextualised urban realities and trajectories. In other words, the aim is to approach Chinese spaces as “ordinary,” understood here as

complete objects of research, as a way to avoid pushing the discussion into any preconceived direction, to open up the debate and to understand the multiple trajectories that unfold in these spaces. Once stripped of its “Chinese” characteristics, the second stage of *writing* (or *re-writing*) space becomes one of understanding what makes it “Chinese,” differentiating between what can ultimately be considered “exceptional” and what is a reflection of “ordinary” or “common” features. To better grasp the interplay between Chinese influence and urban dynamics in Africa, the goal is to multiply the gaze and adopt different angles of vision, leading to what Doreen Massey has termed multiplicities of imaginations, theorisations, understandings, and meanings (2005: 89).

While often associated with the priorities of spatially-focused disciplines, the growing preponderance of urban questions and globalised realities, in this case manifestations of Global China, requires an attention that should cast aside disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, the dynamic spatio-temporal interplay between what is considered to be “ordinary,” “exceptional,” or “Chinese” is complex and linked to specific contextual realities, physical forms, visions, or ways of operating. This will be considered in more detail throughout the various articles in this special issue. Although largely focused on two cities, Johannesburg and Addis Ababa, the themes covered in these different outputs speak to much broader dynamics discernible elsewhere on the continent. One is the growing tendency towards the development of modern large-scale urban projects on green-field sites in many cities across the continent, raising questions about governance, power dynamics, and the actual implementation process. At a more granular level, the growing presence of Chinese people in cities and as part of everyday encounters, whether at street-level or in a marketplace, also indirectly leads to renegotiated interpretations of collective life and, in some instances, the forging of new sociabilities.

Ricardo Reboredo and Frances Brill’s paper on the widely mediated Modderfontein New City project in Johannesburg bridges the manifestation of global trends in relation to context-specific factors. Focused on the various iterations of the planning process and negotiation phase, it examines how the export of “Chinese” urban practices and urbanism has ultimately translated into the built environment. The authors retrace and unpack the manner in which the vision for a futuristic city aimed at the global economy, and partly linked to the viewpoint of a developer from and based in China, became mediated and gradually transformed through the involvement of international consultants, the pushback of the municipal government in Johannesburg, and the reality of the local economic and political context.

Huang Zhengli’s paper offers a layered analysis of an open-air market in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), specialising in Chinese food products and catering to the demand of Chinese migrants. Unlike “ethnic” food markets more generally, this market space is specific in its organisational set-up, as it is dominated by local vendors who have adapted to economic opportunities arising from the increase of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia. The existence of a unique trade environment alongside investment restrictions on food have largely prevented foreigners from entering this sector. As illustrated by Huang, the vendors’ re-orientation towards selling Chinese vegetables has not been facilitated through direct economic interactions with Chinese people, but instead materialised on the basis of local business networks and their privileged access to local food value chains.

Nikolas Broy’s study on the spaces created by practitioners of the Yiguandao religious movement in urban South Africa displays a dimension of Global China that veers away from the predominant research focus on economic and political questions. Broy explores four modes of space-making,

ranging from a presence in shopping malls, in factories and business offices, in private residencies, and through community outreach activities, all of which are tied to distinctive forms of engagement. While this discrete spatial layout, whether stable, fluid, or transient, is characterised by simultaneous practices of closure and interaction, as noted in the case of economic activities, the author argues that Yiguandao temples and activities, due to being located at the core of social life and embedded within society in different ways, represent more intense arenas of transcultural and transnational interaction.

The collection of papers ends with a photo essay on Derrick Avenue, a street in a suburb of Johannesburg, which is largely associated with the presence of Chinese migrants in the city. This contribution by Romain Dittgen, Mark Lewis and Gerald Chungu aims, through a combination of writing and photography, to complexify (and resist) the predominant representations used to visualise Chinese engagements in various African contexts. As argued by Simbao, “China-Africa is not a *thing* that can be conveniently rolled into one term, as this term flattens so many things, [and which is partly due to the] many contexts in which the smaller details and personal experiences contradict and resist the vociferous rhetoric and the one-liners” (2019: 228). As such, Lewis’ photographs offer a reading of “Chinese spaces” that move beyond the easily identifiable markers and portray the various activities and changes as intrinsic and entangled with broader urban processes.

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