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## Ordinary Chinese spaces in urban Africa

Shifts in everyday life and in the built environment

Chinese spaces in urban Africa are often framed as exotic, different and operating in parallel to the host society. If the spatial footprint of Chinese investments, entrepreneurship and socio-cultural presence in large cities across the African continent<sup>1</sup> is significant and evolving, the study of these spaces has, thus far, predominantly been compartmentalised and associated with particular imaginaries<sup>2</sup>. As such, Chinese spaces become 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.

The present call for papers seeks to move away from a conceptual framing of exceptionalism and a correlation of specific analytical frameworks with certain spaces, putting forward the notion of *ordinary*<sup>3</sup> Chinese spaces as complete objects of research. Arguing against the idea of these spaces as static, it also sets the ground for a layered and more critical reading of forms of Chinese-ness. The broader aim is to assess how the functionality of these spatial markers – both from a concrete and abstract point of view – is not only closely linked to fluid and differentiated ideas, rationalities and perceptions, but also tied to specific forms of temporality

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<sup>1</sup> More recently, this phenomenon has been echoed by a growing academic interest in assessing the impact of various forms of Chinese capital on the built environment and on spatial dynamics within cities across the continent (e.g. Haugen and Carling 2005; Park 2010; Harrison et al. 2012; Hulshof and Roggeveen 2014; Marfaing and Thiel 2014; Huynh 2015; Dittgen 2017; Gastrow 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Chinese markets, malls and Chinatowns are largely presented as reflections of informality and low-end globalisation; newly built cities as symbols of inequality/inclusivity, modernity and urban futures; large infrastructure projects such as airports, government buildings, stadiums or special economic zones as mirrors of bilateral deals, soft power and the political economy.

<sup>3</sup> The title is inspired by a book by Jennifer Robinson entitled 'Ordinary Cities' (2006).

(Ferme and Schmitz 2014). Furthermore, it raises questions about the extent to which Chinese spaces act as shadows or a mimesis of the host society, as reflections of a transient urbanism (Wu et al. 2014) or, instead, are generative of alternative forms of urban dynamics.

At the same time, what defines a space as Chinese and ordinary? In light of the growing 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, leading to a widening of practices, it becomes increasingly difficult to tie their spatial identity to the human presence, function or atmosphere/feel. As a result, it requires decoding how the use of space is negotiated, as much as how places and lifestyles are periodically reconfigured.

Given our focus on Chinese spaces in contemporary urban Africa, we invite submissions that explore the nature of linkages and forms of entanglements that exist between spatiality, function and identity. Looking at how these Chinese spaces are conceived, shaped and perceived, interested contributors should consider one or more of the following guiding pointers and questions articulated around the 'built environment' and 'lived experiences':

Papers could explore the changes in the function, design, the built form and the production of space as a way to interrogate the evolving nature of Chinese engagements. What is the extent to which these spatial markers reflect Chinese characteristics – whether through their physical form, vision or ways of operating – or do they gradually become mediated and 'blend in' with the territory of insertion? Are aesthetics and materiality linked to Chinese spaces contributing to either altering or maintaining a particular vision of China as well as of Chinese activities in urban Africa? Similarly, how are certain expressions of materiality and of the built form viewed as Chinese while others are not? Here, it is useful to take into account the extent to which the location, targeting and conceptualisation of projects, the direct involvement (or absence thereof) of Chinese people, branding and advertisement contribute to conveying a particular set of images, ranging from interpretations of authenticity, hybridisation to the reproduction of local trends.

Furthermore, the study of Chinese spaces foreshadows an actor-centred approach, looking at the ways in which people inhabit, work and pursue leisure activities in these environments. Apart from exploring the extent to which lifestyles and habits are informed by the use of space (Dutton 1998), what role(s) do these Chinese spaces play within their immediate as well as broader context. By focusing on the genealogy and chronology of these built forms, how are past and recent Chinese spaces 'used' by urbanites (Chinese and/or others), and to what extent are they integrated into urban practices and local economies? Relatedly, it also speaks

to complex forms of 'living together' (Derrida 2013; de Boeck and Baloji 2016), whether within (e.g. flat/house, market, mall, street, neighbourhood, city as a whole) or in connection to these spaces, relating to questions about temporalities and rhythms, levels of attachment and belonging, as well as the forging of new socialities (Landau 2017). Within this context, it also seems relevant to assess the level of cognitive dissonance between the complexities and layers of Chinese spaces (as well as of associated practices), and the ways in which they are predominantly communicated or constructed in imaginaries and narratives (ranging from perceptions to written material).

We welcome contributions from any discipline with a research focus on urban Africa (ranging from anthropology, architecture, design, geography, urban studies, development planning, sociology, political sciences to comparative literature), and encourage the inclusion of visual material such as maps and photographs. Paper submissions can either zoom in on one specific context or adopt a comparative approach. For those who are interested, please send abstracts (between 300 and 500 words) to <romain.dittgen@wits.ac.za> and <gerald.chungu@wits.ac.za> before **31 May 2018**.

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