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Placing African Cities in Chinese Lives: A Comparative Study of Migrant Geographies

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic research on Chinese migrants in Nigeria, Botswana, and Namibia from 2011 to 2015, this article has three lines of argumentation and contribution. First, it proposes a framing of migrant geographies from a humanistic comparative perspective in order to complement the political economy approaches in geographies of migration. Second, lying in the intersection of urban studies and migration studies, it illustrates the different positionalities of cities in three aspects of migrant geographies – migrant space, network, and belonging – echoing the multiscalar analysis of city-making in migration processes. Third, specifically in the context of Chinese migrant geographies, three African cities, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek, are placed in three migrants' geographic worlds, not always according to their positions in multiscalar power structures, but partly through migrant experiences in which top-down power horizontally works.

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Keywords

Chinese migrants, African cities, migrant geographies, comparative study

Introduction

Chinese migrant lives in foreign metropolises have drawn significant scholarly attention for their community dynamics and interactions with host societies (e.g. Thunø, 2007;

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Zhou, 1992). Over the past three decades, Chinese migrants in Africa come to be seen as a new frontier in the study of the world of the Chinese diaspora (Tan, 2013). Chinese migrants in Africa were reported in terms of potential impacts on the African continent (French, 2015) and studied in the context of ever-growing economic, political, and cultural exchanges on the state levels (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012). Despite such discourses on impacts and exchanges, grounded research on Chinese migrant lives in Africa discovers that most of the Chinese do not want to settle in and have been hesitating on "remaining (in Africa) and returning (to China)" (Driessen, 2016). Furthermore, many ethnographers have illustrated that Chinese migrants in African countries have a loose network of social connections rather than a solid migrant community (Haugen and Carling, 2005; Ho, 2012; Sheridan, 2018; Wu, 2014; Xiao and Liu, 2021; Zi, 2017). In light of these findings, treating Chinese migrants as individual actors rather than a collective of migrant communities can help us shed light on the variegated subjective construct of meanings of places in migrants' life experiences, especially for a comparative understanding of migrants' hesitation and decision on living in a place.

The focus of this comparative study of Chinese migrants' life experiences in Nigeria, Botswana, and Namibia is framed as migrant geographies. This framing treats individual migrant actors as primary analytical subjects in analysing their socio-spatial experiences. This framing differs from geographies of migration in which scholars examine socio-spatial processes and migration politics by aggregating a group of migrants in a plural form (compared to the singularity of "migrant" in migrant geographies) and further by generalising patterns from aggregation of migrants' behaviours (for a review of geographies of migration, see Ehrkamp, 2020). We appreciate the insights in this strand of scholarship, and here we add a humanistic perspective by delving into the life stories of individual migrants and examining the positionality of places in their own geographic worlds. Drawing from humanistic geographies that prioritise human subjects, this study contends that migrant geographies are "owned" by migrants themselves. Our work is to tease out and interpret their geographic views from a comparative perspective. Making comparisons avoids overgeneralisation of individual experiences and complements the political-economic approach from collective perspectives by illuminating the differences across migration contexts (Silvey and Lawson, 1999). Although both approaches emphasise the agency of migrants, the humanistic approach prioritises the subjective human experience over place-based political-economic factors that shape the migration patterns and processes.

One of the key political-economic comparative approaches in migration studies is to examine the multiscalar city-making processes in which migrants are differentially incorporated (Çağlar and Glick-Schiller, 2018; Glick-Schiller and Çağlar, 2009). This work has fundamentally strengthened the linkage between migration studies and urban studies, but it understates the importance of belonging in migrants' relationships and interactions with cities. In the humanistic approach, migrants' belongings are centrally analysed in relation to other socio-spatial relationships in urban and transnational processes. In existing studies of Chinese migrants in urban Africa, scholars primarily take the political-economic approach to illustrate how Chinese migration processes shape

urban dynamics in African cities, such as Johannesburg (Zack, 2015) and Lusaka (Chungu and Dittgen, 2021). Differing from the centrality of place in these works, our approach treats individual migrant subjects as the comparative focus so that migrants' belongings can be better illuminated.

This article has three lines of argumentation and contribution. First, it proposes a framing of migrant geographies from a humanistic comparative perspective in order to complement the political economy approaches in geographies of migration. Second, lying in the intersection of urban studies and migration studies, it illustrates the central role that migrant belongings play in the places and positionality of cities in migrant geographies echoing the multiscalar analysis of city-making in migration processes. Third, based on the biographical approach to Chinese migrant geographies, we illuminate relative senses of place in migrant belongings to three African cities, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek, and interpret the spatial and social dimensions of the formation of such migrant belongings.

Understanding the Place of Cities in Migrant Geographies: A Humanistic Comparative Perspective Towards Migrant Belongings

At the intersection of migration studies and urban studies, scholars have performed extensive comparative research on the incorporation of migrants into urban restructuring and cities' repositioning in relation to states and within global hierarchies of urban-based institutional power (Anderson et al., 2019; Glick-Schiller, 2012; Glick-Schiller and Çağlar, 2009). Migrant experiences examined in these projects unfold through not only multiple sites where ethnographers can observe but also a single site that is embedded in interconnections of unequal multiscalar power – a focus of analysis emphasised by Çağlar and Glick-Schiller (2018: 10–11). These perspectives on migrant experiences are drawn from analysts' reworking of political and economic processes of (im)migration and city-making. Teasing out and theorising these collective processes can help us shed light on the linkage between migrants and cities, but we add that it can be complemented by illuminating individual migrants' ways of conceptualising and strategising migration and cities in their migrant geographies.

In this paper, we propose a humanistic comparative approach to interpret migrant belongings – the pivot of migrant geographies. Indebted to humanistic geography legacies (especially its revisions with feminist, postcolonial, and poststructural geographies in the discipline of human geography, see Smith, 2008) in migration studies (for the review, see Silvey and Lawson, 1999), we understand that individual migrants conceive their own geographic worlds that hinge on their fluid senses of belonging and encompass their migration processes and urban experiences in their host cities. In other words, the formation of migrant geographies is not always, or at least partly, responding to the unequal multiscalar power institutions (Çağlar and Glick-Schiller, 2018). Each migrant constructs an individual geography that involves social and spatial relations to varying

degrees; therefore, we describe geographies as plural to represent this multiplicity. Migrant geographies, in our definition, emphasise the difference in migrant experiences, instead of focusing the attention on migrants' collective reactions to structural processes.

Cities have been approached as a key comparable dimension in geographies of migration (Brickell and Datta, 2011; Çağlar and Glick-Schiller, 2018), and we add that placing cities in migrant life experiences can help us explore how migrants construct their geographic worlds. The humanistic perspective prompts us to position migrants' doings and thinking at the centre of the comparative study of migrant geographies. To do so, we suggest assembling and configuring cities in the narratives of migrant experiences without any kind of pre-given binarism in analysis (e.g. push vs. pull, internal vs. external, and subjective vs. objective). The outcome might be different from or consistent with the comparative analysis of cities in geographies of migration, but the key point here is to complement the political-economic approach, instead of substituting it.

Therefore, we agree with Hahn (2010: 118) that an examination of biographies of transnational actors should be brought into the focus of comparative analysis, and this approach highlights their perspectives and relations, stretching beyond the spatial context of the current lifeworld and its time frame (Andrucki and Dickinson, 2015). A close examination of migrants' biographies is not anecdotal but based on an in-depth understanding of how and why one kind of migrants' experiences are qualitatively different from another. In the political-economy approach, however, cities are compared in terms of power hierarchies (economic, political, and cultural) within which a particular city is situated and to which that city contributes, within and beyond national borders (Glick-Schiller, 2012). Here, by drawing on individual biographies, we compare how cities are subjectively placed in migrant trajectories as well as in urban and transnational experiences.

In doing so, we can shed light on the subjective core of migrant geographies – migrants' belongings. In studies of transnational migration, feelings of belonging are regarded as an integral part of migrant experiences: on the one hand, it is crucial for issues of social cohesion and citizenship in an immigrant society; on the other hand, it is questionable in its territorialised dimension or within its fixed, stable boundaries (Gilmartin, 2008). Unpacking the sense of belonging can enrich our understanding of migrants' decision-making and socio-spatial practices in the transnational processes. Methodologically, Antonsich (2010) suggests that belonging should be analysed both as a personal, intimate, and feeling of being at home in a place and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion. This suggestion usefully informs us of how to study migrants' belongings by placing African cities in the Chinese migrant geographies.

To further interpret belongings in migrant geographies, we recognise the spatial and social characteristics of migratory experiences. Various migrant spaces in cities – including neighbourhoods, events, and institutional spaces – constitute migrants' social contacts and encounters (Phillips and Robinson, 2015). In migration studies, urban spatialities of migrant lives tend to be examined through the concept of the ethnic enclave and other metaphors, which have been critiqued for treating migration as a

type of permanent settlement and offering less room for considering temporary and itinerary migration (Werbner, 2001). In African cities, the Chinese migrants whom we talked with did not foresee themselves as permanent settlers and their migrant space in the cities includes residential, entrepreneurial, and social spaces. Moreover, we also seek to emphasise the relationality of migrant spaces, as "migrant spatialities are interconnected with a range of urban residents and with the articulation of transnational mobilities through urban mobilities" (Collins, 2012: 331). In that spirit, we will explore how different kinds of spatial practices through migrant spaces may shape migrants' belongings.

Relatedly, migrants' social networks can also be factored into migrant geographies. Scholars have identified different types of social relationships facilitating transnational migration, such as family, clan, native associations, and chamber of commerce (Palloni et al., 2001). In migrant geographies, however, the significances of migrant networks are not always recognised. Therefore, it is necessary to prioritise migrants' appraisal of sociability in transnational and urban contexts over the scales of sociability from an analyst perspective (Glick-Schiller, 2012). In doing so, we can further interpret how migrants' belongings are related to different networking practices.

Drawing on the framing of migrant geographies in these aspects, this comparative study of three African cities emphasises a relational approach to the cities in three individual migrant geographies. Such geography encompasses their relational networks that register in migrant spaces and stretch out through these places and their sense of belonging to the migratory post and the homeland. Massey (2005: 119) defines places as "bundles" of space–time trajectories, unified by individuals in cognitive and emotional processes. These bundles, socially negotiated, constantly changing and contingent, manifest a condition of "throwntogetherness" (Massey, 2005: 140) and make places by reconfiguring many simultaneous places that they participate in. The concept of throwntogetherness therefore contradicts the view of place as settled and pre-given, with a coherence only to be disturbed by "external" forces (Massey, 2005: 141). This account provides a useful tool for re-conceiving cities and migration.

Methodology

In this study, we "sample" migrants' life experiences instead of cities. Three cities are given in our previous research projects, but the ways of placing these cities in migrant geographies are individually different. Thus, from the humanistic comparative perspective, we selected life stories of Feige, Meimei, and Wen from more than 100 informants in our long-term ethnographic research. Instead of pursuing representativeness of three migrant geographies, this selection is based on the depth of interaction between authors and informants – the depth defined by not only "multisited," but also "multisighted" geographic engagements (Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2018: 10–11).

For the first author, between 2012 and 2015, he conducted fieldwork over the course of eight months under the auspices of two projects, one focused on Chinese petty entrepreneurs' interactions with Nigerians and the other on Chinese migrants' daily mobilities in Lagos. He lived with three Chinese petty entrepreneurs, including Feige and Wang, and

conducted participant observation on a daily basis. From 2011 to 2015, the second author spent thirteen months doing ethnographic fieldwork with Chinese migrants in Botswana and Namibia. Having lived with three Chinese families, including Meimei's, in Gaborone and visited their shops regularly, she gained insights into the family-run "China shop" business, which refers to the visibility and modality of Chinese retail business in Southern Africa (Laribee, 2008). Additionally, she conducted extensive in-depth interviews with owners of 100 "China shops" in Gaborone and Windhoek, as well as in rural areas of Botswana and Namibia.

Specifically, the first author collected a rich life story of Feige by temporarily working as his assistant in Guangzhou, accompanying him to his hometown in Jiangxi, and delving into his and his in-law Wang's networks in Lagos. Simultaneously, the first author joined several chat groups that Feige founded to observe online interactions. The second author collected Meimei's life story through participant observation in her shops in Gaborone, after their trust relationship was formed. Over the years, she visited and conducted informal interviews with Meimei, her husband, and local assistants for more than twenty times. In Windhoek, she primarily conducted in-depth interviews with Wen and Xia. A total eight-hour interview renders a life story of this young family. In our fieldwork, we secured the informed consent of all key informants to disclose the information provided through either interviews or participant observation. All the names in this article are fictitious in order to guarantee the anonymity of the informants.

Placing Three African Cities in Chinese Migrants' Lives

To have a full picture of Chinese migrant geographies, instead of laying out the city profiles as a backdrop, we situate the introduction to three African cities in three migrants' life stories. In other words, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek are not simply the largest cities in respective countries; the meanings of places emerge from Feige's, Meimei's and Wen's narratives and experiences which we learned from in-depth interactions with them in our ethnographic fieldwork. Here we present a brief account of their life trajectories with reference to Chinese migrants in Nigeria, Botswana, and Namibia in general, paving a path to a comparative interpretation in the "Unpacking Migrant Belongings: Placing African Cities in Three Migrant Geographies" section.

Lagos in Feige's Life

In the pool of Chinese migrants whom the first author knew in Lagos, the majority travelled to Lagos following personal networks, usually drawing on connections with friends or relatives who informed them of business opportunities in Nigeria. Some of these migrants once worked for Chinese companies in Nigeria but moved to open their own businesses. Still others arrived as business partners recruited by Chinese traders who were already in Lagos. Being the first type, Feige's migration trajectory started from his hometown, a small county in the north of Jiangxi Province. He was born there in

1968. Having been living a local life and working in a state-owned company, he had never thought of Africa until his second marriage to Ye. Feige admitted that he was not a responsible father, because all his life was "devoted to Africa" when he discovered this "land of opportunities" (in his words). He narrated his "African story" – how Lagos became part of his life – many times in the period of the first author's participant observation in his migrant life from 2011 to 2015.

Feige first heard of Lagos from Yi's elder brother Wang who had been working in Nigeria since 2000. Before that, Wang had temporarily worked in Zambia as a trader. Wang's adventure in Africa was inspired by Wang's father who worked on the TAZARA – one of China's largest overseas aid projects in Mao's era. Knowing Wang through Yi's relationship, Feige felt interested in Wang's trading business in Lagos. After Feige and Yi got married in 2004, Feige left his company and joined Wang's business in Nigeria. Feige and Yi gave birth to a daughter in Lagos in 2005. However, due to some differences and disagreements between Feige's and Yi's families, they divorced in 2010. Nevertheless, Feige was still to some extent involved in Wang's business in Nigeria, while he was also initiating his own business.

In Lagos, Feige started trading consumer products together with Wang and other business partners who owned factories in China. As sales middlemen, Feige and Wang introduced these products, ranging from clothes to cell phone accessories, from furniture to window frames, to Nigerian clients. Indebted to Wang's experience, Feige understood that he must decisively seize the opportunities in Nigerian markets: to survive in competition with fellow traders, Chinese middlemen should react to the markets very swiftly by approaching manufacturers back in China. After one sector became saturated due to a large number of Chinese and Nigerian traders, Feige and Wang had to switch to another before profits were marginalised. Thus, Feige learned to be strategic not only in choosing target sectors but also in interacting with fellow Chinese.

One of the key lessons Feige learned from living and working in Lagos was to be wary of other Chinese migrants. Like most of the independent Chinese traders in this study, Feige went to Nigeria by using a one-month business visa and overstayed for more than a year. In Lagos, he and Wang bought their own house in the Igando area, keeping a certain distance from the concentrated areas of Chinese migrants in the city. They chose to do so because they were afraid of being investigated by Nigerian immigration officials. However, the second time Feige returned to China resulted from the revelation of his address to immigration officials. Afterwards, he was arrested due to overstaying his visa and sent back to China. He believed that a Chinese competitor who was also doing the sane furniture business, intentionally reported him to the Nigerian authority.

The experience of being arrested in Lagos and sent back to China did not discourage Feige to come back but made him more strategic about transnational migration and businesses. He believed that only with solid connections with suppliers in China, he could make the best use of his trips to Nigeria. Still, he usually overstayed his business visa for multiple years, because obtaining a valid work visa requires formal sponsorship from an officially registered company and longtime application procedures. Despite being an itinerary trader, Feige became very familiar with the geography of Lagos, as

he had to be able to navigate the urban environment to avoid being questioned and arrested by Nigerian authorities. This knowledge later facilitated his later transnational business that links Lagos and Guangzhou.

Gaborone in Meimei's Life

The migratory trajectories of Chinese migrants in Botswana, whom the second author interviewed, can be summarised into three types. The first migration type is that some Fujianese migrants left South Africa for Botswana due to security concerns and fierce competition among Chinese migrants in South Africa. The second type resulted from the expatriate emigration of Chinese state-owned companies, primarily from Jiangxi. Some of them discovered the business opportunities during their contract terms and ended up with their own trading businesses. The third migration trajectory involves Chinese communities in Europe and their connections to Botswana. Despite being a Fujianese, Meimei migrated to Botswana through her family networks which relocated from Europe to Africa in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

One of Meimei's uncles used to work in Romania before migrating to Botswana in 2000 through his connection to a distant relative based in the African country. After settling down, her uncle brought many members of their extended families to Botswana. Over the decade, there were more than seventy members migrating in this way. Their businesses initially started by bringing a large volume of clothes from factories in Fujian to Botswana. Later, they became one of Botswana's most successful Chinese family businesses spanning a wide range of sectors, including clothes, shoes, audio electronics, watches, DVDs, and hardware. Some of the family members started doing wholesale businesses, while others were retailers, such as Meimei running "China shops." While their businesses were concentrated in Gaborone, they also extended to other cities, such as Kasane, Maun, and Francistown. Therefore, some Chinese migrants in Botswana called them "the generals of the Huang's family" (黄家将, *huang jia jiang*).

Meimei was one of the "Huang Jia Jiang." Growing up in the Xiamen region of Fujian, Meimei went abroad for the first time in 2004. When the second author met her in 2011, she was forty-five years old, living with her husband and the eldest son (age seventeen) in Gaborone. Meimei and her husband had been running a "China shop" in a shopping mall before opening another one which their son managed in the same mall. In these two "China shops," they usually sell clothes, shoes, bags, and small consumer products. They hired two local assistants to display goods on the shelves, clean the shops, and handle customer service.

Gaborone has been central to Meimei's retail business and migrant life. Local wholesale markets are one of the primary sources of Meimei's retail products. The wholesalers whom Meimei relied on concentrated in "Oriental Plaza" in the northern industrial area of Gaborone. They are also Chinese migrants who sell a variety of consumer products from their large warehouses. When the competition among "China shops" in Botswana got fiercer, Meimei tried to strengthen her relationships with some Chinese wholesalers to sell certain goods only to her, so that her goods were more exclusive to local customers.

In addition to supplies from Chinese wholesalers in Gaborone, Meimei also looked for other sources back in China, but transnational business was not their primary interest. Meimei believed that she has a business sense of popular goods on the markets, so she was the one – instead of her husband – who went to choose the goods from the wholesalers in Gaborone. Given the small scale of their retail business, they thought that it was cheaper to purchase goods based in Gaborone. After all, shipping goods from China to Botswana – an inland country on the African continent – is very expensive and time-consuming. Therefore, understanding local markets in the city is very important. Meimei made efforts to teach her son how to choose goods from a local perspective.

While living in Gaborone, Meimei regularly attended social gatherings with other family members. Despite the large size of their family in Botswana, they still manage to keep peace with each other and organise social activities on a weekly basis, such as birthday parties, BBQ, "Bo Bing" (a game played on the Mid-Autumn Festival), and group trips to tourist attractions in Botswana. In their family circle, gardening became a popular hobby: most of them lived in independent houses with spacious backyards. In addition to growing family businesses and networks, Meimei's core family has also grown after migrating to Botswana. They had another two children, a daughter in 2006 and a son in 2008. Given the strict one-child policy in their hometown then, this could only happen when they lived in Africa. However, Meimei did not have time to take care of two young children while doing the retail business in Gaborone. They sent their younger children back to China and asked one of their relatives to look after them.

Windhoek in Wen's Life

Generally, neither Botswana nor Namibia is a popular destination for Chinese migrants. Migrants come to these countries by utilising the connections, usually with families and lineages. Both Meimei and Wen migrated to Africa in this way, but differently, Wen had an experience of living in Europe before coming to Namibia. Now Wen and her husband Xia ran a "China shop" in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia. In Wen's narratives of life in Windhoek, their five-year life experience in Hungary was often brought up. To better understand the place of Windhoek in Wen's life, we trace back to their earlier years in Budapest.

Wen met Xia in 2006 in Fujian. He then worked for his elder sister who ran a retail clothes shop in Hungary from 2000. Wen married Xia in 2008 when she was twenty-two years old. They gave birth to two children in Hungary from 2006 to 2010 when they lived in Budapest. Xia liked Hungary and did not want to leave. However, due to the economic crisis in 2008, the clothes shop was closed, and they all went back to China. Afterwards, Xia's other sister who was doing business in Namibia suggested he come. Then, Xia and Wen applied for tourist visas to visit Namibia.

The early Namibian experience was uneasy for them. Xia was caught working without a permit in Windhoek when he was staying at his sister's shop. He was put in the police station for three days. He complained about the noise and smell there and was finally released after his sister paid the fine. He then applied for a work permit and formally started up their own business.

In Namibia, Wen and Xia's business was based on a "China shop" in Katutura, a township in the suburban area of Windhoek. Due to its large local low-income and mixed ethnic community, it was considered by them as an ideal place for retail businesses. They sell clothes, electronics, and daily-use goods such as needles, batteries, and lunch boxes. Only local people patronised their shop. They hired two Namibian assistants, but one of them was just sacked at the time of the interview by the second author, because Wen thought her lateness every day was unacceptable. With the "China shop" model, their business depends on the Chinese wholesalers in Chinatown in Windhoek. Also, as described in Meimei's case, it is not economical and time-consuming to import products from China. Wen played a key role in the retail business. She complained that Xia was too careless to keep the shop and was not patient with customers. There are several other China shops in the Katutura area, so customer service would be very important in the business competition.

After work, the couple usually cook dinner and watch TV at home. The couple lived at a place fifteen minutes away by car. Xia sometimes goes out gambling at the casino in a hotel. The couple was close with Xia's sister's family. On holidays, they often have BBQ and hang out together in the city. Xia also spends much time playing cards with his friends. When they were less busy, they would close the shop for a few days and drive to Namibia's coast.

In sum, in the narratives of three Chinese migrants' life stories, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek are the bases of their migrant livelihoods, regardless of, whether they engage in transnational or local businesses. According to the business sectors and local regulations on retail and wholesale businesses, their urban mobilities manifest different patterns. Also, in their migration processes, the family network plays an important role, but its effects vary over time. This initial comparison prompts us to further explore spatial and social practices in the formation of their migrant geographies. By juxtaposing three life stories, we have a better picture of how three African cities emerge relationally in their life trajectories.

Unpacking Migrant Belongings: Placing African Cities in Three Migrant Geographies

Although Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek were cities where Feige, Meimei, and Wen, respectively, embarked on their journeys to Africa, they all had no plans to settle down. Feige relocated himself to Guangzhou and only visited Lagos periodically, while Meimei and Wen were hesitant about returning to China. In this sense, we may speculate that these African cities do not play a major role in defining their migrant geographies. Does this mean there is a lack of belonging to these cities? In the studies of Chinese migrants in Africa, many scholars discovered that Chinese migrants usually went to African countries with the expectation of building a better life back in China. Although some migrants spent a long time working and residing in Africa, they still periodically engaged in circular transnational migration. Some pioneering Chinese migrants

who have obtained permanent residence and invested a great deal in these African countries, do not completely leave China or socio-culturally immigrate into African societies. Thus, the answer to the speculated question may be "yes," but by delving into their migrant geographies, we find that it is more complicated than belonging or unbelonging to a certain place or a city. There is a spectrum of place-belongingness, such complexity could be better understood through an examination of their socio-spatial experiences.

In this section, by making a comparative interpretation of the differences between migrant geographies, we will first elaborate on a relative sense of place in the spectrum of their place-belongingness towards three cities. Then, we will further interpret why they have such relative senses of place according to different socio-spatial experiences. According to the literature review and inductive analysis of their narratives, our interpretation will unfold through two interrelated dimensions, migrant space and migrant network. It does not mean that only these two dimensions constitute migrant geographies in a general sense, as their geographies do not represent all Chinese migrant geographies in Africa. This exploratory interpretation paves a path to future studies of migrant geographies.

Place-Belongingness: A Relative Sense of Place in Migrant Geographies

Despite being motivated by personal wealth accumulation, three Chinese migrants still have a sense of belonging to the African cities they inhabit for a period of time in their life trajectories. We suggest that this kind of place-belongingness, in Antonsich's (2010) term, should be framed as a relative sense of place. A sense of place, according to Massey (2005), is personal identification with the place and can possibly lead to a sense of belonging. Here we add a concept of relativity and suggest that the sense of place should be understood in a dynamic way, through a wide spectrum of belonging to the place. In other words, human subjects do not always evoke a sense of place to a certain extent but relatively develop a sense of belonging to the place by comparing it to other places or comparing it in its current status to it in the previous one.

The sense of place manifests in interactive ways among Chinese migrants in Africa: on the one hand, Chinese migrants are being pushed (Driessen, 2016), both economically and emotionally, by the structural constraints in Chinese society (e.g. a competitive employment environment) to migrate to African countries with which their connections are randomly established; on the other hand, they are pulled by the aspiration to return home with wealth accumulated in the migratory processes and by the anxiety to justify their migration choices facing the uncertain future (e.g. Lin, 2014). Although these scholarly interpretations of migrant belongings are generally applicable to our empirical studies, a close examination of migrant geographies without presuming a push–pull dualism illustrates the relativity in the general trends.

In Feige's migrant geography, his relative sense of unbelonging to his hometown in Jiangxi Province contributed to his migration to Nigeria. In retrospect of his decision, he reflected,

> When I was in my early thirties, I felt frustrated. I went to Africa because I thought I could make an effort to accomplish something … I didn't plan to make a fortune in Africa … If I stayed in China Mobile, I would go mad within two years. There is no happiness in the physical and spiritual sense.

Feige did not aspire to career development at a state-owned enterprise in Jiangxi, so he joined his brother-in-law Wang's business in Nigeria. Even after he returned to China due to visa issues, he did not go back to live in his hometown but engaged in China–Nigeria businesses in Guangzhou. In the circular migration between Guangzhou and Lagos, he gradually felt a sense of place attached to Lagos, especially when he was proud of his mediator role in the Chinese online communities. Also, he liked the positionality of Guangzhou in the China–Africa linkages and decided to settle in the city, though he has a son living in Jiangxi and a daughter living in Henan. The complexity of migrant belonging in Feige's geography cannot be simply interpreted through the analytical dimensions above.

Unlike Feige's relative unbelonging to his hometown, Meimei still felt strongly attached to her hometown, mainly because of her children remaining there. As we addressed earlier, transnational childrearing was her major concern and affected her timing of returning home. She reflected on her dilemma,

> For my kids, I shall go back. My husband told me that no matter how much we earn if we do not educate our kids well, we will have trouble. In China, a child is usually surrounded by their parents and grandparents, but our kids don't have parents around. My kids asked me, "Why other parents can be around, you have to go to Africa."

Meimei could not answer them because this was a difficult decision for them as well. Despite the feeling of belonging, Meimei and her husband did not intend to close their "China shops." This was also observed by the second author among other "China shop" owners: complaining about the marginal profits in the ever-growing competition and asserting a sense of attachment to homes in China, few of these Chinese migrants actually returned. Thus, as a pivot of migrant geography, migrant belongings manifest themselves through their socio-spatial practices and decision-making in one's life course.

It should be noted that very few Chinese migrants formed a sense of belonging through deeper commitments to African societies, such as marriage. In Nigeria, some Chinese women were married to Nigerian husbands due to their earlier contacts in Guangzhou, China (Lan, 2015). In Botswana, the second author interviewed the forty-year-old Chinese migrant Liu from Hunan province, who opened a "China shop" in Maun, a small town in Northern Botswana. Throughout his life trajectory, Maun gradually became his home place, and his belonging is no longer only attached to China, as is that of many other Chinese migrants, but embedded in the socio-spatial practices in Botswana. In his migrant geography, Gaborone becomes a transient place along his circular migration between Maun and China, though his African adventure started from this city.

Although very few Chinese migrants claimed a strong sense of belonging to African cities, in a relative sense, a sense of place was more likely expressed by Chinese living in Windhoek than those in Gaborone. A China shop owner in Windhoek who used to work in Gaborone told the second author, "Life quality is much higher in Namibia (than in Botswana). I travel to the west coast at weekends and sometimes go to parties at white people's houses. This is unimaginable in Gaborone. There is little entertainment, except casinos." This narrative reflects the racial history of Windhoek as a white colony in Chinese migrant geographies. It also echoes Xia's narrative of comparing his experiences in Europe and Namibia. He thought the quality of life in Hungary was better than that in Namibia, but he still appreciated the "relaxing and safe" life in Windhoek, "beef and bread are good here. We go out to eat very often. Although business is less profitable nowadays, this is a good place, compared to South Africa and Botswana." Both narratives of comparing African cities and countries do not necessarily reveal migrant belongings, but they illuminate that the emotional dimension of migrant geographies is indispensable for understanding the positionality of cities in their practices.

Socio-Spatial Dimensions of Migrant Belongings

After knowing the relative sense of place in three migrants' narratives of belonging, we further interpret how migrant belongings are formed in specific migrant geographies. Brickell and Datta (2011) attribute migrant belonging and identity to the physical and conceptual construct of trans-local homes and neighbourhoods. Although our case studies do not demonstrate a strong sense of belonging to either trans-local homes or neighbourhoods, we theoretically agree with them that spatial and social dimensions of migrant geographies should be taken seriously in the understanding of variegated migrant belongings.

Migrant Spaces and Spatial Practices in Three Cities. The sense of belonging to cities, we suggest, depends on how migrants live their lives in urban spaces they frequent. Drawing on two transnational migrants' life trajectories, scholars find out that migrants' "spatial practices over the life course do not conform to traditional imaginaries of migration as a linear journey from margin to centre" (Andrucki and Dickinson, 2015: 215). Based on comparative studies of these three migrants' life experiences, we add that the fixity and mobility in their urban spatial practices render different migrant belongings.

Specifically, the "China shop" business model in Gaborone and Windhoek illustrates the fixity of spatial practices, while Chinese migrant lives in Lagos are generally mobile among different migrant spaces in the city. The first area of residential concentration, Victoria Island, together with neighbouring Ikoyi, hosts Chinese state-owned enterprises and large private corporation staff. Well-established communities, such as the 1004 Housing Estate and Lekki Phase I, attracted many upper-class Nigerian citizens and foreign expatriates including Chinese. The second Chinese residential area is Festac Town, where many Chinese migrants choose to live due to its proximity to the ports

of Apapa and Tin Can. Another advantage is its proximity to the Trade Fair and the Alaba International Market, major wholesale places for phone handsets, electronic generators, home appliances, and so on. The third residential area, Ikeja, is the administrative centre of Lagos State. Many Chinese migrants choose to live and establish their offices there due to the density of Chinese restaurants and supermarkets.

Feige's migrant geography, however, does not fully hinge on these urban spaces. As a petty entrepreneur, Feige could not afford housing in Victoria Island or Ikoyi; neither did he want to live in Festac Town and Ikeja due to his concern for the self-interested Chinese communities in Nigeria. With his brother-in-law Wang, he rented a house (later bought it) in the Igando area where few Chinese migrants chose to live. The house has a spacious basement which they used as a warehouse. When they traded furniture (chairs and tables) from China to Nigerian markets, they brought container trucks into the neighbourhood and unloaded chairs into their basement. Given that Chinese migrants were not allowed to do retailing businesses in Nigerian markets, which is quite different from the retailing China shops in Botswana and Namibia, they could only receive Nigerian clients at their house. While Wang usually took care of customer service at home, Feige tried to bring potential Nigerian buyers to view the products by moving around among different markets in Lagos. This kind of mobility made Feige very familiar with the geography of Lagos, leading to his sense of belonging to Lagos when he started doing transnational businesses in Guangzhou later.

Unlike Feige who was quite mobile in Lagos, Meimei's mobility in Gaborone largely hinges on daily business in "China shops." Meimei's shops are about 100 m^2. At the entrance, there are several glass countertops, inside of which small items such as watches, cell phones, and electronics are displayed. On three sides of the wall hang sets of bags and shoes. In the centre of the shop, several ranks are placed to display clothes and dresses. At the back of the shop is a storage room that contains a toilet. Meimei generally spends twelve hours a day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., working in the shops from Monday to Saturday. During lunchtime, she usually eats the food that she has prepared the evening before. Meimei was tired of how this shopkeeping practice (看店, *kandian*) (Yao, 2002: 82–100) restricted her mobility to limited migrant space,

> I have been nowhere these years. I do not dare to close the shops to travel. Even when I am at home, I am thinking about things in the shops. I want to go to check if there is theft. Even if I close the shop for a half day, I can't go far. In Gaborone, there is no place to go.

After returning from shops to their houses every day, Meimei and her family often stay indoors, sometimes planting vegetables in the gated compounds. Meimei admitted that this was a common lifestyle among Chinese migrants in Botswana, "Chinese people are very isolated in Botswana. We neither learn local culture nor meet local people. We stay in the shop all day, going nowhere. We are worried too much about security. Therefore, we dare not explore the world."

In the recent decade, a growing number of earlier-arrived Chinese migrants who accumulated a certain amount of capital from retailing businesses turned to wholesaling,

because the retail model of China shops became less and less profitable due to the increasingly competitive markets. These wholesalers' lifestyles are more flexible than retailers'. Indebted to the networks they have been developing for years, they only go to the shops and warehouses at the appointment with clients. However, the increased flexibility in wholesalers' migrant geographies does not necessarily lead to an increased sense of belonging to Gaborone. On the contrary, they spent more time back in China on purchasing wholesale products and strengthening their connections with producers. In Gaborone, their socio-spatial interactions focused more on Chinese retailers such as Meimei. "They have my phone number. Once new goods arrive, they call me and also many other retailers." Meimei described a hectic moment when she tried to compete with other Chinese retailers to obtain the new goods sooner than later, "There were too many people, and as a woman, I can't compete with those men."

The spatial practices of Chinese migrants in Windhoek appeared very similar to those in Gaborone because "China shop" was a dominant business model in Namibia as well, except among those Chinese wholesalers who work in Windhoek Chinatown. However, relative to Meimei's fixity to her shops in Gaborone, Wen and Xia's lives in Namibia are more mobile and more relaxed. Xia regularly went to local casinos in Windhoek, and the couple was able to have day trips to the Namibian coast. Many Chinese migrants interviewed for this research perceived Namibia as a secure society. What they did not address or realise is the relatedness between discourses of security and racialisation of urban space in Namibia (Müller-Friedman and Friedman, 2023). Chen, also a migrant from Fujian, said, "I was very worried before coming to Africa because the image of illness and poverty comes first, but unlike that image, Namibia is half Europe." Although his narrative conveys stereotypes and prejudices about both Africa and Europe, it implies that the urban mobility experience is very related to individual perceptions of the city that is spatially shaped by colonialism (Walther, 2002).

While the migrant space of "China shop" differentially shapes Meimei's and Wen's migrant geographies, from Feige's case, we should note that migrant geographies are not statically attached to specific migrant spaces. When Feige worked and lived with Wang, his geography was based on the residential and market spaces, though he was mobile in order to approach potential Nigerian buyers. After his partnership with Wang ended, he engaged in service businesses that target Chinese migrant communities in Lagos. Feige used to sell vegetables nearby Ikeja area where many Chinese migrants lived. He bought them at cheaper prices from farther local markets and transported them to the Sunday market which the Chinese often patronised. Knowing more fellow Chinese in this way, he also initiated services in flight tickets, visa extensions, and car rentals. He thought in doing so, he would not be revenged in the competition by doing this service business, though he was still wary of his clients. He more frequently visited those social spaces where Chinese migrants gathered in the city. His migrant geography, therefore, became overlapped with the geography of Chinese immigration in Lagos as described above.

Migrant Networks and Networking Strategies. The second dimension of belonging, according to Antonsich (2010), is built on the social discourses and practices in migrant

geographies. In multi-scalar migrant networks, sociabilities are emplaced in terms of family, workplace, and association, according to Çağlar and Glick-Schiller's (2018: 130–144) categorisation of sociabilities of emplacement – proximal relations, workplace sociabilities and sociabilities initiated in institutional spaces. In our case studies, family relationships are usually rooted in blood ties but also incorporate individuals whom migrants trust and identify as being as close as family in the migrant lives; workplace relationships are based on interpersonal relationships formed in business spaces, which can involve people in the family network as well as others involved in business with whom the migrant has superficial connections for businesses purposes; and association relationships incorporate the largest circle of migrants across business sectors either in informal ties (e.g. social activities in person or online) or formal organisations (registered with state authorities).

Based on the "China shop" model, the positions of Gaborone and Windhoek are very central in Meimei's and Wen's migrant networks. Many Chinese migrants start with China shops in the capital cities and expand their businesses through family networks to more rural or local areas. For instance, in Huang's large family network, some migrants such as Meimei decided to go deeper into local communities where they could gain larger profits by maintaining local customer networks. Meanwhile, Meimei was proud of her siblings and the large family network in Botswana and Namibia.

> We came from a poor area (in China), and we learn to support each other when we are abroad. If we do business together, we know we should separate the money for each household very clearly (in case of financial troubles).

Unlike Meimei who has a large family network, Wen was only connected with her sister-in-law's family, but Xia established a network of fellow China shop owners with whom he often played cards. In Namibia, Chinese retailers usually socialise with fellow retailers instead of Chinese wholesalers. Despite doing the same business, they are not necessarily competitors if their China shops are in different areas. They usually get to know each other through a mutual friend or at wholesalers' places in Chinatown where they meet to purchase goods. Wen interpreted this phenomenon through an economic class lens, "unless we are relatives, it is difficult to make friends with those in a different class." They had strong connections with some wholesalers, but the relationship remained at a business level. Despite they were more mobile than Wen, they were more dependent on Windhoek – the sole African city in their migrant network.

Family networks can facilitate the socio-economic mobility in migration processes but do not always render migrant belongings to the place of family businesses. Meimei benefits from the large-scale family network, while she also feels pressure by living in the shadow of some economically "successful" family members. This pressure was elevated especially when Meimei attended family gatherings where family members updated their business status. Although she was proud of her family as stated above, she also expressed a certain upset when being asked about her "China shop" business, "you should go to ask my sisters, their businesses are much bigger than mine … My brother-in-law just built a

new house in our hometown." For Meimei, as well as Wen, doing family businesses in the African cities is built on the convenience of family networks but also fixes their career paths that have to rely on the business model – "China shops" with an expectation to become a wholesale business. The difference between Meimei's and Wen's social dimensions of migrant belongings lies in their relative senses of place in the respective city.

Compared to the central position of Gaborone and Windhoek in migrant networks, Lagos is essential but less dominant in Feige's migrant network, especially when his business became more transnational between Lagos and Guangzhou. Due to overstaying visas and being deported by the Nigerian immigration authority, Feige returned to China and initiated a new business in Guangzhou during a transitional period before his next journey to Nigeria. Indebted to his migrant network built in Lagos, he continued engaging in service businesses by targeting those Chinese businesspeople in the China–Nigeria trade. He founded several popular large chat groups on QQ and WeChat – two major Chinese social media platforms – and enjoyed a good reputation due to his active participation and generous assistance in the groups. In this sense, the virtual space became an extended migrant space where migrant networks connect people in multiple cities across China and Africa.

Once, a Chinese trader in Guangzhou complained in the group that a logistics company sent her goods to an incorrect address of her Nigerian client. A staff member from the company, who was also in the group, refuted the trader's complaint and refused to apologise. Their quarrel in the group did not cease until Feige came to mediate. Feige asked his Nigerian partner to fetch the goods and send them to the correct address in Lagos. Feige believed that his mediation and assistance could bring him more Chinese customers who planned to travel to Nigeria. His reputation also results from his urban experience in Lagos. Being very familiar with the geography of Lagos, he often gives directions on the phone to Chinese newcomers in Lagos even if he has not been there for a period. Some young businesspeople in the groups visited Feige for advice before they set out for Nigeria. Thus, Feige's experience in Lagos became a source of social capital. To some extent, both Lagos and Guangzhou are placed significantly in his migrant network.

Although Meimei and Wen did not much engage in transnational businesses as Feige did, they still had to manage a kind of transnational relationship with their children in China. This relationship is crucial for their migrant belongings when they were hesitant if they should eventually return to China. Meimei told the second author that when she called her children, her young kids said, "why do you always lie to us, saying you are coming back?" She was heartbroken and did not know how to answer. Her husband wanted to leave Africa because of childrearing issues, but she had not made a decision yet. Wen and Xia had a similar concern and thought of bringing their children to Namibia. Due to their perception of the security and stability in Namibia, some Chinese migrants sent their children to international schools in Windhoek, hoping that they could be finally admitted to schools in Europe or North America. After Wen estimated the educational cost and the time spent on childrearing while keeping the shop, she gave up the idea. "We haven't established our business yet. Taking care of children

here is too time-consuming." Thus, Wen as well as Meimei managed this relationship through transnational communication, reinforcing their belonging to hometowns in China.

If we zoom out from the individual to the community level, three cities are the primary networking sites of Chinese migrant communities in respective African countries, given the various migrant associations based in these cities. However, from the humanistic comparative perspective, the positionality of three cities in migrant geographies is not related to those in associational networks. As gateway cities, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek hosted many kinds of Chinese social organisations, from Chinese chambers of commerce to hometown associations (同乡会, *tong xiang hui*). All these associations were led by established entrepreneurs, especially those who have large-scale investments. These associations usually have a liaison with the Chinese diplomatic authorities on matters of Chinese migrants and their interactions with local societies. Social activities organised by these associations do not usually attract petty entrepreneurs. Meimei said, "This is for successful Chinese migrants. I am a small business owner. I can't have a conversation with those leaders." Feige did try to approach one of the leaders in a Chinese association in Lagos, because he thought this would be beneficial to his service business. After a brief meeting, Feige was told that cooperation was not possible because Feige's background was not officially recognised.

To a large extent, migrant belongings in these three migrant geographies do not form according to migrant communities in those cities. Even though Feige became active in Chinese migrant communities due to his service business, he did not feel belonged to them. He developed his relative sense of place between Lagos and Guangzhou. The widely scattered China shops in both the urban and rural areas of Botswana and Namibia make Chinese migrants hardly bound up with social organisations, including native associations. In this sense, the link between belonging to a group and belonging to a place (Pollini, 2005) is not actualised in these migrant geographies.

Concluding Remarks

Migrant geographies provide a lens to prioritise migrant subjects' geographical views of places in their migrant experiences. Through this lens, ethnographers can make holistic portraits of migrant epistemologies geographically formed through urban and transnational mobilities. Because of its focus on the individually flattened scale as a category of practice in everyday migrant lives, this ethnographic portrait forms a positive complement to the theorisation of multi-scalar migration that is based on categories of analysis. Çağlar and Glick-Schiller (2018: 11) suggest that many migration ethnographies of "everyday life" treat research sites as self-constituting places and fail to explore how these sites are constituted by multi-scalar networks of differential power. We would add that from the humanistic perspective, the descriptive and interpretive portraits of migrant geographies can serve as an "entry" to shed light on the specificities and differences of migrant trajectories, facilitating a further theoretical discussion on the power hierarchies of city-making in migration processes, as is done by Çağlar and

Glick-Schiller. In other words, migrant geographies are not developed to replace or challenge but to enrich geographies of migration. The "ontological narratives" (Somers, 1994) presented by migrant subjects can contribute to building a geographic world, therefore complementing the analytical mapping of migratory institutions and processes.

Nevertheless, given that migrant geographies are individual-based, only a comparative approach within a certain context makes sense in interpreting the nuances. In this study, the context is Chinese migrants in African cities, in which the humanistic comparative perspective directs us to conceptually prioritise migrants over cities. However, we do not generalise the patterns of migrants' socio-spatial practices according to their Chinese ethnicity. Rather, we demonstrate how their socio-spatial experiences differently register at migrant spaces and networks through the individual linkages connecting China and Africa. Their Chinese identity is not a pre-given category but is negotiated through transnational migrant belongings. Thus, this humanistic comparative research provides the field of Africa–China studies with an insight into non-essentialist world-making practices: Chinese migration to Africa is not simply about essentialised categorisation of nations and cultures, but also about a spectrum of (un)belongingness in terms of the kinds of businesses migrants do, mobilities and localities of their migrant lives, and individualistic transnational networking. The nation-centred approaches in Africa–China studies can be complemented by the migrant geographies approach.

Seen through a spatial and relational lens, three African cities, Lagos, Gaborone, and Windhoek, are placed not simply as migrant destinations but dynamically with migrant mobilities in and beyond the cities. Despite spatially concentrated Chinese communities and vibrant migrant associations in Lagos, belongings to cities shifts in Feige's geography, from his suspicion of and isolation from fellow Chinese to his efforts to socialise with Chinese communities and to his retreat to focus on Lagos-Guangzhou connections in the online communities. The places of Gaborone and Windhoek in migrant geographies are based on the urban spatialities of China shops and a sense of belonging to hometowns due to transnational childrearing. However, bearing strong colonial racial legacies, Windhoek renders more discourses of security, leading to a relative sense of place in Wen's and other migrant geographies. The nuances illuminated in this exploratory study prompt us to take migrant geographies into account when theorising the ever-changing Chinese migration to Africa and, more ambitiously, any migration phenomena in the world.

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