

**Border Crossing, Collecting, Gravitating:
Small Narratives of Three Ordinary Collectors in the
Chinese Diaspora in South Africa Since the Late 1980s**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Fine Art

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for a Doctor of Philosophy at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

I hereby grant to Rhodes University permission to make additional copies of it, in whole or in part, for the purposes of research.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Benjamin Brown', written in a cursive style.

Date:

04 September 2024

ABSTRACT

Border Crossing, Collecting, Gravitating: Small narratives of three ordinary collectors in the Chinese Diaspora in South Africa since the late 1980s

Shifting away from the conventional viewpoint that confines art collecting predominantly to established structures like art institutions, markets, and exclusive collector networks, a trajectory historically influenced by Western collecting traditions and museology, this thesis takes a radical turn by delving into the small narratives of three ordinary Chinese collectors, namely Shengkai Wu, Yiyuan Yang and Shudi Li, who immigrated to South Africa since the late 1980s. The focus on Chinese collectors and migration resonates with my positionality as a recent Chinese immigrant in South Africa and aligns with Boaventura de Sousa Santos's approach to proximity in knowledge-making, which emphasises 'knowing with' and 'walking alongside' the subjects of study. The selected immigrant collectors were chosen based on their current low-to-middle economic status in South Africa. These three individuals have decades of living and art-collecting experience in the country, having held professional backgrounds in China prior to their immigration. The number of collectors was determined through an in-depth qualitative biographical research method, taking into account the niche field of art collecting and the relatively small Chinese population within the broader South African demographic. It approaches collecting as a method of pursuing clues and explores it as a socio-cultural practice by collaging the biographies of three ordinary collectors as micro-histories. Details of these ordinary lives are entangled with the lives of objects that traverse China and South Africa. The use of non-official data, at times fragmented and partially obscured, is employed to craft a narrative that weaves together diverse and complex perspectives.

The aim of this thesis is to attempt to shift from elite collecting narratives to a more diverse understanding of the global circulation and appropriation of art and cultural objects in relation to grassroots migration. This shift is explored through the unique insights derived from recovering the personal narratives of ordinary immigrant collectors and their associated objects in overlooked geographical locations and states of transformation within the context of China–Africa relations. I engage China–Africa relations within the framework Global South, seeks to address the limitations of describing the multi-dimensional interweaving of low-profile individual and objecthood, unofficial and official, historical and ephemeral relationships in the burgeoning field of China-Africa relations. The investigation unfolds through two interconnected

aspects embedded in the development of each collector's biography. Firstly, it delves into how the collecting practices of these three Chinese collectors are interwoven with their experiences in both China and South Africa. Secondly, it examines the agencies of the collectors and the relationships they establish with the objects they collect.

I approach these collectors as curators of their autobiographical exhibitions in the process of preliminary data collection and subsequent thematic and object-oriented interviews. Through the analysis of collectors' oral, visual and written narratives, as well as the biographies of objects, this PhD thesis in Art History uncovers a multilayered influx of crossways of knowledge-making by the collectors on the ground.

Inspired by practical material re-ordering and personal interests, these collectors engage in configuring the border-crossing process within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa. Recurring narratives of critical socialist experiences in Maoist China are linked to their suppressed agency and subsequent recovery through emigration to South Africa. They negotiate a complex diasporic terrain marked by engaging with socialist philately materials, persistently gravitating towards China. Concurrently, they transcend conventional nation-state framework, accentuating the convergent aesthetic qualities inherent in transnational artefacts and community-based art practices. The collectors' engagement with exported Chinese "specialised arts and crafts", and unconventional artefacts, such as philately materials, creates a bottom-up fresh interpretation of what constitutes collecting Chinese art in the context of South Africa. Fragments of British colonial history on the Rand, Chinese semi-colonial history, and contemporary printmaking in both China and South Africa, embedded in tangible material artefacts and in intangible visual connection, become visible through their logics of collecting and affective approach from the bottom up. Highlighting the often-overlooked Chinese agency in the creation of these objects, this research illustrates how individual mobility between China and Africa can contribute to the nuanced role of aesthetics through collecting, redefining what is visible and meaningful in the context of the Chinese diaspora and art collecting in South Africa. Specifically, discourses on the border poetics of Zheng He, colonial postcards and notices on the Rand, visual connection in printmaking, and Chinese semi-colonial artefacts of a converged "Chinese-British" aesthetic and a controversial Tang blue-and-white dish are instances where ordinary Chinese collectors in the Global South strategically mobilise collecting as a means to migrate towards an alternative politics of hope, as conceptualised by Chiara Brambilla.

This hope presents a “strategic Southernness,” cultivates an “alter-geopolitics of knowledge” (Simbao 2017) that, pushing against the often-dominant representation of spectacle within the structured frameworks of art institutions, markets and networks of elite collectors. I argue that these emerging themes and objects in the collectors’ narratives represent a grounded, localised knowledge-making from below, unfolding practices underpinned by the material conditions of ordinary collectors of art and material culture in the Global South, aspects that have not been given adequate attention in history.

In the process of encountering, reassembling, and appropriating these material objects and associating people in South Africa, I argue that collecting becomes not only an act of diasporic agency in constructing memories of the past, but also offers insight into the complex Chinese diaspora within the dynamics of a rising Chinese presence in Africa. On the one hand, these ordinary collectors employ collecting as an act of resistance against the aftermath of political turmoil and the epistemological inequality imposed on grassroots communities. Their emergence has contributed to transforming the residual colonial culture of the “othering” in the landscape of art collecting in South Africa. On the other hand, their agency intersects with Chinese diasporic nationalism, which lingers in the tension between internalised Eurocentric exploitation and romanticised appreciation and cultural preservation, a question that awaits for further investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Ruth Simbao, for her invaluable support throughout my Ph.D. journey. Her patience, encouragement, inspiring conversations, and unwavering care have been instrumental in completing this study. I am deeply appreciative of the enriching workshops and exceptional research environment provided through Simbao's National Research Foundation SARChI Chair programme, *Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa*. As a participant in this programme (grant number 98768), I was honoured to be a recipient of a grant holder-linked NRF/DSI SARChI PhD bursary from 2019 to 2021.

During my Ph.D. studies, I had the invaluable opportunity to co-curate an (auto)biographical exhibition featuring printmaker Nompumelelo Bukani, alongside fellow SARChI Chair participant, Viwe Madinda. This exhibition, which relates to my thesis, developed from a two-month artist's residency within the Residencies for Artists and Writers (RAW) project, and took place at the RAW Spot Gallery. As part of the SARChI programme and in alignment with its objectives to foster a "strategic Southerness" and address specific needs in writing art history from various Souths, this exhibition played a small role in collaborating with a Makhanda-based artist who works in a context outside the dominant South African art world. I would like to thank Lifang Zhang, Nalukenge Claire, Gladys Kalichini, Barnabas Ticha Muvhuti, Daniel Retief, Charmaine Mostert, Perpetua Chinomona, Stephen Fóláránmí, and all the other members of the SARChI group who have provided invaluable support during the course of this project.

Furthermore, my sincere appreciation extends to the Rhodes University African Studies Centre. The insightful seminar workshops and constructive discussions offered by the Centre significantly contributed to the advancement of my thesis project. I acknowledge the Rhodes African Studies Centre as a Cluster Centre of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2052/1 – 390713894. I am grateful for being honoured with the Rhodes African Studies Centre Doctoral Scholarship from 2022 to 2023.

This research owes a great deal to the three collectors who entrusted me with their personal stories and collections. I am deeply grateful for their kindness, openness, and generosity in making this endeavour possible.

Last but not the least, I would like to express my gratitude to my husband, Pieter, and the rest of my family, Max, Lingfu and Lalu for their support and love during the completion of the project. Without you I could not possibly have followed through.

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PREFACE

This section elucidates the background that motivated my scholarly endeavour to study collectors within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa. It briefly reflects on my positionality as a new Chinese immigrant in South Africa as if I am walking side by side with my participants on this journey of self-configuration. It serves as a gesture of ‘knowing with’ (de Sousa Santos cited in Baasch, Fóláránmí, Kakande and Simbao 2020) the participants in my research rather than ‘knowing about’ something or someone from a distance. Writing in an academic context about people who you have known for a long time is tricky. It is also a reminder for me to be aware of my distance and to balance intimacy with a critical attitude. The journey has been transformative, leading me to grapple with the concept of collecting in South Africa as an evolving process of rediscovery and unlearning, both in terms of individual perspectives and historical intricacies within the Global South.

In 2018, about eight years after I relocated from China to South Africa, I received a Christmas present from America. The present was *Colour, Confusion, and Concession: The History of the Chinese in South Africa* by Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man, which is well known in the China–Africa discourse, yet I did not know about it at that time. This second-hand book was originally a present from a South African Chinese couple who lived in Port Elizabeth to their nephew and his family in America in 1997 with a written message (figure 00.1) on the front page: ‘Enjoy your reading of this book. You will understand all the hardship we Chinese had’. The phrases ‘*we Chinese*’ struck me, as a woman who has married into a non-Chinese community in South Africa, being detached from my roots in the mainland China for years.

The book was a catalyst that touched me emotionally and intellectually through its images, such as the Chinese indentured labourers and the graves of the early Chinese settlers in the late nineteenth century. These images haunt me until this day.

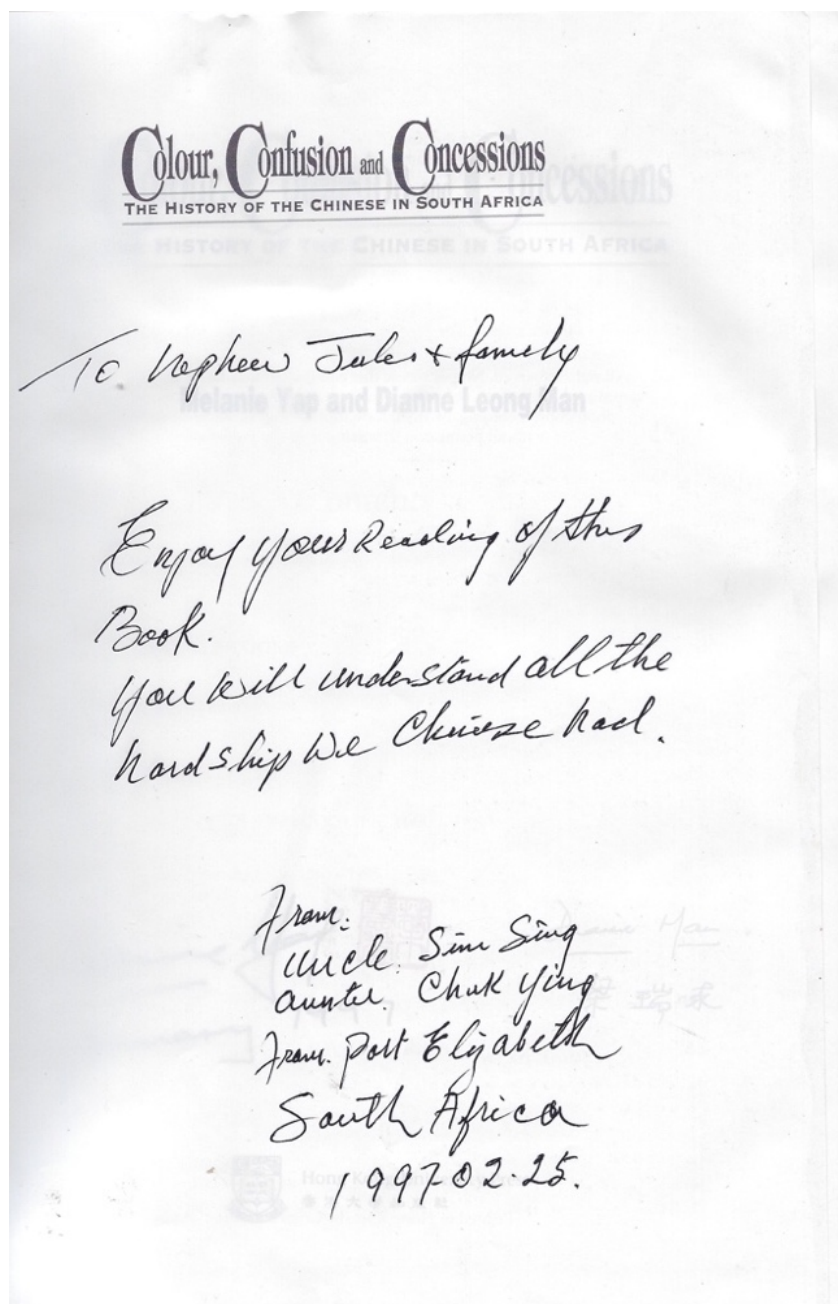


Fig 00.1: The written message on the front-page reads: 'To Nephew Jules & family: Enjoy your reading of this book. You will understand all the hardship we Chinese had. From Uncle Sim Sing, Auntie Chuk Ying, from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 1997.02.25.'

It has enlightened my awareness of being a Chinese in South Africa that connects to the different spheres of Chinese presence in history and the contemporary Chinese communities in the country. A compelling feeling of proximity has driven me to zoom into these traces of history and evidence of Chinese attachments to this country. As a result, I visited Melanie Yap in her house one afternoon. As we enjoyed rooibos tea with some sesame seed-coated rice balls stuffed

with sweet red bean curd sourced from Chinatown, I had a fascinating feeling of experiencing intimacy and distance at the same time, sitting with a Chinese historian who is distinctively South African compared to me as a new Chinese mainland immigrant to South Africa. Questions came to my mind: How long does it take for an immigrant to become South African? Did these lived lives of the early settlers who left China and were buried in this country have a sense of belonging? Standing in front of one of the earliest Chinese graves in Port Elizabeth, South Africa and touching its engraved name and dates, I could not find an answer. Nonetheless, acknowledging the importance of their reverberant effects is part of what William Raymond (1977) specifies as the ‘structure of feeling.’ Raymond (1977: 132) suggests that we should not treat ‘feeling [as being] against thought,’ but instead, we should consider the ways that thought can be felt and feeling can be processes of thought. In the process of navigating the relational configurations of being a new Chinese immigrant in South Africa, I become aware that my emotional affinity is a constructive orientation as I begin to *attach to the soil*¹ in a living and interrelating continuity. In the continuous search for supplementary inklings to discern the layered elusive spheres of reality of Chinese presence in South Africa, I start to question how other new Chinese immigrants from mainland China, like me, have gone through this process of self-configuration in relation to the traces of the past in their present daily life.

After graduating from Wits University, I worked in a Chinese-state-owned company for three years from where I began to know many Chinese from the mainland and witness different Chinese communities in South Africa. Due to my arts background, I have been interested in collecting art. My former boss, who was from the mainland and was on a fixed-term contract in South Africa, started collecting objects while in South Africa. He would passionately share with me about his new pieces of glass art from Italy or early Qing Chinese export objects that were part of his collection.

¹ “Attached to the soil” was a metaphor employed by Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech in Pretoria on 10 May 1994. In this speech, he suggested that people of different origins in South Africa can become intimately linked to this country as they grow roots, much like the jacaranda trees and mimosa trees. To cultivate an affinity for South Africa, I joined a group of 50 South Africans in a joint portrait–exhibition project initiated by Professor Peter Glendinning at Michigan State University. The project aimed to reflect a contingent collective narrative of what South Africa is and could be since Nelson Mandela’s 1994 speech. Glendinning used ‘Attached to the soil’ as the title of the exhibition, which has been showcased across seven South African university galleries. In this project, I chose to ‘interview’ some of the earliest Chinese settlers buried in the Port Elizabeth Cemetery in the 1880s as a performative intervention to engage with them directly through traditional Chinese spiritual practices.



Fig 00.2: The China Town archway in Johannesburg painted by Yiyuan Yang. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

On one occasion in an antique market in Benoni, a town on the East Rand of Johannesburg, we came across another friend of mine who I had accidentally got to know when he was painting on the Chinese arch gate (figure 00.2) in Johannesburg's Chinatown, Cyrildene. Although he and my boss were strangers, a mutual recognition marked their encounters. They could identify each other's faces and hear the familiar tones of Mandarin as they engaged with friends in different collecting sites, hinting at the frequency of their chance meetings. This way of frequent spontaneous encounter is not unusual, as both have observed that there have been small waves of these mainland collectors or cultural consumers. Some of them disappeared after a while and would re-appear all of a sudden, whereas others have never turned up again. Many questions could be raised here concerning this fascinating phenomenon. Who are these Chinese collectors? What do they collect and why? How do they relate to the Chinese communities and the other local communities through their collecting practices? How do they perceive their collecting practices in relation to the Chinese presence in South Africa? Have their individual experiences in China impacted their collecting practices in South Africa? Could these incidents, objects and people of spontaneous encounter possibly inform us a new style of collecting, relating, or seeing?

INTRODUCTION

Aim and Rationale of Research

Although South African Chinese communities have largely been invisible in South African society and politics (Yap and Man 1996, Park 2006&2009), the biographical stories written by a few Chinese South Africans have gained significant visibility (Accone 2004; Ho 2012; Chen 2009, Lin 2019; Chang 2020). While there has been a recent rise in scholarly studies of Chinese presence in Africa in the visual arts and culture (Simbao 2012, 2019a, 2019b; Corrigan 2018; Chen 2018; Mwaba 2019, Zhang 2019, Huynh 2020; Hu 2020; Leeb-du Toit et al., 2023), little has been published on Chinese collectors and collecting practices in Africa. This PhD thesis aims to partially fill this gap through the creation of biographies (Hu 2023).² that draw on the lives of three Chinese collectors, namely Shengkai Wu, Yiyuan Yang, and Shudi Li, who immigrated to South Africa since the late 1980s. Moreover, recent histories of collecting have shifted away from the traditional focus on collectors and collecting practices in Europe and North America, towards a more diverse approach that include global circulation and the appropriation of art and cultural objects. This shift is partially informed by the emergence of new art markets and art genres in the developing countries (Archer 2020) and ideas associated with the theoretical framework known as the “Global South” (Fillitz and van der Grijp 2018).

Scholars and organizations within established Western canons strive for a redirection towards ‘unfamiliar geographies,’ and the agency of overlooked, ‘often non-European actors’³ (The

² In the chapter within ‘Visualising China in Southern Africa: Biography, Circulation, Transgression,’ edited by Juliette Leeb-du Toit, Ruth Simbao, and Ross Anthony (Wits Press, 2023, pp.50), I explore the intertwined biographies of collector Shengkai Wu and his stamp cover, employing a combined methodology of biography and object biography. This investigation highlights a complex, reciprocal process of mutual knowledge creation between objects and individuals within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa. By examining the intersected biographical paths of the collector and the object, I unveil myriad lines of intricate historical and contemporary interconnections and possibilities embedded in the enormously rich individual and object narratives.

³ In the conference call for ‘Decentring Collecting Histories’ at the College Art Association in Chicago, scheduled for Feb 16–19, 2022, Stacey Pierson advocates for examining the agency of overlooked ‘often non-European actors’ (The International Art Market Studies Association 2021). While acknowledging the critical and meaningful nature of raising these issues from well-established Western canons to explore new possibilities for diversified contemporary collecting narratives, I am hesitant to use the term “non-European actors” in this context. My hesitation stems from the concern that such a term may inadvertently approach the topic from a Eurocentric perspective, defining these lesser-known actors in opposition to European traditions and reinforcing European traditions as the centre of gravity. This approach risks unintentionally perpetuating dichotomies, such as the North-to-South gaze and neoliberal structural lines of centre and peripheries.

International Art Market Studies Association 2021). This approach is considered a means to ‘de-centre’ the histories of collecting and challenge assumptions about what defines the ‘centre’ of the field (The International Art Market Studies Association 2021).

In addressing the uneven geopolitics of knowledge production in relation to collecting practices, I propose adopting a different approach that is context-sensitively embedded within the Global South. The goal is to highlight the overlooked Chinese collectors and collecting practices within the framework of alternative modes of knowledge, moving away from the discourse of ‘de-centring,’ which tends to revolve around hegemonic centres. My conceptualisation of the Global South is embedded, on one hand, within narratives of shared colonial and post-colonial experiences among the relatively disadvantaged positions of developing countries that advance collective strength (Mawdsley 2019: 259). Particularly, in the case of this study, it emphasises their anti-imperial stances and efforts to reclaim cultural heritage in response to colonialism and hegemony. On the other hand, when exploring China-Africa relations through the framework of the Global South, I align with Shi’s (2021: 627) proposition to transcend idealised narratives of solidarity and instead explore the everyday sociocultural interactions among smaller actors. These interactions can manifest in complex and dynamic forms, creating a varied, nuanced, and textured Global South.

Within this broad landscape of an emerging discourse on the varied configurations of the Global South (Zhang 2019: 362), situated in South Africa, I position my research on Simbao’s (2017: 7) open call for “strategic Southernness,” which advances situational and processual configurations inspired by contingent approaches. These approaches have navigated an increasingly complex transregional interactions in different regions within the Global South (Leeb-du Toit, Simbao, and Anthony 2023). Through strategically adopting contingent approaches in response to the lived experiences of “critical local voices” (Labi 2015: 103), the study attempts to advance the strategies of ‘reaching sideways, writing our ways’ (Simbao et al. 2017) of art histories within the Global South.

In contrast to the celebrity collectors featured in colonial collections within international and South African art institutions (Wang 2017; De Kamper 2018; Esmyol1999&2020), as well as the focal point of exclusive networks among high-end collectors in the “global art” market (Beaven 2019; Plattner 2020), this thesis takes a radical turn by fleshing out the world of ordinary collectors within a specific community at the crossroads of entangled geographies, linking the

Chinese diaspora to South Africa with small stories (Mwaba 2019) or petit récits (Lyotard 1984). The focus on ordinary collectors represents a direct, bottom-up analytical approach, with an ontological and epistemological commitment to uncovering the agency of modest collectors. These Chinese collectors are situated within the lower to middle range of the South African economy, ranging from small shop owners to those living on retirement funds. They primarily collect less-known or less-valued objects, existing beyond the more established topics and classifications within Art history. These collectors often seem situated in the ‘blind spots’ (Simbao 2015) of hegemonic and frequently homogeneous market-oriented collecting narratives, navigating the ambivalent transnational context of (un)translatability.

The thesis seeks to contribute to the underrepresented “marginal and obscured” (Peltonen 2014, 103) individuals and their experiences in the Global South. It aims to delineate their overlooked agency within the Chinese diaspora and the landscape of arts and culture in South Africa. The thesis treats collecting practices as a ‘paradigm of clues’ (Ginzburg 1992) and a social practice (Pearce 2013) in collaging three ordinary collectors’ biographies ‘sideways’⁴ as microhistories (Peltonen 2014: 116). Coined by Matti Peltonen (2014: 116), the concept of a sideways biography builds upon Simone Lässig’s observation regarding the contemporary trend in biographical writing, which increasingly embraces non-linear narrative approaches and a “montage” of multiple perspectives. This thesis creolises multiple perceptions of the lives of people, objects, transnational movements, and visibility in a non-linear, montage approach. It posits that the immensely entangled details of ordinary life, particularly ‘non-official data’ (Li 2000), notwithstanding being trivial, fragmented and obscured, are traces and clues demanding scrutiny. By doing so, it attempts to achieve a thick description (Geertz 2008) from the individuals on the ground and fine-textured reflectivity and complexity, where different cultural contacts and associated semiotic signifiers (Hu 2020)⁵ among multiple waves and layered Chinese immigrants to South Africa are often flattened or omitted within the dominant China–Africa

⁴ The term “sideway” biographies describe a method of composing biographies that diverges from a linear narrative approach. (Simone Lässig, (2008) ‘Introduction: Biography in Modern History — Modern Historiography in Biography,’ in: Berghahn and Lässig, *Biography Between Structure and Agency*, pp. 10).

⁵ The myriad lines, in relation to cultural practices, are often overlooked, dividing but also connecting different Chinese communities in South Africa. Using the lucky cat as a signifier, I demonstrate the ways transnational appropriation and adaption of cultural symbols from folk traditions differentiate the three primary distinctive communities in South Africa (Hu 2020).

discourse, which is often overwhelmed by ‘big men voices’ from the top (Simbao 2012). The concept of thick description aims to reveal the meanings that specific social actions—such as collecting—hold for the individuals who perform them while explicitly articulating what this understanding demonstrates about the social context in which it occurs and beyond (Geertz 2008: 321). Simultaneously, it seeks to uncover the conceptual structures that inform these actions. Weaving biographical studies through thick description, as discussed by Geertz (2008: 321), allows the thesis to draw conclusions from small yet intricately detailed facts, thereby supporting broad assertions about the role of individuals by engaging deeply with complex specifics.

There are different Chinese communities and evanescent layers of Chinese diasporic experiences, including those indentured labours who were repatriated to China, leaving behind ‘distinct senses of Chineseness’ (Accone 2006a: 257) in the tapestry of configuring a contemporary Chinese self in South Africa. Accone’s use of the term “Chineseness” is marked by the delineation of three distinct groups within the Chinese communities in South Africa. These communities include the ‘SABCs,’ whose ancestors trace back to the earlier 19th-century Cantonese settlers, the Taiwanese community formed since the 1970s, and the latest and largest waves of immigrants from mainland China since the late 1980s and the beginning of 1990s (Accone 2006a). In contrast, my use of “Chineseness” pertains to the perception and documentation of Chinese indentured labourers within a specific social context and historical moment in South Africa, as evidenced in colonial archives, museums, and scholarly accounts (Harris 2013; Richardson 1977; Huynh 2008 & 2023). In the thesis, I adopt Youngmin Kim’s interpretive approach to Chineseness (2019: 82), which builds on a social lineage account that questions what historical conditions lead people to perceive themselves as belonging to a single group. This approach takes agency and historicity seriously as that Chineseness presents itself as more of a processual configuration responding to shifting conditions and resides within the agency of self-proclaimed practitioners. Therefore, the scope of Chineseness of the thesis is defined by the agency of different Chinese communities in relation to ethnicity, identity, and material symbolism within varied social and historical lineage accounts.

This PhD thesis not only sheds light on the limited representations of cultural practices of new immigrants from mainland China in South Africa, but also uncovers the way they are drawn to and grappling with diversified Chinese things and red aesthetics in South Africa, where different aesthetics intersect in a contact zone (Shigemi 2022: 24). Red aesthetics in the context of China

can be broadly interpreted as the aesthetic expressions found in cultural and artistic forms created to convey the revolutionary ideology of the Communist Party. However, scholarly accounts, as framed by Hemelryk Donald (2014) and Chen (2017), offer nuanced perspectives. Hemelryk Donald (2014: 1) defines it as ‘an immersive aesthetic field’ through mass communication, encompassing writings, slogans, sounds, images, and paintings. This field formed a ‘red sea’ through which the Party disseminated ‘extraordinarily powerful visual metaphors for the revolution-in-progress’ in the decades after 1949. Peng Chen (2017: 200–202) frames it as a compilation of red culture emerging from the aesthetic evolution shaped by the revolutionary history of modern China across a prolonged period. This compilation includes the fusion of ideological education and folk culture in the early revolutionary history of Shaanxi in the 1920s, the aesthetic impact of the Soviet Union, and the industrial culture during the initial establishment of New China. The trajectory extends further to include political posters from the 1960s to the 1970s. This thesis adopts Chen’s framing as the collectors engage with artefacts of revolutionary history, synchronising with Chen’s outlined time frame. In comparison to the distinct Chinese things made for domestic market they are accustomed to, these border-crossing collectors enter a discursive space with artefacts not only mass made for foreign market in imperial and modern China, but also imitation or reinvention of Chinese aesthetic forms crafted by diverse makers outside China endowed with colonial vestiges and ambiguity. The ordinary collectors and the mass-produced export wares and objects of ambiguity have formed small clusters of ontological and epistemological entities that have long been ignored by the high-end global art market. These clusters, which orient alternative sources of references, self-proclaimed analyticity, and modality, enable us to question and resist the blind spots against ordinary, less-celebrated objects as important vehicles of cultural heritage.

When committing our attention to these small actors, Global South becomes a concept of spontaneous sparks in a third space, encompassing inconsistently cognisant repercussion of ‘obscured conditions’ (Lowe 2015: 2). These conditions tied to the small actors have hitherto been silent but are presented in the evanescent layers of beings, spontaneous encounters, and absurd entanglements in tiny spaces, in part because of the scarcity of sources reflecting their experiences.

The research adopts a broad definition of art, which includes Asian antiquities, European objects d’art and modern and contemporary art and artefacts (including the works of South

African and Chinese *minjian* artists). The term “*minjian*,” commonly translated into English as “folk,” carries a nuanced complexity within the Chinese context compared to the “folk” derived from the Western tradition. Veg (2019: 26) clarifies that “*minjian*” literally means “among the people,” with its core concept originating from the historical interplay between “*min*” (people) and “*guan*” (officials). In the realm of arts and literature, *minjian* emphasises grassroots or community-based cultural practices. I use *minjian* in the context of South Africa to signify the border-crossing collectors’ transnational connection to grassroots or community-based positions and cultural settings in relation to their experiences in China. While acknowledging this diverse artistic landscape, the study predominantly centres on Chinese artefacts within South Africa. This focus is motivated by the collectors’ transnational identities and their adept navigation of liminal spaces through the acquisition and engagement with these artefacts. This phenomenon also aligns with the concept of “home bias” in the arts where collectors tend to have a particular affinity for art that shares their culture, history and nationality (Steiner, Frey, and Resch, 2013: 2). I extend the concept of “home bias,” which primarily focuses on short-term border-crossing art buyers, to include immigrant art collectors within the Chinese diaspora. This extension adds layers of complexity to our understanding of home, nostalgia, and belonging in relation to collecting, the Chinese diaspora, and mobility, where collecting Chinese art objects serves as a means of homecoming and as points of identity configuration. Consequently, the study frames the notion of Chinese art in South Africa through their perspectives and lived experiences of border-crossings. In the study, border-crossing encompasses geographical, metaphorical and epistemological transitions. This includes subnational movements within China and transnational movements to South Africa.

Individual collectors’ personal stories of the past and present provide cultural reference and context in examining their art collecting practices and the diaspora in South Africa. Their stories also enable the discernment of nuances within the new Chinese communities (Huynh and Chen, 2010) and intra-Chinese relations between Chinese South Africans and Chinese from Taiwan (Yap 1996, Accone 2006a; Park 2006 & 2009, Wilhelm 2006), in order to understand them as an integral, yet understated part of South Africa’s complex society and history. Jung Park (2009: 156) identifies three distinct periods of newest Chinese immigrants from mainland China. The first period was from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, and many landed in South Africa between 1989 and 1992 (Park 2009: 156). Most of this group who arrived in South Africa during the first

period with almost nothing and launched small businesses or worked as employees for Taiwanese businesses. The second wave of mainland Chinese immigration to South Africa occurred in the mid to late 1990s, immediately following South Africa's first democratic elections. During this period, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies sent Chinese nationals to staff their operations. After completing their contracts, several employees chose to stay in South Africa (Park 2009: 156). These individuals were mainly well-educated professionals with international work experience and financial resources. The latest wave of Chinese immigrants began arriving in South Africa in the early 2000s. Mainly small traders and peasants from Fujian province, many entered the country illegally through neighbouring countries (Park 2009: 156-157). Due to limited English skills, education, and business networks, they typically operate small shops in remote towns across South Africa (Park 2009: 157). The collectors of the study are from the first wave of new Chinese immigrants, with a more contextualised observation elaborated in the thesis outline section.

Time and race are crucial parameters in understanding the Chinese diaspora in South Africa (Huynh and Chen 2010) and art collecting practices (Pearce 1995). Prior to the appearance of a few Taiwanese diplomatic officials in South African auction houses and antiquity exhibitions in the early 1980s, as observed by South African Asian art specialists and collectors, the history of art collecting in South Africa synchronised with the West, reflecting a generally colonial perspective towards collecting. This perspective started with colonial masters collecting Chinese art, rather than the Chinese collecting their own art (Ollemans 2023; Wu 2023; Chan 2021: 15; Stevenson 1997: 41). During the Apartheid era, race was a significant determining factor in the practice and discourse of art collecting and the art "public," which had been exclusively white-centric (Roberts 2020:18). The South African Chinese communities, especially those South African-born, had little contact with public art institutions and resorted to alternative spaces to pass down their Chinese heritage through community club activities and traditional festival celebrations (Yap and Man 1996; Corrigan 2023: 62-73). This unequal history of collecting has also partially contributed to the limited development of Chinese art connoisseurship and less interest in Chinese art collections in contemporary South Africa, particularly within the South African-born Chinese communities. This aspect of the history of collecting is discussed in the subsection titled "On Collecting."

This study focuses on Chinese collectors in South Africa, questioning whether the emergence of the new Chinese immigrants is beginning to shift the centre of Chinese art collecting in the country. Following the three waves of new Chinese immigration to South Africa, the landscape of art buying has gradually begun to change with the increased presence of Chinese buyers, particularly in the secondary art market, despite the limited scholarly accounts available. The secondary market refers to the arena where art owners resell artworks previously purchased (Velthuis 2011). Within the hierarchy of this market, auction houses serve as the primary vendors and are predominantly located in major cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg, where art transactions frequently occur (Roberts 2020: 12). In contrast, ordinary Chinese art buyers are often found in small antique shops and flea markets, operating outside mainstream institutionalised structures within the lower range of the secondary market.

Initially, my sampling plan aimed to reach out to a few mega wealthy Chinese art buyers closely associated with auction houses and art galleries in the elite cultural fields of South Africa. These individuals mainly belong to the second wave of professional new immigrants and are positioned within the high-income brackets of South Africa. However, their reluctance to participate in the research, along with my observation that most ordinary Chinese new immigrant art buyers purchase from small antique dealers, fairs, flea markets, and artists directly, led me to reconsider my research approach towards a grassroots-oriented focus. As a result, I decided to select collectors based on their lower-middle economic status and their position within the middle to lower tier of the art market, a segment that has received little scholarly attention not only in South Africa but also globally.

I consider differentiating individual occasional art buyers and brokers from collectors in the choice of my case studies to be a critical sampling requirement, as the aim of this study is to reveal a more complex and diversified understanding of the ecology of the South African art world beyond the institutionalised structural value system. In the predominantly market-driven practice of buying art, its ‘emotional value’ diminishes, and it becomes merely a form of capital when it is placed on auction (Velthuis 2005: 2). Based on her extensive market study of Black art buyers in South Africa, Roberts (2020: 31) argues for the importance of identifying collectors’ personal connections to artists and their work. Zwanns (2015: 56) outlines two key aspects that distinguish collectors from occasional art buyers: the importance of ‘the social process and reputation’ of the art, which play an influential role. Additionally, collectors tend to ‘become

more self-directed' and increasingly trust their own judgment as they gain experience. I consider collectors' emotive, self-analytic processes and their valuing of the social process of artmaking as important elements in selecting cases of Chinese collectors for the study. The selection of the three collectors described in this thesis is principally informed by these important elements, based on their extensive personal histories of collecting within the South African context, distinguishing them as committed collectors rather than transient Chinese cultural brokers. Secondly, their collecting trajectory has covered major art cities in South Africa, including Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban. Thirdly, even though gender is not the focus of the study, it is important to acknowledge the gender issue within its scope. The study did not specifically intend to select three male new Chinese immigrant collectors. Although there are two female collectors in the higher economic brackets of Chinese collectors—who were reluctant to participate in the study—a gender imbalance becomes evident in the middle-to-lower economic status group. Despite this, one of the selected collectors occasionally receives advice from his wife. Notably, all three individuals were born in the 1950s and navigated the complexities of the Cultural Revolution before immigrating to South Africa circa 1991 or 1992. This temporal and experiential alignment necessitates an in-depth exploration within the study, specifically focusing on the materiality inherent in socialist constructions and their broader implications. As indicated by the title, this research positions the three Chinese collectors within the period of immigrants from mainland China to South Africa since the late 1980s.

The main question of the research is: What can the stories of ordinary immigrant collectors in the context of China-Africa reveal about framing art collecting and the Chinese diaspora from below in the process of configuring the Global South?

I view the agency and storytelling of ordinary Chinese collectors as a practice of discursive knowledge production. In this context, I use “framing” as a metaphor to highlight the role of these collectors in constructing a conceptual framework of ordinariness from below. I tackle the question from two underlying aspects interwoven in the creation of each collector's biography. I investigate the ways that three Chinese collectors' collecting practices intertwined with their experiences in China and South Africa. I also explore the agencies of the collectors and the objects they have collected.

Definition of Key Terms and Concepts

This subsection addresses the four set of key terms that underpins the study theoretically and empirically: *ordinary/ordinariness*, *agency*, *gravitating* and the *Global South*.

Ordinary/Ordinariness

The word “ordinary” comes from the Latin *ordinarius* (order, arrangement, system). “Ordinary” signifies a cluster of meanings that pertain to the ‘habitual, customary, regular, usual, or normal’ (Sandywell 2004: 162). It is used to describe anything from daily routines to common characteristics, offering a nuanced understanding of what is considered typical or standard in various contexts.

This study develops the concept of ordinary/ordinariness as an epistemological intervention against the superficial redundancy (Thomasson 2007: 5) inherent in elitist, unreflective, common-sense worldviews, especially towards lesser-celebrated objects and collectors who exist outside the institutionalised global art market governed by elitist gatekeepers. It raises the question of how art collecting, and the Chinese diaspora can be framed differently through defining ordinariness. I unpack ordinariness by examining the politics of daily routines and common characteristics in the context of art collecting within the Chinese diaspora. “Ordinary” includes:

- Being ordinary as an ontological state

- Feeling ordinary as an affect

- Living ordinarily as a form of positionality in political economies or power dynamics

- Taking up ordinariness as a form of self-identification and self-justification

Being ordinary as an ontological state refers to grassroots immigrant collectors and mass-produced artifacts that are often seen as unnoticed yet ever-present discourses of everyday practice outside the mainstream art world. Feeling ordinary as an affect relates to collectors’ emotive attachments to objects made by Chinese *minjian* artists, as well as by South African community-based artists. Living ordinarily as a form of positionality refers to collectors positioned within the lower-middle economy of South Africa, who are subject to power dynamics shaped by the Eurocentric art market structure and the material conditions they can access, as well as the racial and colonial legacy and shifting power dynamics resulting from their transnational movements between China and South Africa. Taking up ordinariness as a form of self-identification and self-justification involves perceiving ordinariness as a value system and a means of agency in China-Africa studies. This process of forging a sense of solidarity, reading

parallel contexts, and configuring identity within the Chinese diaspora arises from the bottom-up and through daily encounters. The systematic definition of ordinary/ordinariness contributes to debates about analyticity, identity conditions, and shifting geopolitical power entwined with the Chinese diaspora, collecting, and material circulation. This definition serves as a critical intervention addressing the grounding issues related to the epistemology of human and non-human small actors in the Global South.

Agency

The term *agency* can be traced back to the philosophical individualism of the early Enlightenment, grounded in religious morality, where individuals are free agents ‘able to make rational choices for themselves and society’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 964). Inspired by Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy of freedom and individual will, Talcott Parsons (1949) defines agency in relation to effort, as the force that achieves. Jeffrey Alexander (1988: 301) advances the definition beyond both Kant and Parsons by highlighting the structural contexts that agency engages. This perception of agency is critical to the thesis as it sets the small actors, namely collectors and objects, within multidimensional structures of power dynamics, e.g., collecting, migration, and circulation. However, Alexander’s theorisation does not provide pragmatic systematic analysis features in his analysis of agency, considering the term itself has remained elusive and vague despite its common association with ‘self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962).

My conceptualisation of agency aligns with Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998: 962) approach, which views it as ‘a temporally embedded process of social engagement.’ This process draws from the past through its “iterational” or habitual aspect while also being oriented toward the future through ‘a projective capacity to imagine alternative possibilities’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962). Furthermore, it engages with the present through ‘a practical-evaluative capacity’ that ‘contextualises past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962). This interpretation opens up a way of analysing the agency of immigrant collectors by drawing on different habitual aspects (memories of political turmoil, bodily experiences of art practices, routine philately activities) of the past in China to mediate or transform their capacity for collecting art in South Africa, which is contingent on a diasporic context.

Hein De Haas's (2021: 8) aspirations-capabilities framework offers valuable insights into understanding the interplay between structure and agency in migration processes. Building on Amartya Sen's (1999) capabilities approach, which redefines development as the expansion of substantive freedoms enjoyed by individuals, De Haas (2021: 14) views migration as both a form of freedom and a function of capabilities and aspirations. As individuals navigate various contexts and networks, they possess the ability to alter their relationships with existing structures. According to De Haas (2021: 14), structures are defined as 'patterns of social relations, beliefs, and behaviours shaped by elements and institutions such as 'class, religion, gender, ethnicity, networks, markets, and cultural belief systems.' The thesis follows both De Haas' and Sen's framework on migration, agency, and structure raises questions about how collectors' agency is shaped by structures such as Chinese identity, lower-middle-class economic positions, and Eurocentric market-driven collecting networks. At the same time, it imagines migration as a form of freedom that represents a departure from suppressed agency as collectors in China due to political turmoil and an opportunity to renew creative capabilities in South Africa.

The thesis is anchored within the broad discursive space of China-Africa relations, which observes a salient turn toward African agency (Alden and Large 2019: 13). According to Mohan and Lampert (2012), the agency turn stemmed from a critique of China–Africa relations, which often neglected, ignored, or erased African agency. Initial research on African agency within China-Africa relations highlighted how African political elites influenced China's involvement to serve the interests of African nations (Otele 2020: 275). Lambert and Mohan (2015) contend that African agency encompasses more than just the state-centric level, including ordinary individuals, traders, and non-state actors. Jamie Monson and Stephanie Rupp (2013: 41) emphasised the importance of research that is historically grounded, ethnographically informed, and theoretically nuanced. They shifted the analytical focus from national-level macro perspectives to encompass multiple levels of dynamic connections, ranging from community and individual levels to transnational and transregional contexts. Moreover, they highlighted the necessity of considering a diverse array of actors in such analyses.

The thesis follows the turn of focus from macro perspective to a historically grounded approach that highlights the agency of communities and individuals. From a historical standpoint, Chris Alden and Daniel Large (2019: 15) argue that the scholarly narrative of China

in Africa was ‘originated in the West’ because China’s approach to Africa was filtered ‘through the West,’ especially through the influence of former colonial powers and their knowledge systems. While this argument remains open to contestation, it raises questions about whether, and to what degree, Chinese immigrant collectors have engaged in their collecting practices in South Africa ‘through the West.’ What are the varied manifestations of “seeing” through the West that have been incorporated into their Chinese agency? While agency has the projective capacity according to an individual’s will, as Tom Goodfellow and Zhengli Huang (2021: 674) point out, the agency of the Chinese collectors is subject to the political-economic landscape of South Africa, ‘producing contingent benefits and disbenefits that are far removed from the visions of any planners – Chinese or African, past or present.’

Besides framing the term agency in relation to human actors, the study also considers the agency of non-human actors as a critical approach. Following Lauren Ahern’s (2001: 110) definition of agency as ‘the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act,’ Janet Hoskins expands the concept of agency beyond humans, suggesting that the capacity for social action, in terms of who and what is capable of acting, is subject to varied contexts. Therefore, agency includes ‘spirits, machines, signs, and collective entities (ancestors, corporations, social groups)’ (Hoskins 2006: 74). The concept of objects having “social lives” was introduced in a significant edited collection by Arjun Appadurai (1986), which provides a theoretical background for examining the global flow and appropriation of cultural objects that link China and South Africa. The “path” and “life histories” of things not only create cross-cultural contexts but also embody ‘formal complexity and technical virtuosity’ (Gell 1998: 95) that act as agents to captivate collectors. In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell argues that art is a system of social action, emphasising the importance of examining how people interact with objects by distributing aspects of their personhood into things. This study employs the anthropology of art as a framework and treats the agency of objects as a knowledge system that intersects with the agency of collectors. Within the expansive discursive realm of China-Africa relations, the concept of non-human agency—particularly the agency of art objects in circulation—demands further exploration, which this study aims to address as one of its contributions.

Gravitating

The term *gravitating*, inspired by critical geography studies, has become a loaded concept in the post-place construction of knowledge across various disciplines (Heyman 2008). Models of

gravitation have been theorised in economic and cultural geography to interpret the geography and horizontal diffusion of cultural and economic processes, shaped by the physical distance between locations and geopolitics (Grosjean 2019: 3). This study conceptualises gravitating as a synthesis of physical and metaphorical attraction or inclination toward specific cultural, social, material, or geographical entities. In a diasporic context, it encapsulates the psychological and cultural pull that individuals experience, leading them to connect with familiar cultural elements, such as their home countries, collective memories, and objects with aesthetics that resonate with personal and communal significance.

Individuals are embedded within various gravitational fields, which Christian Welzel (2017) refers to as multiple “solidarity circles,” each exerting its own gravitational force. This study considers how collectors orient themselves around these multiple gravitational fields within a multilayered process of horizontal and vertical diffusion. The primary gravitational field on the horizontal landscape under consideration comprises multiple versions of China/Chineseness, conceived as cultural units with central tendencies around which individuals gravitate (Akaliyski, Bond, & Welzel 2021). I consider Ruth Simbao’s theorisation of ‘situational geographies of exclusion and geographies of resistance based on shared histories of colonialism’ in the Global South, which emphasises ‘non-hierarchical, entangled ways of relating,’ as an important departure point for approaching the concept of gravitating (2017: 2-6). Within these processes of contingent, situated gravitating, themes such as “home” and “second home,” “ordinary” and “exquisite,” “institutional” and “private,” “Chinese” and “Chinese-like” become recurring in the narratives of collectors who configure their identities through collecting and migration.

The vertical diffusion process pertains to the gravitational forces of personal memories related to collecting and material attraction since childhood in China, which have shaped their lives in South Africa. I argue that the vertical and horizontal landscapes of these gravitational fields are interconnected by a third gravitational force, oriented toward the framework of ordinariness, where ordinary collectors’ situated experiences, individual agency, aesthetic choices, and objects of orientation are grounded. The influence of these gravitational forces, as exercised by the agency of the collectors, aims to challenge and shift the weight of structural, Eurocentric knowledge creation concerning art histories and migration in the Global South (Simbao 2017: 5).

Global South

The concept of the *Global South* has become increasingly prominent in contemporary art discourse and practice and China-Africa relations. However, defining such a broad theoretical framework can be challenging. A useful starting point is to consider definitions that address the contested spatial dimensions of the term. The formalization of the “North–South” divide as a global concept gained prominence by the 1980 report, produced by an independent body named Brandt Commission (Brandt 1980). The report highlighted the stark economic differences between the wealthy, industrialised countries of the Northern Hemisphere and the poorer, under-developed and developing nations of the Southern Hemisphere. However, the division is inherently a loose geographical concept, as some wealthy nations, such as Australia, are in the Southern Hemisphere, and some impoverished nations in Asia, located in the Northern Hemisphere. Evidently, since the birth of the idea of “South” and “North” divide, the “Global South” as the Comaroffs (2012) argue, regardless of its specific meaning at any given time, consistently refers to a peripheral location, an “elsewhere” to mainstream Euro-America, positioned outside of its dominant centres, whether these are real or imagined. Scholarly accounts observe that the term has become an increasingly ‘deteritoralised,’ concept is often used to describe a form of collective ‘subjectivity’ or ‘resistant imaginary’ underpinned by ‘a shared experience of subjugation under capitalism’ and decolonisation (Mignolo 2009: 23; Shi 2021: 626; Mahler and O’Brien 2017).

The thesis offers a nuanced, inward-discursive perspective within the South that pushes the boundaries and contents of defining the Global South. It does not focus on an ‘ex-centric’ location that revolves around the concept of core or peripheral discourse in defining the Global South, particularly the impact of Euro-American actors, though the influence of the West cannot be entirely disregarded. Instead, it situates the Global South at the crossroads of intertwined political, diasporic, and cultural geographies of China-Africa grassroots contact. My conceptualisation of the Global South does not strictly adhere to geographical confinement; however, this does not imply that geographical locations are irrelevant, considering that the center of gravity in art scholarship and collecting practices has been predominantly shaped by Western publishing houses, elite art institutions, and mega collectors (Simbao 2017: 5; Kellner 2024). I argue that recognising the ordinary actors on the ground, who take on a vernacular

embodiment intersecting the geographies of Africa and China into new hybrid Global South entities, is essential.

I adopt a critical approach to the Global South, which has been criticised as increasingly ‘interpenetrated by neoliberal and authoritarian regimes’ (Papastergiadis 2017: 69). The Global South often appears in top-down visions of socio-economic development and cultural homogenisation in rhetorical scripts or is adapted to suit the interpretative and consumption preferences of the ‘multilateral elites’ (Simbao 2018: 16; Shi 2021: 626). Flair Shi contends that the Global South should not be limited to highbrow works with overt anti-imperial themes but should also encompass everyday sociocultural phenomena within Southern communities, even when these are less palatable to cosmopolitan cultural elites (2021: 627). He argues for a clear distinction between “Global South” as a historical and descriptive category, denoting communities based on their geopolitical and socioeconomic contexts, and “Global South” as a value—a politicised stance rooted in anti-imperial and anti-hegemonic ideologies (2021: 627). Interactions that do not align with the idealised notion of the “Global South” as a value, including its negative aspects, need to be included. My conceptualisation of the “Global South” in this study follows these flexible, inclusive, and critical positions.

How do the collectors respond to the contextual change from memories of Socialist China to South Africa, where postcolonial discourse remains critical in framing the Global South? Drawing from the lived experiences of these Chinese collectors, grounded in the concepts of “situatedness” and “placedness,” this thesis advances the spirit of solidarity based on shared experiences, while remaining mindful and reflective of the Chinese collectors’ privilege (and vulnerability) during “other-other” encounters (Simbao 2017; Zheng, Cheng, and Coetzee 2021). It poses the question of whether class differences and the influence of the West play a role in the process of configuring the Global South. I argue that by exploring Chinese agency as a complex and dynamic temporal process, and by deciphering varying levels of ‘maneuverability, creativity, and reflective decision-making’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 964), we can understand how these individuals’ migration and collecting narratives critically assess and reshape the conditions of our knowledge-making of the Global South.

Style and Methodology

The study draws inspiration from scholarly writings in cultural and visual history that concentrate on individual or select figures to illuminate broader cross-cultural histories and

material cultures, as evidenced by works such as Ruth Simbao (2023), Henrietta Harrison (2021), Kai Jun Chen (2023), Yiyou Wang (2007) and Ivy Yi Yan Chan (2021). The styles of these scholarly biographical writings inform a continuous biographical (re)turn since the late 1980s (Lässig 2008) in which biography and life writings are employed as a critical method, challenging established interpretations of human history in a scholarly way (Renders, De Haan, & Harmsma, 2016: 27; Rassool 2010: 29; Anthony, Simbao & Leeb-du Toit 2023: 16; Angelo 2021).

Ruth Simbao (2023: 29) examines a ‘visual letter’ created by South African-born filmmaker Henion Han as ‘an act’ or ‘process’ of biography informed by a multigenerational navigation of unplanned migrancy and acute distress of separation, with a longing for eventual return to the roots. Collaborating with Han’s distinctive style of camera-writing, Simbao forms an (auto)biography that not only captures lives torn between multiple spaces of migrancy and geopolitics in South Africa, China, and Taiwan but also sensitively navigates traumatic scenes of reburial the humans remains through a careful mediation of seeing and not seeing. British historian Henrietta Harrison (2021: 37) undertakes a biographical study of two extraordinary interpreters in the eighteenth century who lived between Chinese and English cultures. Li Zhibiao, an interpreter for the British embassy, born into an elite family in China, received a classic European education in Naples with training in Latin with rhetoric, philosophy and theology. In contrast, George Thomas Staunton, an interpreter and banker in the East India Company’s establishment in Canton, received an unconventional European education and was taught Chinese in his youth. By revealing the life stories of these interpreters, Harrison (202: 274) highlights the precarious situations they faced as their lives intertwined with intensified political tension between China and Britain. Their ability to empathize with the culture of the opposing side became a potential source of danger. Chinese literary and cultural historian Kai Jun Chen (2023:17) delves into the life of bannerman Tang Ying (1682–1756), who emerged from rustic north China and presented himself as “the craftsman” of the imperial court. Chen uses Tang as a vantage point into the underrepresented roles of “technocratic subjects” in official kilns. Under Tang’s supervision, a significant portion of exquisite Chinese porcelain was crafted and collected in prominent collections worldwide dated to the initial decades of the eighteenth century. Tang Ying’s biography embodies the less-known technocratic culture, distinguishing themselves from the stance of the Han literati in both knowledge production and art making. Ivy Yi Yan Chan

unearth the life of Loo Ching-Tsai (C. T. Loo, 1880-1957), a prominent international art dealer, to examine his influence on the circulation and reception of Chinese antiquities in the United States between 1915 and 1950. Through archival research, biographical exploration, and interpretative analysis, she investigates the transactional methods, networks, conceptual frameworks, and visual strategies employed by Loo in his business. Chan argues that Loo played a pivotal role in shaping the concept of “Chinese art” by strategically navigating the boundaries between various territories, ideas, and roles within the interconnected worlds of the market, museums, and academia. Yiyou Wang (2007) examines the landscape of Chinese art collecting in Hong Kong during the latter half of the 20th century. By reconstructing the biographies of four elite collectors, who also served as art dealers, advisers, scholars, or museum donors, it highlights the diverse practices that flourished within this British colony. Wang reveals how these individuals and their networks significantly influenced the formation of both private and public collections, contributed to Chinese art scholarship, and played a crucial role in the evolution of the art market. These scholarly styles of biographical writing not only legitimises the biographical approach for this thesis as a critical method, but also provides practical guidance in my data collecting process as they bring my awareness to the types of biographical questions I encountered in the process of data collection, such as the mediums and means the collectors employ to narrate their storytelling within a Chinese diaspora, their experiences of living between different cultures and ways of relating to craftsmanship in the artefacts they collect.

I adopt what Simone Lässig (cited in Peltonen 2014: 116) refers to as a ‘sideways’ biography, which does not strictly follow a linear narrative but rather montages and creations with various aspects or viewpoints in the same life of a person. These different viewpoints are *critical building blocks* of their profiles in different chapters of the thesis. They string together seemingly dispersed, absurd and ambiguous lines of connections that point to the idiosyncrasy as well as similarities of the three collectors. The shared building blocks are themes evolved around collecting practices, respectively: homemaking in relation to border-crossings; the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976); and the implications of collecting, the relationship between people and objects, and intra-community engagements. Collecting is often a very private and self-determined practice; depending on the characteristic of each collector, these building blocks are employed in varying ways in each chapter.

I link Simone Lässig's 'sideway' biography methodology to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012: 27) critical post-colonial reflections on the acts of writing, ways of writing and "writing back" and at the same time "writing to ourselves" as an "insider" of the new Chinese immigrant communities in South Africa. How to write *with* the collectors in a way that they are the leading figures of the alternative articulation of powers in the histories of collecting, especially their attitudes and gestures, and feelings underpin the style of writing in this thesis is a question that guides my methodology. I consider their collecting practices as acts of writing, their collections as a form of "non-narrative vocabulary" or 'artefactual literacies'⁶ (Pahl and Roswell 2010). In this way, data collecting becomes a process of learning and interacting with their styles of "rhetoric of collecting" (Dyson 2002: 128). The concept suggests that the realm of objects serves as a 'space of enunciation,' where individuals utilise a 'collecting rhetoric' to carve out unique, personalized pathways (Dyson 2002: 128) and set the frame of references for *writing our ways* in the thesis.

I utilised qualitative research methodologies, such as conducting informal unstructured and formal semi-structured interviews with the collectors on an individual and regular basis was a critical part of data collecting, which proved to be a protracted interactive process. I knew Yiyuan Yang and Shudi Li prior to this research, however, our contact was not focused on collecting practices. Engaging with them from the perspective of collecting, was a new journey for us. The essential challenge in the data collecting with the collectors I know personally as an "insider" researcher involves the ongoing requirement for reflexivity, the ability to critically assess our relationship from the perspective of a researcher (Smith 2012: 137). Drawing clear inquisitive lines in proceeding our unstructured, informal interviews while navigating enormously rich data of their live stories and remain sensitive to the ways they present themselves for the research. The case with Shengkai Wu was slightly different, as I did not know him before the study, which took some time to build trust. Initially, the interviews were conducted in a formal semi-structured manner strictly following outlined questions. I employed object-led interview method (Marshall 2020) as means to open up a biographical path in our interview conversations, as Latour (1993: 20) argues, 'consider things, and you will have

⁶ In *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story*, Pahl and Roswell (2010) explored how objects reflect the daily, sensory-rich experiences of students by incorporating the objects into literacy instruction.

humans.’ The interviews took place from May 2019 to December 2023, with each session lasting an average of about one hour.

I employed Susan Naomi Nordstrom's (2013, 238) object-interview⁷ method as the primary interview approach to the three collectors in comprehending the intricate and convoluted connection between ‘objects and subjects (both living and non-living)’. The methodology draws on French philosopher Deleuze’s concepts of ‘the fold, events, and a life,’ offering a way to reconsider objects and subjects as “fibrous, connective, and folding entities” in qualitative interviews (Nordstrom 2013: 237). I undertook these interviews as ‘collaborative communicative events’ that develop their own norms and structures (Ellis and Berger 2003: 157). In these interviews, the collectors, objects (including images and texts), and me are entangled. I ask the collectors to share and discuss their collections, including how they encounter the objects, what captured their interest. What stories does the object tell? How do they interact with these objects in their lives? Each interview lasted about 2 hours. As Nordstrom (2013: 246) suggests in designing these interviews, I asked ‘connective questions,’ e.g. how does this object/topic connect to objects and topics in our previous conversations? During the process of transcribing these interviews, I identified each collector’s repeated “collecting vocabularies” and the connections that emerge frequently, these patterns are directed to the further interview conversations. I use these repeated “vocabularies” as key words as well as my notes from each interview to conduct extensive archival and literature research before further scheduled conversations. As part of the qualitative research process, I visited the National Archive of South Africa in Pretoria in 2019 and 2020 to retrieve archives about the indentured Chinese labours on the Rand, a topic frequently came into interview conversations with Yiyuan Yang and Shengkai Wu. I also conducted a few of interviews and home visits with South African visual artist Nompumelelo Bukani in the P Street location of Makhanda from 2020-2023 in order to comprehend Li’s attraction to Bukani’s prints. In response to Shengkai Wu’s philately and ceramic collections, I conducted an interview with Chinese philately collector Andre Du Plessis

⁷ The object-interview method differs slightly from the object-led interview, as it frames the interview within the understanding that ‘subjects and objects relationally construct each other’ (Nordstrom 2013: 238). In the object-led interview I conducted with Wu initially, our focus was on building an object biography together, with questions primarily crafted around the objects.

who is also a renowned member of the Philatelic Federation of South Africa, and also with oriental ceramic expert and dealer Sue Ollemans in 2023. I also visited the ceramic collections of the University of Pretoria Museum and conducted an interview with the Museum Collections Curator Gerard De Kamper in 2023.

Enhancing the quality of data collection and analysis, I conducted sites visits based on the hybrid methods of participation observation and observant participation (Moeran 2009), which include “ride-alongs” (Sem 2021) with collectors at different antique markets and shops, flea markets, and auction houses in Johannesburg and Cape Town as mobile positioning and outward looking, while private spaces of home-visiting at Yang’s house or the conversations outside Shenkai Wu’s home as “fixed positioning” and “inward-looking.” Through a hybrid approach, I tried to undergo a ‘total social immersion’ (Hastrup and Hervik 1994, 3-4; Okely 1992). In these immersive experiences with the collectors, I began to pierce together collectors’ biographical objects with their daily acts and activities, including repeated acts of seal carving (Yang), acts of viewing from prints (Li) or a magnifier (Wu).

Living in the same community conveys an intimate co-defined space relate to daily living which supposed to give a less feeling of being in a “field” that is “out there.” However, viewing from their ways of seeing, I became more aware of our different backgrounds as new immigrants in South Africa, especially the Cultural Revolution experiences have continued to shape their lives significantly in South Africa. I considered emotions and personal meanings and gestures as critical topics of data collecting and analysis and tried to ‘listen “around” and “beyond” the words’ and objects they share with me ‘exploring the unsaid as much as the said’ (DeVault and Ochberg cited in Ellis and Berger 2003: 160). Visual analysis (Messaris and Abraham 2001; Greenspan 2014) becomes a very important aspect in interpreting and framing their stories. I also reached out to antique dealer Chris Tapsell in the UK and Chinese postal historian Lane J. Harris via emails for assistance with research materials that I can hardly find online or obtained in South Africa.

Visual representations and narratives pertaining to collections and personal trajectories were meticulously documented. I group the data I collected, including my preliminary analysis when I transcribed interviews into three independent but correlated archives: an inventory of collectors’ biographical archive, critical object biographical archive and third party archive with interview transcriptions of others and fieldwork notes. Theses archives cover photographs, transcribed

interviews, collectors' object stories, videos of site visits, collectors' published articles and blog articles, publications on the objects they mentioned. The thesis employs a visual and multimodal analysis (Pereira, Pádua, Pereira, Benevenuto, & Dalip, 2016; Zeitlyn and Banks 2015) method, critically interpreting images, objects, life-stories, acts of carving/painting/searching as interconnected biographical accounts for each collector at the same time strives to foreground the collectors' thoughts, sentiments, attitudes and gestures, thereby furnishing a nuanced and layered exposition of the collectors' experiences and collections.

Literature Review

The thesis requires an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the Chinese collectors and their collecting practices. It mainly builds on three clusters of literature. It starts with a critical reflection of visual arts and culture on the Chinese presence in South Africa within the broad discourses of China–Africa relations and the Global South. It promotes multimodal forms of individual narratives and configurations in the reflection. Thereafter, it builds on writings of Chinese communities in South Africa with an emphasis on a biographical approach. Lastly, it examines accounts of three underlying core conceptions: the notion of home, collecting practices and border aesthetics.

Experiencing China–Africa Relations Through Aesthetic and Cultural Reflections

The last two decades have witnessed a burgeoning scholarly interest in China–Africa relations, largely due to the ever-increasing contemporary China–Africa engagements and overwhelming issues of globalisation. The accumulation of a robust body of work has contributed to the theoretical and methodological rigour in shaping China–Africa relations as a field of study. Nevertheless, a few scholars have reflected concern over the state of the study and media coverage as continuing to be largely framed on a macro-level of economic, political and strategic dimensions (Park and Huynh 2010; Simbao 2012; Monson 2013; Leeb-du Toit 2017a, 2017b and 2019). At the same time, they solicit empirical research that is fine-grained (Monson 2013), historically grounded (Simbao 2012, Monson 2013), contextually relevant (Simbao 2012 and 2019) and community embedded (Park and Huynh 2010, Simbao 2012 and 2019, Monson 2013) to thrust China–Africa relations into new levels of specificity and analytical directions in visual arts and cultural domains.

As one of the leading scholars in visual arts, Ruth Simbao (2012: 7) opens up insightful investigations on the ways contemporary art practices seek to ‘talk back’ to the perpetuating distortions and stereotypes forged by the media, often reinforcing a simplified dichotomy of “curse” or “cure” perceptions (Keenan 2009). She curated an exhibition titled *Making Way: Contemporary Art from South Africa and China* in Makhanda (Simbao, Huynh and Heymans, 2012) and Johannesburg (Simbao 2013) in pushing for more in-depth discussions that would unravel the complexity of entangled engagements on the ground. Eighteen artists from South Africa and China, including Lebogang Rasethaba, James Webb, Hua Jiming, Gerald Machona and Michael McGarry, participated in the exhibition as an attempt to shed light on the experiences of mobility orientated between China and Africa. In his short film *Sino*, made during his master’s degree studies at Beijing Normal University, Rasethaba self-critically relates [South] Africa’s own form of Afrophobia to the typical narratives of Chinese xenophobia towards Africans in China. Meanwhile, in performing ‘Walking into Africa in a Chinese Way’, the Chinese performance artist Hua Jiming – wearing a suit made of newspapers from Beijing and Cape Town – walked and crawled through the central business zone of Cape Town. Simbao (2012 and 2019: 228) reveals Hua’s meaningful performance as reflecting media’s popular imaginations of China–Africa relations in a problematic ‘costuming’ and ‘reductionist’ manner. *Chinafrika.under construction* (2017) is another art project that has drawn considerable attention, with its focus on the newly emerging contemporary intersecting China–African culture in the pressing globalisation in which ‘objects and images of the “other” culture penetrate everyday life’ (Becker and Kötter 2017).

Given the above artistic practices based on deeply personal research and a confrontation with current theoretical debates, the eighth edition of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)⁸ ministerial meeting on 30 November 2021 in Dakar, Senegal signified that a continuous shift is needed to contribute a more grounded discourse. FOCAC 2021 drew significant attention in the discourse on China–Africa in anticipation of deeply shaping the future trajectories of China–Africa relations (China Foresight 2021; Ladan 2021) as China strategically

⁸The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), inaugurated during the Ministerial Conference in Beijing in 2000, is regarded as one of the cornerstones of Sino-African relations. Conducted through joint Ministerial Conferences held triennially since its inception, the Forum is dedicated to promoting unity and collaboration across diverse realms such as economic development, trade, investment, and cultural exchange (Enuka 2010). FOCAC has been examined as a framework for Sino-African engagement in the 21st Century (Enuka 2010; Ibonye 2020)).

plans to scale back its considerable activities in Africa (Sun 2021). The so-called ‘underwhelming’ (Sun 2021) shift from the top level has singled out the necessity of focusing on the alternative bottom-up approach grounded on small actors among the Chinese and African peoples. It highlights Simbao’s (2019: 228–232) observation on the often-loud voices of “big men” who have significantly shaped the broad international discourse of China–Africa and therefore there is a need for ‘delinking’ from, ‘unscripting’ and ‘pushing back slowly’ against the loud, metanarratives of China–Africa relations with the small stories of individual Chinese and African experiences. As she describes, acts of making way slowly and with small steps, push for more meaningful reflection on person-to-person encounters, so that shared experiences, resonances and potential solidarities can be untangled from rumours and media hype (2019: 228).

Since Simbao (2012) started the conversations on visual arts as new approach of reaching sideways to China–Africa relations in 2012, over the past decade, ‘small acts of resistance’ against the metanarratives with small stories on a micro-level have been emerging in visual arts (Simbao 2017 and 2019; Mwaba 2019, Huynh 2020, NG-Yang 2022). Zambian artist Stary Mwaba (2019) develops Jean Lyotard’s notion of *petits récits* (little narratives) against the legitimisation of metanarratives in the context of Zambia–China encounter. Mwaba’s *Black Mountain* project displays the power of personal narratives, using family members’ encounter with the Chinese presence in Zambia to challenge the distorted media perception of the role of China in Zambia (2019: 7). The special issue of *African and Asian Studies*, titled “China’s Relations with the Global South: Circulations of People, Things, Images, and Ideas,” edited by T. Tu Huynh and Danson Sylvester Kahyana (2020), furthered Simbao’s conversation. It argued for the often-underappreciated transcultural expressions of daily life and imaginaries between the Chinese and African peoples as a way of ‘pushing back’ slowly. In the issue, Natalia Molebatsi and T. Tu Huynh’s article (2020: 81–98) builds on Natalia’s grandmother’s storytelling of her interactions with the Chinese people in Alexandra between the 1950s and the early 1970s. It pushes back the common perception that Black⁹ people had little or no engagement with the Chinese people during that time.

⁹I capitalise the word “Black” based on Anthony Kwame Appiah’s (2020) argument that “Black” is a historically created racial identity. It is a deliberate acknowledgment of the cultural, historical, and political significance of the Black experience of people of African descent. Appiah, K.A. (2020). *The Case for Capitalizing the ‘B’ in Black*.

Notably, the ground-breaking book¹⁰ titled ‘Visualising China in Southern Africa: Biography, Circulation, Transgression,’ edited by Juliette Leeb-du Toit, Ruth Simbao, and Ross Anthony (2023), synthesises a comprehensive scholarly reflection on intricate, intimate, historically layered, contested, and deeply personal experiences. It encompasses both individual and communal dimensions in both Africa and China, providing a critical “push back” to the metanarratives on a collective level. The Chinese presence in Southern Africa is depicted as a complex, multimodal, and entangled existence of subjects, objects, ideas, and sensations, explored through the prism of art and material culture. Several chapters within this volume directly intersect with the focus of my thesis, a discussion I will engage with respectively in the forthcoming core concept section. In this segment, the identification of prevailing metanarratives within the field, alongside scholarly strategies to counteract them through the use of small stories as a form of transformative discursive practice (de Fina 2008: 422), particularly those imbued with the situatedness of storytelling by ordinary collectors and their objects, is a crucial facet of my research agenda. The strategic utilisation of critical biographical and autobiographical methodologies, characterised as ‘biographical contestations’ (Rassool 2010: 29; Anthony, Simbao & Leeb-du Toit 2023:16), across chapters one to five of the book, serves as a conduit for uncovering ‘ahistorical and sensationalist’ reflections (Simbao, 2012, 2019a), and eliciting ‘witness histories from the “inside”’ (Dierks cited in Simbao 2023a: 29). My vested interest in these insiders’ biographical endeavours also pertains to their multimodal approach to life writing, incorporating textual, visual, and performative elements within a biographical framework. In contrast to the predominant literary form of Chinese biographies in South Africa, as referenced in the introduction, which will be expounded upon in subsequent sections, the multimodal biographies featured in this tome signify a deliberate process of visually constructing or

[online] The Atlantic Daily. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/> [Accessed 9 Feb. 2024].

¹⁰ The book was partially developed from a symposium titled 'Referencing China and East Asia in Southern African Visual Culture,' convened by Ross Anthony and Juliette Leeb-du Toit. The symposium took place at the Goethe Institute in Johannesburg from April 29 to 30, 2017, and was organized in collaboration with several partners, including the South African Visual Arts Histories Association (SAVAH), the Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD) Research Center at the University of Johannesburg, Leipzig University, the Goethe Institute, and the Confucius Institute of the Durban University of Technology in South Africa. Twelve speakers participated in the symposium, and the keynote address was delivered by Ruth Simbao (Juliette Leeb-du Toit, Ruth Simbao, & Ross Anthony 2023: 350).

aesthetically interpreting lives through various mediums and actions. These include films (Simbao 2023a), photographs (Corrigall 2023), stamps (Hu 2023), performance art (NG-Yang 2023), and environmental elements (Mwaba & Simbao 2023a), each contributing to the portrayal of life in multifaceted forms that inherently possess their own social dynamics. These multimodal biographies within this scholarly volume encapsulate a nuanced process of visually design of a *life* or aestheticisation of a *life* across a spectrum of mediums. In alignment with Susan Naomi Nordstrom's (2013: 239) conceptualisation of life, which emphasises the theoretical design of a researcher, I use italic font to distinguish between a person's lived experience and a life that is visually (co)-constructed within a biographical context, by both the writers and the biography protagonists. The resultant visual narratives possess an inherent social dimension, shaped by a confluence of internal visual references and external influences—namely, social, historical, and cultural forces—that 'procedurally' shape their manifestation (Nordstrom 2013: 240). Within Han's autobiographical film, meticulously dissected by Simbao (2023: 42-43), photographic portraits not only interact visually within a series of black-and-white Chinese portraits but also function as a 'bridge to elsewhere,' bridging the realms of the living and the departed through intricate visual associations. Shengkai Wu's biography (Hu 2023:50-61), similarly delves into, unfolds through the visual narrative of a stamp cover, revealing traces and residual postmarks that weave a narrative thread connecting it to the lineage of Shayuchung stamps in China and a rich Chinese immigrant family history dating back to the 1940s. The aestheticisation of communal *life*, as embodied by the Chinese Camera Club in South Africa (Corrigall 2023: 62-73), is meticulously crafted through cultural and landscape photographic practices, drawing evocative parallels with Chinese artistic traditions and establishing connections with East Asian and diasporic camera clubs across diverse regions. In Kristin NG-Yang's introspective journey (2023: 104-121), artworks emerge as intricate visual constructs, navigating the complexities of identity, offering solace amid adversity, and consciously documenting the diasporic experience of a Chinese artist in South Africa. These multifaceted biographical narratives serve as a rich tapestry informing an exploration of multimodal life writing and the deliberate selection of mediums by individual Chinese figures in South Africa. My interest in these insider narratives extends to their multimodal nature, encompassing textual, visual, and performative elements within a biographical framework. This approach distinguishes them from the predominantly literary Chinese biographies in South Africa. Their significance

lies in their capacity to evoke a social life of their own, shaped by internal visual references as well as external sociocultural forces.

Theoretical attention to post-structural exercise of Appadurai's (1986) approach to objects and subject-object relationships provides a line of critical literature for the thesis (Kopytoff 1986; Gell 1998; Hoskin 1998 & 2006; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Brown 2004; Gosden 2005; Miller 2008; Turkle 2007; Kuchler and Timothy 2020). In the context of Chinese communities in South Africa, the mutually constructed relationship between subject and object is explored in chapter two of this edited book about the collector Shengkai Wu. I used Janet Hoskin's (1998: 7) notion of objects as 'foils for self-definition' which remains an important theory in the thesis. Besides that, Brown's (2004:7) conceptualisation of the mutual relation as a "condition for thought" is used to decipher how the character of these objects, e.g. Chinese exported artifacts with social aesthetics differentiate these ordinary Chinese collectors from others in South Africa. Nordstrom's (2013: 237) notion of an object-interview space not only provides methodological insights but also offers important theoretical guidance for the thesis in comprehending the interconnected visual life of a biography and autobiography among multimodal beings. It views this process as a formation occurring within 'a Deleuzian space in which subjects and objects, living and non-living, entangle together' as 'fibrous, connective, and folding entities' (Nordstrom 2013: 237). I sought to elucidate how the visual narratives of collectors are intricately intertwined with the visual essence of the objects they collect. These objects serve as conduits to various aspects of existence within a visual realm, acting as "bridges to elsewhere" through images, objects, and ideas. They allow the individual visual journey of a collector to embody micro-histories of social life and evolution. These layers of existence and connections, as depicted in the edited book, are integral to my study, particularly the circulation of artifacts and ideas across diverse contexts, which 'offers the potential to grasp another dimension of transregional relationships' (Anthony, Simbao & Leeb-du Toit 2023: 18).

Overall, the increasing body of work builds on empirical research into the dynamic interactions between people and communities through small stories in visual arts and culture. It signifies the value of unravelling individual experiences on the ground. This thesis follows the same line of thoughts and seeks to locate the three Chinese collectors within a space of 'transcultural assemblage' (Huynh and Kahyana 2020: 2) of small stories, images and objects

that complicates China–Africa relations within both historical processes and newly emerging reflectivity.

Small Stories in the Chinese Communities of South Africa

South Africa has the largest long-term settlement of Chinese communities on the African continent against the backdrop of a long history of small migration from China to Africa. Even though the three Chinese collectors considered here have been anchored in the newer Chinese immigrants to South Africa since the late 1980s (Accone 2006; Park 2008, 2012, 2013; Park and Chen 2009, 2010, 2021; Huynh et al. 2010; Huynh 2015), historical accounts (Harris 1994, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2014; Park 2008, 2016; Park and Chen 2010, 2022) of the early Chinese communities provide substantial background knowledge in interpreting the objects they have collected and the Chinese experience within the broader context of South Africa’s colonial past. This experience can be traced since the sixteenth century, when the Dutch East India company controlled the Cape, bringing in a small number of Chinese slaves and convicts (Yap and Man 1996, Harris 1998, Park 2008). Later free contract labourers and artisans came to South Africa in the nineteenth century in small numbers. A significant body of literature has highlighted the history of over 63 000 indentured mine labourers imported from China between 1904 and 1910, after the discovery of gold in South Africa in 1886 (Yap, Park, Harris, Kynoch 2005). The three Chinese collectors orient their connections, on an individual level, to the early history of Chinese presence in South Africa through relating to the often-neglected non-official data of the colonial past, such as postcards on the mines (Huynh 2008) and ceramic objects in the museums of South Africa (Esmiol 1999; 2023). Through their engagements with these historical artifacts, they reinterpret the narrative of the early Chinese presence, infusing it with contemporary significance and understanding.

The current Chinese communities in South Africa are mainly composed of three distinctive groups: the local South African Chinese, Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong and the new immigrants from the mainland China (Accone 2006; Huynh 2010). Their entry time into South Africa is a critical parameter in identifying different waves and patterns of Chinese migration to South Africa (Huynh 2010). The local South African Chinese have been deeply rooted in South Africa since the late 1870s (Accone 2006). The Taiwanese and Hong Kongese South African communities took shape in the apartheid era from the late 1970s to 1980s. While most of the Chinese are the newer immigrants who have been arriving from mainland China since the late

1980s and continue to the present. Tu Huynh, Yoon Park and Ying Chen (2010) draw a distinction among the immigrants from mainland China between pre-2000 and post-2000, as 2000 witnessed the largest flow of new Chinese migrants. Besides the difference in numbers, class and regional differences are identified between the pre-2000 and post 2000 new mainland immigrants. The pre-2000 new immigrants were described as middle-class professionals linked to prosperous cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, while the post-2000 newcomers comprise the majority of new immigrants who are mostly of small traders and peasants from the province of Fujian (Huynh, Park and Chen 2010). The three Chinese collectors are the pioneers in the pre-2000 migration movement who came to South Africa in the late 1980s and the beginning of 1990s. They were professionals with sophisticated personal links to arts and culture in China before they immigrated to South Africa. Yiyuan Yang was from Beijing; before he came to South Africa, he worked as a graphic designer in an advertising company in Shenzhen, Guangzhou. Shudi Li was a university lecturer in the art department of Henan University. Shengkai Wu worked at the Jiangxi Scientific and Technological Information Center, and has introduced ceramic art to foreign customers frequently in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province. Apart from the three Chinese collectors, a few of the other new immigrant Chinese collectors who are not the focus of this project, also fall into the category of pre-2000. During the border-crossing process, the social status of pre-2000 new immigrants changed significantly. Some of these immigrants became successful business owners, rising to the upper echelons of the South African economy. For instance, Baopei Zhao, a well-known collector on Chinese social media, who has collected over 2 000 pieces of African classic artefacts, came to South Africa in 1991. Before immigrating, he was also a designer in Shanghai and graduated from the Shanghai Institute of Technology. However, most of the pre-2000 immigrant collectors occupy the middle to lower range of the economy strata in South Africa, with comparatively fewer resources to collect art. The stories of these middle-lower-income Chinese new immigrant collectors have largely remained invisible in South Africa. Research on the new immigrants has been predominately focused on their role as shopkeepers and migrant workers, (Park & Alden 2013; Lin 2014; Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009) economically and politically and the ways that they have transformed the rural and urban space of South Africa (Huynh, Park and Chen 2010; Harrison, Moyo and Yang, 2012; Harris 2018) in a macro perception.

When one shifts his perception to individual narratives, could the Chinese communities in South Africa be seen differently? Historian Anshan Li (2000:7–8) considers memoirs of personal experiences as important historical documents in studying the history of the Chinese in Africa. In the memoir, *South Africa Travel Journal*, Xie Zixiu (1905), the secretary of the Johannesburg Cantonese Club, who served as “adviser” at the New Comet Mine, provided first-hand Chinese observations about the Chinese indentured labourers at the mines (Li 2000; Ngai, 2021).

Unofficial History of the Chinese Revolution: A memoir by Feng Ziyu (2011) uncovers the important role of Chinese in South Africa’s involvement in the Xinhai Revolution (1911–1912). Besides memoirs, auto/biographies of Chinese in South Africa have opened a way of seeing the Chinese communities through individual and family stories. These texts, namely Lily Changfoot’s *A Many Coloured South Africa: The diary of A non-person* (1982), Darryl Accone’s *All Under Heaven: The story of a Chinese family in South Africa* (2004), Emma Chen’s *Emperor Can Wait* (2009), Ufrieda Ho’s *Paper Sons and Daughters: Growing up Chinese in South Africa* (2011), Ming-Cheau Lin’s *Yellow and Confused: Born in Taiwan, raised in South Africa and making sense of it all* (2019), James Chang’s *My Journey as a ‘Coloured Person’ to the apartheid South Africa* (2020). In the process of navigating the auto/biographical selves, these deeply personal texts untangle the complexities and tensions of ‘diasporic identities within multiple spaces of (un)belonging’ (Neville 2021: ii). They foreground the contested spaces in between China and South Africa where the auto/biographical selves navigate the ‘individual, social and cultural and national terrain of between here and there, between us and them’ (Park 2010: 460). These often-overlooked stories exhibit generational, communal, historical and geopolitical entanglements that parallel national histories of China and South Africa. In particular, the enormous grey feeling of being excluded during apartheid South Africa has forced these auto/biographical selves to continuously construct their South African identity in the post-apartheid time. Lily Changfoot (1982) records her journey of growing up on a small farm and being subjected to overt racial structure in mid-twentieth century South Africa. She positions her psychological autobiography in relation to the historical and political events of apartheid. Darryl Accone’s text also primarily exhibits the experiences of unbelonging from being Chinese South African under the racial segregation policy during apartheid. He traces his family story from the arrival of his ancestors as early as 1911 to their relocation to Pretoria in 1969. Through ‘recounting and (re)constructing’ family stories, Daniella Neville argues (2021: 20), that

Accone's 'part historical, part autobiography and part fiction' (Neville 2021: 106) showcases 'transoceanic movements between sites of complicated rootedness'. Unlike Accone's novelistic narrative, Ho's text is a recollection of her observations of growing up as a second-generation Chinese immigrant in the city of Johannesburg. She uncovers the informal yet critical spaces of illegal migration operations and unregulated activities such as "fahfee"¹¹ in the Chinese communities in South Africa. It shed light on the complexity of informal Chinese communal relationships with the local communities and the resilience of individual Chinese migratory families that have formed part of the contemporary South African society. As the first generation of Taiwanese-born immigrants in South Africa, Ming-Cheau Lin, Emma Chen and James Chang shared a similar path of exploring the lived experiences in South Africa as a process of making sense of their positionality in post-apartheid South Africa. Emma Chen's text is a nostalgic journey channelled through her childhood memories of traditional Chinese food and these memories empowered her to have a full life as a well-known Johannesburg restaurateur in South Africa. While from a younger generation of Taiwanese immigrants compared to Emma Chen, both Ming-Cheau Lin and James Chang confrontationally and provocatively come to terms with their childhood memories of being subjected to racism as a 'coloured person' (Chang 2020) and being 'yellow and confused' (Lin 2019) indicated in their titles during apartheid yet simultaneously exhibit a way to 'turn outward' (Neville 2021: 70). Lin describes the turn outward as a path to 'encourage and create conversations around unlearning and progression' (Lin 2019: 12). Chang concludes in his movement from 'a negative start in life 'a negative start in life to a self-found balance' (Chang 2020). These deeply personal texts of historical and contemporary recollections and constructions by South African-born Chinese and Taiwanese provide enormously detailed and individualised narratives of the Chinese communities in South Africa. However, no bio/autobiography has so far been written by the Chinese from the mainland who comprise the largest population of the Chinese communities in South Africa. There are short accounts online in Chinese, reflecting an increasing shift toward social media that challenges traditional paper-based publishing entities (Hua Miao Dai Li 华侨代理 2022). Social media platforms like WeChat, Sina Blog, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok are particularly popular among

¹¹ Fahfee, an illicit Chinese-operated numbers game or lottery in South Africa, functioned as a means through which individuals in a subordinate position could resist and negotiate the oppressive tactics utilized by the socio-political elite (Louw 2017 & 2019).

new Chinese immigrants, who use them to share their stories in South Africa with audiences in China and the broader Chinese diaspora around the world. Additionally, limited language proficiency, slow acculturation, and an economically driven focus on life priorities have contributed to the absence of biographies or autobiographies in both Chinese and English among these new Chinese immigrants in South Africa. How do these individuals from mainland China navigate diasporic selves and making sense of themselves in contemporary South African society? My thesis partially fills this gap by crafting a collection-mediated biography with the collectors, thereby blurring the boundary between biography and autobiography. This occurs as their attitudes and narratives are expressed within the embedded social life of their collections.

The Notion of Home

For a number of decades there has been a significant increase in home being viewed as a multilayered phenomenon across different disciplines (Bowlby, Gregory and McKie, 1997; Wardaugh, 1999; Somerville 1992). Shelley Mallett (2004: 67) observes that the dominant and persistent ideas about home represented in the relevant literature question whether: ‘Home is (a)place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices and/or an active state of being in the world?’

The concept of home, characterised by its inherent “unsettling” nature and the tension it evokes between stability and instability, has long been a central theme in diasporic discourse spanning centuries (Bickerstaff and Dodson 2009). Moreover, there exist various manifestations of “unsettling” and “homecoming” (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004), each adding layers of complexity to the understanding of belonging and displacement. Drawing on South African artist Nobukho Nqaba’s metaphor ‘the bag as my home’, Ying Cheng (2018: 18, 22) also unsettles the common conceptions of home as a stable space by unpacking artistic creations made from China bags¹² in contemporary African art. Instead, home is a permanently fluid space constructed by ordinary objects in circulation that reflect the unsettled experiences of migrants in Africa. When one is disempowered from mobility, as Chen argues, using a case of a Chinese hawker, home becomes ‘a nervous condition of always on-the-move but never arriving; a way of belonging in the world, and at the same time being rejected or excluded by the world’ (Cheng 2018: 29). Cheng’s text highlights two important aspects of home for this thesis. First, how is home

¹² China bag refers to the type of woven bags made of red, blue, and white polypropylene fibbers. They are commonly seen being used by migrants both in Africa and China. Ying Cheng explains that it is often being referred to as China bags colloquially because most of them are produced in China (2018:30).

imagined or constructed in relation to the experiences of social crises such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution when one is subjected to vulnerability and (im)/mobility? Second, how does the duality of immobility and mobility manifest in the dialectal relationship between the circulation of objects the collectors collected and their ways of arriving home? These two questions, I argue in this research, direct to the fundamental issue of (non)/ownerships and identity deeply embedded in our conceptions of home. I argue that home is plurilocal, contingent, (in)tangible and portable through the circulation of the objects and the collectors' immigratory trajectories between China and South Africa. It is a state of being unsettled in the world in which where we live and how we move are conflated in daily objects with multiple (im)mobilities across borders and times in history. It is also a constant process of political representations of ownness and non-ownness, belongingness and non-belongingness.

Even though home is imagined as a fluid and fractured concept due to the duality of mobility and immobility, we cannot ignore the stability of "dwellings-in-moment" within the temporality of homemaking by the three Chinese collectors. The stability of dwellings in South Africa, where conceptions of home prioritise a physical structure such as a house or a room, partially encompass' their collections and their daily living activities. I treat the physical or dwelling as one location of an encapsulated home and analyse the conceptualisations of the specific home in relation to the Chinese collectors' collecting practices in South Africa. It is imagined as 'a place where space and time are controlled and structured functionally and aesthetically (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 6; Douglas 1991). The relationship between the dwelling and home is examined in this project in terms of each Chinese collector's spatial organisation and aesthetic of domestic dwellings inflecting their concepts of collecting in South Africa. Greg Noble (2004: 233) argues that as 'we accumulate objects, we accumulate being'. He delineates notions of 'existential breadth' and 'ontogenetic depth' to reflect the density and continuity of everyday life underpinned by the open-ended complexity of quotidian accumulation and spaces of a home. I develop Noble's approach as upholding the need to embrace the location of ordinary collectors in wider networks of relationships and home spaces rather than being limited to a self-enclosed orientation of collecting that implicitly focuses on an ordered collection based on taxonomic logic. I demonstrate the way objects are constructed as substitutions for home by these three collectors and making a home is directed towards the practices of collecting. Objects, home and self are conflated and contributed to the migration and crisis of the Chinese Cultural Revolution,

when stability and ownership of cultural objects in home spaces were compromised. Achieving possession of the deprived ownership of cultural objects demonstrates their ‘accumulate being’ in the collectors’ struggle for recognition. Collecting these objects provides an ‘ontological proof’ of their biographies and, by offering ‘its dimensionality, maximise the possibility of recognition and the attainment of ontological security’ (Noble 2004: 234).

How is home imagined by the Chinese communities in South Africa? Daniella Nasya Neville (2021) asserts in her examination of three Chinese auto/biographical texts in South Africa that the notion of home is central to the Chinese diasporic selves in the South African Chinese communities who are (in)voluntarily connected with the act of leaving home, making a home, interacting between homeland and the host land and searching for the ultimate ideal home. She connects the conceptions of home by three Chinese biographies in relation to ‘complicated rootedness and various lived experiences of rootedness’ (2021: 3). Her exploration provides insight into how the conceptions of home orient different trajectories of individuals whose homemaking is an evolving experience of entanglements of different sites of rootedness and belonging in Taiwan. In a similar vein, Ruth Simbao (2023) employs the cinematic perspective of South African Chinese filmmaker Henion Han to elucidate the intricate dynamics of homemaking and displacement. This complexity is profoundly shaped by Chinese burial practices and the geopolitical tension of between China and Taiwan. The camera emerges as a critical mediator, navigating and articulating profound distress and trauma. This symbiosis between visual acts and objects as conduits for emotional mediation constitutes an analytical focus within the purview of this study.

Finally, Boyms’ (2001: 41-49) approach to nostalgia is employed to understand the collectors’ motivations for collecting. By distinguishing between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia, which involve returning to one’s origins, different modes of collecting are reinterpreted as avenues for homecoming within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa. This re-evaluation positions the collectors as border-crossing collectors, traversing cultural and geographical boundaries in their quest for a sense of home.

On Collecting

The concept of collecting is challenging to define, given its perception as a “scientific” hobby (Strasser 2012) in eighteenth to nineteenth-century Europe, while some indigenous people referred to it as “stealing” (Smith 2008: 61; Clarke and Szydlo 2017). In the introduction of the

influential volume of edited essays by John Eisner and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* (1994: 1), it is stated, ‘Noah was the first collector.’ As a Chinese researcher based in South Africa, I find it challenging to identify or relate to this statement. While collecting as a ubiquitous human activity of accumulating and preserving things or ideas transcends cultures and historical epochs, its formalisation and evolution as a modern discipline have been profoundly influenced by the emergence of modern museums and public culture within the European tradition (Bennett 2013; Macdonald 2006). In this study, I first try to centralise my focus on the context of South Africa. I draw a brief overview of the current literature contingent to the histories of collecting in South Africa, with a particular focus on “Chinese” things and the communities while interweaving relevant studies in European tradition that relates to the complexity of collecting cultures of institutions as well as individuals in South Africa. Then I delineate the postmodern collecting theories that most relevant to this study.

A Brief History of Collecting in South Africa

The history of collecting in South Africa is marked by archival practices within colonial museums, institutions, and settlers’ homes since the commencement of colonial rule in the southwestern Cape in 1650 (Kros et al. 2022: 3). The first critical literature I draw upon in this field of study is a critical archival approach by various contributors directly engaged with materials in languages of African origin (Kros et al. 2022: 6) before colonial establishment. Can certain “archives” embedded in African societies, e.g., oral storytelling, be interpreted as a form of collecting practice by these societies (Kros and Wright 2022: 56)? Based on existing materials, the earliest recorded consumers of Chinese artefacts in South Africa prior to colonial history were the indigenous people who lived in the Kingdom of Mapungubwe around 1075 to 1220 AD (Ramji 2022: 240; Esmiol 2023:124). These artefacts were studied within the framework of earlier Indian Ocean trade and China–Africa relations (Esmiol 2023: 124; Huffman 2009: 44). Esther Esmiol’s texts (2020: 2023), among other narratives of the Cape of Good Hope (1652–1795) (Woodward 1974, 1982; Hall et al. 1990; Malan 1993; Klose 1997; Schrire 2014; Lucas 2006), reflect that Chinese trade ceramics constituted a core aspect of local material culture during and after the formation of the Cape colony since the sixteenth century through European traders. The history of colonial trade led by the Dutch East India Company not only determined the collecting of “Chinese” things appearing in local museums and private houses as part of Cape Dutch house interior decorative art (Sue et al. 1999: 4; 20–28) but also shaped the fact that the

mostly systematically researched, archived forms of Chinese art were predominantly limited to the genre of Asian ceramics in South Africa. Archival records were maintained in a way that offers little trace about how slaves, including small numbers of Chinese convicts, related to Chinese export wares in the Cape colony (Klose 2007: 49; Malan 2007; Klose and Schrire 2014: 106).

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a collecting culture emerged, with missionary efforts focusing on the acquisition of items categorised as ‘ethnographic curiosity’ and ‘natural history specimens’ (Wingfield 2018: 727). British missionary John Campbell’s (1815) notes recorded his travels to South Africa at the request of the missionary society in London with a particular interest in “Hottentots” within the Cape Colony. The aftermath of this period of collecting and its relation to the formation of ‘salvage anthropology’¹³ in the later 19th century has been critically examined (Geuber 1970; Redman 2021). The most iconic case of this period of salvage collecting of the “others” was the stories of Sarah Bartmann¹⁴ and associated ‘scientific discourse’ on Black females’ bodies that were raced, sexed, and consumed due to ‘a fundamental driving mechanism inherent in colonial oppression’ (Tuvell 2011: 209). The process of repatriating her remains engendered further ‘(re)construction of a “pantheon” of postcolonial icon’ in novels, films, poetry, and fashions (Moudileno 2009: 200; Dubin 2008: 88). The stories of Sarah Bartmann are perceived as a shared *affective* case of post-colonial configuration in interpreting scholarly accounts and popular collecting of postcards (Huynh 2008 & 2023; Du Plessis 2021 & 2022) about the indentured labourers on the Rand against the background of ‘a colonial past which keeps on haunting’ (Moudileno 2009: 200) both Chinese and South Africans. One of the most disturbing tales of souvenir collecting about Chinese labourers was the claim

¹³ From around the mid-19th century, the urge to “salvage” information about disappearing human societies evolved from a niche interest to a massive scientific endeavour. Newly formed organisations and influential individuals in America and Europe, supported initiatives to collect endangered cultural objects. During its evolution as a scientific discipline in 19th-century America, anthropology became ‘fixated on salvaging’ cultural objects and records for museums, archives, and libraries (Redman 2021:10).

¹⁴ Saartjie (or Sartjee) Baartmann, Baartman, or Bartmann, born in 1789 (Dubin 2008: 85), is widely known as the “Hottentot Venus”, a South African indigenous woman was paraded as an exotic in nineteenth-century England and France, often displayed in a cage due to her distinctive appearance (Tuvell 2021: 209). Many descriptions of Bartmann emphasised her resemblance to animals (Sharpley-Whiting 1999). Even after her death in 1816, indignities were inflicted upon her body. Her remains were exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme until the mid-1970s (Dubin 2008: 90).

that after their execution, the Chinese prisoners were scalped, and their “pigtails” were gathered and taken by ‘high-ranking officials in Pretoria jail’ as ‘trophies and curiosities’ (Yap and Man 1996: 128). I used this shared case of colonial curiosity collecting to interpret the ways the Chinese collectors’ re-imagining of the diasporic experiences of the Chinese indentured labourers.

Several significant works on collecting delve into the unique relationship between private collectors and the major public institutions they played a role in establishing in the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century (Kerr 2006; Carman 2006 & 2005; Stevenson 1997). Against the backdrop of approximately five million Europeans who migrated to Africa between 1835 and 1935 (Erickson 1976), Michael Stevenson (1997) conducts a critical examination of a small group of mining magnate collectors, primarily from middle-class German-Jewish backgrounds. They amassed wealth in Kimberley and Johannesburg during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, with many of them eventually returning to London. This group was coined as “Randlords” by the London press (Stevenson 1997: ii). Their significant role in the traumatic historical events of the Jameson Raid and the South African War and the subsequent importation of Chinese indentured labourers, as well as philanthropic gestures in art, reflects a contested period of art collecting in South Africa. Unlike other Randlords, Sir Lionel Phillips and Lady Florence Phillips settled in South Africa permanently and were instrumental in funding the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1910 with the support of funds and art donations from the Randlords (Carman 1988). Carman (2006 & 2005) criticises the acquisition policy of the Johannesburg Art Gallery during that period, noting that it primarily reflects Lady Phillips’ taste, with a dominance of the British School and a notable absence of a section dedicated to South African artists. The Randlords displayed limited interest in Asian art, with the sole Oriental collections comprising Chinese porcelain pieces mounted in eighteenth-century French ormolu in their extensive private collections (Stevenson 1997: 41)

Since the 1930s, a shift in collecting culture gradually took place, moving away from British School paintings to establish a “South African art” canon modelled by leading academics, curators, and private collectors (Kritzinger, 2023: 142; Van Eeden 2008; Hillebrand 2004: 85; Esmyol 1999). One notable collection of Chinese ceramics, bequeathed by Judge Davis to the South African Museum in Cape Town in 1948 (Iziko National Museum), received considerable

attention from antique dealers (Esmyol 1999: 38).¹⁵ Lady David, widow of the eminent British collector Sir Percival David, referred to this collection as ‘an oasis in a desert’ (Esmyol 1999: 38). The largest Chinese ceramic collection in South Africa is the Van Tilburg collection, donated to the University of Pretoria Museums in the 1970s by Jacob Abraham van Tilburg, an immigrant from the Netherlands (De Kamper 2018).¹⁶ Additionally, Lieutenant Colonel R H Whitwell donated enamel wares and oriental ceramics to the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg upon his return from China in 1923 (Shao 2002: 18).

There are over four thousand Chinese artefacts in South African Museums (Kritzinger 2023: 153), linked to different collectors, with very few publications about them, particularly objects in lesser-known museums. The provenance of these objects requires further critical study. In addition to artifacts acquired through direct or indirect trade with the Dutch East India Company since the late 17th century, well-documented European collectors and dealers in South Africa have purchased Chinese artifacts at auctions in Europe and America, as well as during their travels in China (Esmyol 1999: 38; Shao 2002: 18). Throughout history, Chinese burial artifacts have arrived in South Africa often with complex trajectories and minimal critical study, whether they came previously from the West or from Hong Kong. Through a case study of Chinese funeral ware known as *Mingqi* in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), art historian Nicola Kritzinger (2023: 141–153) introduces the concept of “irritating objects” to characterise certain overlooked Chinese ceramics within South African museums. Kritzinger (2023: 141–153) argues that the lack of critical engagement with these objects is primarily attributed to a deficiency in East Asian expertise in South Africa. Another challenging issue is that they are regarded as ‘extraneous’ to the museum’s core policy (Carman 2010: 23). These objects were ‘removed from the sphere of circulation’ (Dyson 2002: 128) and became “singularised” (Belk 1989: 62) in a museum context as ‘rare,’ ‘significant,’ and ‘good’ artefacts (Kritzinger 2023: 149). They served

¹⁵ The collection has the most exquisite Song ceramics in South African museums, and some of the items were bought in the same auction with Judge Davis, whose world-renowned collection, is known as the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art in London (Ollemans 2023). In the midst of World War II, Sir Percival and his wife found themselves relocated to Maputo (Lourenço Marques) in Mozambique following a period of internment in Shanghai. Their journey continued to Johannesburg and eventually to Cape Town, where they formed a close friendship with Judge Davis.

¹⁶ The provenance of the collection has faced allegations as partially ‘stolen from Jewish Holocaust victims during the second world war’ (De Kamper 2018: 60). Besides that, the issue of authenticity was also questioned by being the collection an assemblage of a ‘pile of fakes, copies and inferior pieces’ (De Kamper 2018: 65).

a Eurocentric self in the higher classes to ‘gain a sense of mastery and control over the natural, human, and artificial worlds’ around them (Belk 1989: 110). They were “Chinese” things but had little to do with the Chinese themselves in South Africa. Scholarly studies of the Chinese communities in South Africa have hardly mentioned any involvement with local museums or ceramics collections. Private nostalgic collecting of Chinese comics, novels, and phonograph (Yang 2021) records from Hong Kong and China among older Chinese immigrant communities occurred during border crossings with little scholarly attention. Against the backdrop of structural discrimination of the Group Areas Act in apartheid, which racially segregated people, cultural transmission and commodification were mainly realised through community practices, such as the New Year festival (Yap and Man 1996: 394) and the Chinese Camera Club (Corrigall 2023: 63) in the 1950s–60s.

Within the shifting trend of establishing a “South African art” canon, Paula Girshick (2008) explores the emergence of collecting and marketing certain African objects as “art” rather than mere souvenirs or curiosities in South Africa from the 1930s through to the late 1970s. This movement began in the 1930s, when African objects became popular teaching aids for art classes by artists such as Irma Stern and were appreciated by a few academics and merchants such as Maria Stein-Lessing, and Vittorino Meneghelli. Collectors of that time approached these art objects from a modernist perspective attempting to transfer some of the objects from ‘curiosities’ to ‘high primitive art’ (Girshick 2008: 87). In 1978, Vittorino Meneghelli made a substantial donation to the Art History Department at Wits, facilitating the establishment of the Wits Collection of African Art. South African art historian Anita Nettleton (1988) explores collecting African art objects during a similar era, examining a rural and nuanced context. She discusses how rural artists navigate between creating “art” for the “art market” and crafting artefacts for communal functional use (Nettleton 1988: 305). Within the hierarchical system of high art and craft in the Western canon, the aesthetic of an African “art” object becomes entwined with domestic and export market styles and is subsequently reappropriated into local contexts (Nettleton 1988: 307). These “African” objects resonate with various “versions” of exported “Chinese” ceramics and brassware circulated in South Africa, thus transforming collecting into an aesthetic contact zone characterised by encounters with the “others” (Mickaella 2009; Pratt 2012) and a re-evaluation of the familiar as strange (Chumley 2016). Besides works by Girshick (2008 & 2016) and Nettleton (1988, 1993, 2010 and 2014). Sandra Klopfer (2004: 18–25) also

provides a historical examination of collectors such as Kevin Conru, Ken Karner, Udo Horstmann, and Jonathan Lowe, who developed an interest in southern African art before the 1980s. These collectors made later exhibitions and collections of African art possible in local museums. Sieber's groundbreaking study on African household objects confirms a growing trend of collecting non-figurative objects among some private collectors (1972; 1979). Patrick McNaughton (2002: 18) attempts to make sense of the different interests of collectors. He finds that academics and institutions, in most cases, focus on contexts of production since the mid-twentieth century.

Collecting Since the 1970s in South Africa: Transforming in a State of "Unknown"

I use the 1970s as a timeframe linked to the postmodern development of collecting, where collecting is used to 'promote (and explain) social transformation' (Martin 1997: 3), alongside the backdrop of a dominant capitalist modernity defined by the pervasive influence of capital hegemony. This includes the prevalence of commodification, emphasis on individualism, societal fragmentation, objectification, and the promotion of consumer culture, all of which remain significant components of contemporary society (Kellner 1995: 256). In the 1970s, a time marked by domestic uprisings and resistance, as well as international disinvestment campaigns and support for anti-apartheid efforts (Gurney 2009), Keyan G. Tomaselli argues that despite the efforts of art activists and scholars, a left-wing affirmative theory with a clear anti-apartheid constituency was still missing (Tomaselli 2019: 338). The Gaborone meeting seems to have been a follow-up to the 1979 State of Art in South Africa Conference, held at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, which sought to harness art as a tool of resistance (Tomaselli 2019: 340; Williamson 2004: 9). In contrast, early 20th-century Afrikaner cultural theorists viewed Western Marxist pessimism as a recognition of the failure of historical materialism, believing it had forfeited the possibility of counter-mobilisation (Tomaselli 2019: Muller and Tomaselli, 1990). However, anti-apartheid artists took a different approach by affirming the future and navigating the racial realities of the present. Those involved in "‘acting out’ the anti-apartheid struggle were effectively forging a new culture,' in line with E.P. Thompson's (1968) culturalist humanist perspective in South Africa (Tomaselli 2019: 340). Against the backdrop, Standard Bank sought political approval and acceptance through collecting African art (Girshick 2018: 93; Pepper 2009). Corporate collecting (Hobbs, Burger, and Atkinson 1998; Verschoor 2016) and community outreach centres (Rassool 2006; Hobbs and Rankin 1997 & 2003; Nwafor 2012)

focused on developing community-based arts projects and art markets burgeoning from this period and continued their momentum till today. The emergence of the heritage industry and the idea of “community” in the 1980s have further challenged conventional museum settings and collecting practices (Martin 1997: 3). Critical texts by Ciraj Rassool (2000, 2006 & 2008) indicate how collecting becomes a bridge between emerging heritage studies as a disciplinary field and conventional museums as a colonial legacy in South Africa. Through means of ‘collecting and documentation,’ museums are transformed into “Heritage” (2008: 26). He argues that colonial ethnography has resurfaced under the guise of indigenous resurgence, highlighting how heritage systems of recording, preservation, and knowledge creation remain influenced by a politics of paternalism and attempts at cultural redemption (2008: 27). Within this transformation, the history of shared forced removal and anti-apartheid about local Chinese communities has been collected and presented in museums as “heritage”, such as the South End Museum in Gqeberha (Kadi 2007). Meanwhile, the “African” and “Chinese” artefacts in the museums face ‘anxiety’ for different reasons (Kritzinger 2023: 151). Contemporary young people who hold a split view on the problematic labelling of “tribes” or “traditional crafts” as a product of colonialism by anthropologists and archaeologists (Kros and Wright 2022: 54). Nessa Leibhammer, who was curator of Traditional Southern African Collections at Johannesburg Art Gallery, reveals how most of her colleagues at the gallery, irrespective of race, avoided working with collections of objects that had been labelled as “traditional” (Kros and Wright 2022: 37). Kritzinger argues that the Chinese artefacts even face a more profound uncertainty, particularly because they are ‘treated as unknown’ (2023: 151). How do you transform art collecting or heritage when the “others” are largely unknown? The issue of unknown or less known is a common condition in collecting and curating art in the South. By curators, which is reflected in scholarly accounts theoretically, terms such as ‘irritating objects,’ ‘awkward art and difficult heritage’ (Tinius 2020: 130) become means of configuring while in the making of the South.

The “unknown” are not limited to these ambivalent objects, but also extend to the limited understanding of private collectors who are from previously collected cultures and communities in South Africa. Texts about private collectors include discussions in the discourse of race and segregation, using binary terms such as “Black artists, white patrons” (Rankin 1990) and ‘Black art and white markets’ (Nettleton 1988), reflecting scholarly concerns about the contemporary art market. It's noteworthy to point out that Ann Roberts’s report (2020: 103) reveals that some

Black collectors are finding a “third space” in their way of buying art which is mostly “unknown” to the dominant canon of high art:

“When I went into the space, there were many Black collectors in the sense that it was people whose homes I walked into and who had art, when I say art we're talking about quality artists with a reputation, a career, etc. People who are quite serious about collecting art for whatever their various reasons are” (KT cited in Roberts 2020: 103).

Additionally, there are more Black buyers who are not included in the “report” or art market discourse because ‘the art they buy is not valorised by the mainstream commercial galleries and therefore falls outside of the purview’ of Roberts’ research (Roberts 2020: 104). Literature based on collectors within mainstream commercial galleries reveals that the configuration of collecting culture has been profoundly shaped by the ascendancy of the private sector, encompassing individual collectors, curators, galleries, and auction houses, especially considering the relatively subdued involvement of public museums (Corrigall 2018; Kritzinger 2013). In the sphere of ‘high art,’ with a particular emphasis on contemporary African art distinguished by its institutionally entrenched and academically informed genesis, public engagement predominantly gravitates towards academic enclaves and a curated cadre of collectors and curators (Labuscagne 2010: 116; Kritzinger, 2013: 12; Corrigall 2018). In her latest analysis, ‘Tracing the Impact of Western-Centric Validation on Curatorial Practices and the Development of the Art-Ecosystems on the African Continent,’ Mary Corrigall (2023) maintains that it is nearly unfeasible to avoid a Western-centric scrutiny of Global South art markets, even when expressed through the initiatives of notable African figures like curators. This perspective is drawn from a ten-year observation of key curators and artists in the contemporary African art scene. Nicola Kritzinger (2013: 12) posits that private collectors [who are “known” within mainstream circles] wield influence akin to the “cultural brokers” delineated by Sylvester Ogbechie (2010) in his characterisation of curatorial roles. These collectors not only shape but also “dictate” perceptions of value, both culturally and monetarily, within the art world (Kritzinger 2013: 12).

This study examines the “unknown” collectors who exist outside the mainstream circle through the lens of Chinese collectors in diaspora. Within this realm of ordinary collecting, there are nuances that necessitate a contingent anthropological approach to understanding each collector’s behaviour. When collecting practices initiated by ordinary Chinese individuals intersect with border-crossings, undervalued artefacts, or mythmaking narratives, and when such

practices deviate from established canonical and market-driven norms, it prompts a return to the foundational question concerning the rationale behind collecting. This re-evaluation aims to elucidate the logic employed by ordinary collectors in their engagement with material encounters in the South.

Thomas G. Tansell's seminal work, 'A Rationale of Collecting' (1998), offers an inclusive and nuanced anthropological perspective on collecting. Serving as a critical text for this thesis, Tansell's scholarship facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the constitution of a collector within the South. Tansell's accounts (1998: 4) on the matter of 'need,' particularly considering the nuanced realities of emotional imperatives, prompt critical reflections on the definition of 'need.' Such insights assist this study in discerning instances where certain collecting behaviours may appear excessive or divergent from logical paradigms in the canon. Furthermore, Tansell's elucidation challenges the limitations inherent in an exclusive focus on tangible artefacts. He contends that delineating boundaries between the tangible and intangible realms relies on individual mediation.

Expanding on Tansell's conceptions, this study looks at collectors as a collective group and considers how they navigate the division between intangible and tangible aspects of collecting as a strategy in response to their positionality in South Africa with limited Chinese artifact resources. Their positionality can be understood in three aspects. First, as art collectors based in South Africa, they face a scarcity of exquisite Chinese artifacts and connoisseurship in the domestic market compared to the North. Occasionally, exquisite artifacts that appear in South Africa tend to circulate to wealthier countries in the North, as exemplified by the case of a pair of polychrome-glazed Buddhist lions from the Late Ming Dynasty discussed in Chapter 1. Second, they are ordinary collectors who occupy a lower-middle economic status, which limits their financial capacity to pursue art compared to mega collectors. Third, they have the experience of being immigrants in South Africa, with limited language skills, making it challenging to integrate into the domestic elite collectors' circle, where a historically Eurocentric dominance in dealership still persists.

Literature on ceramic studies and colonial collections (Woodward 1974 1982; Malan 1993; Klose 1997; Schrire 2014; Lucas 2006; Esmyol 2020, 2023) is critical to the study in understanding the material culture conditions of exported Chinese objects in South Africa. Additionally, private collectors' collection catalogues, such as Johann Kritzinger's Youxiantang

Collection of Chinese Art (Kritzing and Kritzing 2016), and exhibition catalogues of oriental art expert Sue Ollemans serve as reference materials. Studies on individual collectors have historically been overshadowed by the dominant narratives of grand museums, offer a more nuanced understanding of collecting practices in relation to Chineseness, urbanity, and the early conceptualisation of Chinese art in the West (Pierson 2017). Although these studies have predominantly concentrated on elite collectors and their interactions with museums (Chan 2021; Wear 2001; Wang 2007; Pierson 2017), they shed light on important dimensions of private collecting. Ivy Yi Yan Chan (2021: 9) provides an insightful analysis of five elite Chinese collectors in Hong Kong from 1949 to 1997, revealing the significant roles played by ‘self-initiated local elitist groups, middlemen, and collaborationists’ in shaping both museum and private collections, as well as the intricate dynamics of Hong Kong society. Similarly, art historian Eric Otto Wear (2001) conducted an ethnographic study of individual collectors in Hong Kong and Taiwan, drawing on personal encounters and interviews. Utilising the frameworks of situational sociology and object theory, Wear explores the multifaceted meanings of an imagined “Chineseness” as a vehicle for fostering an indigenous high culture and configuring identity (2001: 173).

The study of Chinese diaspora and art collecting remains underrepresented in scholarly research. However, a few works focusing on elite individual collectors and their family collections, as well as their interactions with foreign museums and institutions in China, offer valuable insights for the thesis. These texts illuminate how prominent Chinese collectors in the northern diaspora have cultivated strong connections with renowned cultural institutions. Wen-Hsin Yeh (2011: 176-184) recounts how successive generations of the Yeh family expanded their collection across continents and oceans, eventually forming the Yeh Family Collection at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Initially, this collection of Chinese art was intended to reflect cultural and social distinctions within Chinese society. Over time, however, it has evolved into a representation of “Chineseness,” emphasising the aesthetic contrasts between cultures (Yeh 2011: 183). Shiping Tu (2011: 44-45) briefly notes that since the 1990s, a few prominent Chinese collectors and their descendants, based in Japan, Hong Kong, and America, have ‘repatriated’ numerous significant Chinese artifacts to museums in China. Despite this, the study of the Chinese diaspora and art collecting remains underexplored, particularly the narratives of ordinary collectors, which have not been adequately addressed in contrast to the well-

documented activities of various collectors' associations across the globe that maintain close networks with China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Artron Art Index 2023).

An important perspective on migration, trauma, and collecting is offered by Mimi Wong (2023) in her piece titled *The Art of Accumulation in an Age of Decluttering*. Wong recounts her upbringing in a California home filled with antiques amassed by her mother, who had grown up as a second-class citizen under British colonial rule in Hong Kong and was unable to return to her ancestral home in Hunan Province. After immigrating to the United States, her mother frequented antique malls and flea markets, seeking out relics—particularly those from China—that had somehow made their way overseas and were being sold by dealers who, in the 1990s, were often unaware of their true value. Wong (2023) later realised that through this act of collecting, her mother was preserving a dream of 'cultural belonging'; the antiques served both as a connection to and a substitute for 'the melancholic fantasy of a motherland'. Wong also draws on the works of artists such as Song Dong's *Waste Not* (2005) and Huang Yu-Hsiu's photo series *Hoarders* (2016–18) to explore the complex emotions, chaos, and fear of loss associated with hoarding, and its correlation to scarcity and trauma in the lives of Chinese immigrants. Wong's writing resonates with the experiences of the collectors discussed in this thesis, highlighting the overlooked aspects of migration, trauma, and the role of ordinary collectors within the Chinese diaspora.

Other relevant literature on collecting includes Sharon Macdonald's (2006) systematic introduction to collecting practices, which encompasses different periods and types of collecting, and configuring collecting in a museum context. Belk (1989) offers a distinct perspective on collecting, examining it through the lens of consumer research within the Western tradition. He conceptualises aesthetics as consumable items, suggesting that collecting empowers individuals to acquire special objects for their collections, thereby transforming them from commodities into singularised and sacralised possessions (Belk et al. 1989). The intertwining of widespread consumer culture and collecting appears to coincide with the rise of possessive individualism and the symbolic self (Belk 1984), which connects to an autobiographical sense of self. Collecting contributes to the expansion of one's sense of self by enhancing the collector's connection to their personal history (Belk 1991). This aspect is critical for my investigation into the collaborative creation of biographical narratives through the stories shared by collectors, contributing to the field of biographical studies.

Border Aesthetics

In recent years, critical border studies have advanced nuanced concepts and methodologies to explore the complex spatial, social, and temporal dimensions of contemporary borders (Moze and Spiege, 2021: 1). An increasing focus on the aesthetic dimension of how ‘visuality shapes the geopolitics of borders’ has provided theoretical insights for this study (Moze and Spiege 2021: 1). Specifically, the role of the visual in both constructing and subverting borders (Moze and Spiege 2021: 1) sheds light on collectors’ experiences with border crossings and facilitates a critical examination of how aesthetics intersects with border reconfigurations within the context of the South. Border scholars have often turned to Rancière's (2005, 2019, and 2018) aesthetic insights to investigate border depictions, as well as the wider sensory and axiological aspects of modern borders (Schimanski 2019: 35–36; Schimanski and Nyman 2021). Rancière's critique of positions that interpret recent artistic strategies through the ‘historico-theoretical concept of “postmodernity”’ (Tanke 2011: 71) is crucial for understanding collecting practices in the postmodern era. He argues that postmodernism should be viewed as a reassessment of the distortions imposed on the arts by the myth of artistic modernity, challenging established categories prevalent in numerous art historical narratives (Tanke, 2011: 71). Literary scholars were pioneers in applying Rancière’s theory to the exploration of borders and borderlands, recognising that these themes were central to significant cultural production globally and that bordering encompassed an aesthetic dimension (dell’Agnese, Amilhat Szary 2015; Schimanski, Wolfe 2007; Schimanski 2006; Viljoen 2013). During the 2000s, the notion of “border poetics” surfaced as a means of interpreting literary narratives through a border-centric lens (Schimanski, Wolfe 2017; 2019: 35–36; Schimanski and Nyman 2021). This framework conceptualises the connections between borders in the represented world of the text and the borders that mark the text itself as a spatial form of representation, projecting borders onto five planes: topographical, symbolic, temporal, epistemological, and textual (Schimanski and Wolfe 2007: 217). I used the idea of border poetics developed from textual border-crossings across these five planes in interpreting the collectors’ narratives of collecting in the study. According to Schimanski (2019: 34) the interest expanded from literacy to encompass studies on ‘border films, border music, and border (wall) art.’

Drawing on Rancière’s concept of politics as the ‘*partage du sensible*,’ which involves the division or sharing of what can be sensed, allowing individuals to assert their political

subjectivity and voice their concerns, border aesthetics focuses on the complex interplay between visible and invisible elements within cultural and social frameworks (Schimanski 2019: 36). This “partage” has the potential to render individuals either invisible and unheard or visible in disempowering ways (Schimanski 2019: 36). Brambilla and Pötzsch (2017) investigate the notion of “in/visibility” within the context of borders and audio-visuality, particularly concerning immigrants (Brambilla and Pötzsch 2017). Their interpretation of Rancière’s assertion regarding the inherently political nature of an aesthetic regime in the arts, wherein the arts map out the visible, establish connections between the visible and the expressible, and define relationships between different modes of existence, expression, and creation, is essential for understanding the process of printmaking by Chinese stamp artisans and South African printmaker Nompumelelo Bukani. Additionally, I connect Rancière’s concept of aesthetics as potentially emancipatory and forward-thinking to the aesthetic preferences of the Chinese diaspora, examining the collections of Shengkai Wu and Yiyuan Yang from the colonial period. It connects to my “strategic Southernness” approach in looking ways of speaking in an “affective” and sensory approach in a post-colonial context that contemporary Southerners find means to navigate problematic colonial artefacts in a context-sensitive way through art collecting, poem or other means of creative forms.

Pnina Werbner & Mattia Fumanti’s (2013) ‘The Aesthetics of Diaspora: Ownership and Appropriation’ is a critical reference as it provides means in terms of looking at the possibilities of being empowered in a diasporic context. They argue that the diasporic appropriation of aesthetic, literary, and performative traditions, along with objects, clothing styles, or cuisine, cultivate ‘authentically felt cultural competences’ and a profound sense of belonging (Werbner & Fumanti 2013: 149). Kathy Burrell (2008: 353) examines borders from a materialised perspective. She argues that ‘journeying and border crossing’ are ‘physical acts’ that constitute a ‘highly materialized and emotional undertaking, suspended in space and time between two realities.’ The collectors’ border crossing experiences and collecting practices are deeply imbued with materiality and emotion, constituting a tangible and meaningful space in their own right. The last clusters of border aesthetics I draw directly relate to “Chinese aesthetics” to interpret the complexity of “Chinese” things in South Africa. They encompass China-made artefacts intended for the export market, Japanese or European imitations in “Chinese style,” and the so-called “authentic” Chinese items made in China for domestic Chinese taste. Additionally, there are

China-made South African items defined as South African, such as the Cape VOC blue-and-white dishes. Among these artefacts, some of the most controversial colonial items demand further research. For instance, the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps made in China designed by the British in a mixed style, printed in China with Chinese and English elements in the stamp and posters in Chinese official proclamation style, which could have been made in China or South Africa under the management of the colonial government.

I use Inga Shigemi’s (2022) case study of ‘Japanese art in Classical Chinese aesthetic ideals meet the West as a Contact Zone’ as an insight to interpret the world of these artefacts in a contact zone. These “Chinese” items represent a process of reciprocal transcultural translations between the East, West, and South Africa. They serve as semiotic triggers for Chinese collectors grappling with the reality of an uncertain and nuanced “Chineseness” embedded in these artefacts in a diasporic context.

Chapter Outlines: Untold Stories

The sequence of storytelling among the collectors is structured not only by age, from elder to younger, but also by their relationships and geographic locations. Shengkai Wu and Yiyuan Yang, both residents of Johannesburg, have maintained a friendship spanning three decades. Their distinct styles of collecting and differing social classes in China set them apart. Shengkai Wu hails from a family of high-ranking officials and was taught about collecting and research from a young age. In contrast, Yiyuan Yang was born into a family transitioning from rural to urban life and is largely self-taught in artistic skills. Initially, they shared experiences in collecting, even participating in the only Chinese collectors’ association in South Africa around 2009, which existed briefly. This association attracted members who were more motivated by the prospect of wealth than by a deep understanding of the art of collecting. Despite Wu’s and Yang’s differences, their shared experience as sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution has sustained their friendship. Wu frequently visits Yang for haircuts, a skill Yang acquired during Cultural Revolution time. Shudi Li, another collector, has a migration history from Durban to Cape Town and currently divides his time between his home in Cape Town, where his wife resides, and Zhejiang, where he was based for work before his retirement. The three collectors exhibit idiosyncratic collecting styles. Wu is highly selective, acquiring a few pieces over decades, each carefully researched. His collection includes Chinese artifacts and an Andy Warhol print of Marilyn Monroe, though there seems to be little correlation between his Chinese

and non-Chinese collections. Yang, on the other hand, collects large quantities of mass-produced objects, filling his living space. He has a particular focus on copperware, which he has collected for decades, as well as English ceramics and a few African ceramic figures. These pieces, often overlooked by other collectors, serve as tools for Yang to compare and understand Chinese ceramics. Li's collection includes a large number of Chinese ceramics and a few African carvings and prints, directly sourced from lesser-known community artists. Some of his African carvings are currently on loan to Zhejiang Normal University, where he once worked. Li's primary focus is on the aesthetic quality of the artworks.

Despite their differences, all three collectors share a common pattern: their primary focus is on Chinese artifacts or art objects that resonate with Chinese aesthetics or mediate their connection to China. In contrast, there are mega-collectors, such as the famous couple Songshan Li and Rong Han, who lived in Africa for years before permanently returning to China, where they focused on collecting extensive African carvings and established private museums (Wong 2023; Elinaza, 2014; Claessens, 2014). According to Bourdieu's framework, the acquisition of art can be seen as a means to gain entry into a particular social world (Roberts 2020). The mega-collectors align with Bourdieu's suggestions, as they are deeply invested in the social and cultural capital that art brings to their lives in China. However, the three collectors in South Africa do not fit neatly into this framework. They are less concerned with the social and cultural capital that art collecting might confer and more with the deeply personal connections that their collections facilitate in configuring a diasporic identity in South Africa. Their collecting priorities and focus on China-centric content have led this thesis to explore their personal narratives in depth, highlighting their constant obsession with and imagination of China through their collections—a theme similar to Mimi Wong's accounts of her mother in the Chinese diaspora.

Chapter one is a biographical study of Shengkai Wu. He was born into an affluent family in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China in 1952. Wu immigrated to South Africa in 1990. Since then, he has been actively involved in the field of art and antiquities. This chapter consists mainly of two sections. The first section explores the life trajectory of Shengkai Wu, focusing on his experiences of stamp collecting in both China and South Africa. It begins by discussing Wu's childhood hobby of stamp collecting which brings his path into the politics and poetics of philately, and his individual identity in relation to the transnational migration history from China

to South Africa. It further delves into the intricate world of “semi-colonial”¹⁷ Chinese objects that emerged in South Africa, with a specific focus on “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps issued by the British-dominated Shanghai Municipal Council’s local post office between 1865 and 1867. It argues that these semi-colonial objects, with their distinctive converging aesthetics, create a space for diasporic banal nationalism (Billig 1995) between China and Africa and continually gravitate Chinese immigrants back to China in the process navigating their transnational identities. Michael Billig’s *Banal Nationalism* (1995) examines how everyday activities contribute to the reinforcement of national identity. He defines banal nationalism as the subtle and routine ways in which national identity is strengthened in daily life. This occurs through seemingly mundane practices, symbols, and language. I perceive the presence of “Chinese” things and associated collecting practices in South Africa as an implicit expression of Chinese nationalism, which influences the lives of Chinese immigrant collectors in South Africa. The second section uncovers Wu’s relationship with a Tang blue-and-white ceramic piece that he collected in South Africa. Taking inspiration from Brian Larkin’s case study in Nigeria (2020), the study explores how the collector, as a form of interference, disrupts the “idealised narratives” of blue-and-white ceramics. This interference is manifested in historical configurations wherein ceramic technology, linguistic dilemmas and implicit cultural expression intersect in the emerging discourse of Tang blue-and-white. I argue that the collector’s emphatic advancement of early Tang blue-and-white signifies the temporality of Tang blue-and-white as an experiential framework in the global flow of Chinese blue-and-white ceramics.

Chapter two focuses on Yiyuan Yang. Yiyuan Yang was born in Beijing, China in 1954. He settled in South Africa in 1992. This chapter builds on ideas of border poetics developed from textual border crossings. It begins with a brief biographical account of Yiyuan Yang’s life, weaving moments of border crossings into his narrative along with associated artefacts, images and acts of resistance, particularly highlighting his decade-long experience as a sent-down youth

¹⁷ The term “semi-colonialism” has a long history and varied interpretations, describing the turbulent interaction between foreign powers and China during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. This thesis adopts Anne Reinhardt’s (2020:3) interpretation of “semi-colonialism,” which refers to the relations between foreign and Chinese powers in mainland China under the treaty system. Reinhardt suggests keeping ‘both sides of the hyphen under active consideration’ to capture the ‘particularity of China’s experience’ while also highlighting its similarities with colonial contexts (Reinhardt 2020:3). The “semi-colonial” objects refer to objects made by foreigners and Chinese people who lived in the treaty port cities during the 19th and early 20th that embodied the erosion of Chinese sovereignty under the treaty system’s influence.

on the Loess Plateau of Shanxi Province, an experience that profoundly shaped his collecting style in South Africa. Next, the chapter critically examines Yang's collecting practices of Chinese trade coarse brassware in South Africa, linking them to the trope of Zheng He within the context of China–Africa engagement. I conceptualise each object within a collector's assemblage as a “non-narrative vocabulary.” By examining these objects in relation to the collector's rationale, a form of “collecting literature” emerges. I first critically scrutinise the dominant official Zheng He myth within Sino–African discourse. Subsequently, I explore how Yang strategically employs his “object vocabulary” to craft a narrative interwoven with the mythos surrounding Zheng He. I contend that the artefacts curated by Yang exert a *minjian* (民间) coercive influence through their replication and emulation of classical artefacts from Zheng He's era in different historical times. Furthermore, they introduce novel dimensions to the prevailing Zheng He narratives in mainstream Sino–African discourse. I illustrate how Yang's focusing on collecting lesser-celebrated objects from Chinese *minjian* craftsman embraces a humanistic approach. This perspective, characterised by empathy, re-enactment and personal commemoration, challenges the canonical history of collecting only exceptional pieces with intricate craftsmanship. I explore the significance of these lesser known but ubiquitous artefacts to collectors outside elite circles across diverse regions such as Europe, South Africa, America, India and Japan. While these items may not attract the attention of high-profile auction houses or connoisseurs, their widespread presence offers insights into border-crossing trends from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Lastly, this chapter critically analyses a photo postcard made in 1906, titled ‘The Famous Repatriation Poster’, about the Chinese indentured labourers in South Africa, collected by Yiyuan Yang in South Africa. Through piercing together different individuals' engagements in relation to this colonial object collected by Yang, it fleshes out a way of seeing the history of Chinese indentured labourers in South Africa beyond Orientalism (Ngai 2017; Chua 2020). It advances Yang's sensitive approach to uncovering overlooked examples of silent resistance by Chinese labourers in the form of posters and seals buried in the historical archives. These silent forms challenge the importation of Chinese labourers in South Africa as merely an economic experiment of the global labour migration force, but also a co-constituted acculturation process between the indentured labourers and the British colonial government.

Chapter three examines Shudi Li, who was born into an art educator's family in the city of Kaifeng, Henan Province, in 1954. This chapter demonstrates his artistic talent in graphic artmaking; drawing revolutionary posters of Mao's thought for the school bestowed him a path of silent presence in the shade (Li 2019). Li arrived in South Africa in 1992 as a designer and later received his Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art at KwaZulu-Natal University with a highly successful exhibition at the Centre for Visual Arts of the university and settled in Cape Town. He currently lives between China and South Africa. Li's conceptualisation of collecting gravitates towards intangible aesthetic elements. Drawing upon Tanselle's (1998: 4) discourse on collecting intangibles, this chapter embarks on an exploration of the artistic forms, contours and embedded narratives within Li's biography, elucidating the intangible aesthetic constituents of his collecting practices. Central to this investigation is an understanding of how Li navigates the divide between an 'internal repertoire of ideas' and external tangibles manifestations. Within the context of objects and graphics spanning China and South Africa, Li enriches the inherent materiality of lines, infusing them with a metaphorical rhythm of rawness, simplicity, disruption and entanglement, as well as shades of alienation. These lines are endowed with performative enactment of variations, distractions, displacement and triumph that resonate with political undertones and translational configurations. Lines and traces emerge as inherently political entities, actively shaping processes and perceptions. The subsequent section of this chapter specifically explores Li's projection of a visual connection onto the printmaking of South African artist Nompumelelo Bukani. Here, I elucidate the rationale underpinning visual ideas as intangible collecting, forging a connection between the shared visual connection of Bukani and Li. This connection is conceptualised as a form of visual solidarity that situates the "South" both physically and metaphorically, drawing inspiration from the lived experiences and spontaneous encounters of ordinary individuals on the ground (Simbao et al. 2017: 1). By contextualising printmaking within these dual contexts, this chapter highlights the intricate and multifaceted nature of such encounters, defining them as 'embedded and simultaneously contingent, constitutive' processes (Simbao et al. 2017: 1).

In my conclusion I return to the broad context of Global South and arguing for the importance of a nuanced contingent approach to art collecting by looking at less-known ordinary collectors who are outside the mainstream high-art circles. I argue that examining the Chinese diaspora in the Global South through the lens of ordinariness, revealing how ordinary Chinese immigrant

collectors in South Africa, situated within the middle-lower political economy, challenge and complicate prevailing discourses on art collecting. These collectors, whose practices are shaped by their positionality and affective experiences, subvert the dominant Eurocentric, elitist frameworks of the art market-museum-academia system by focusing on community art and mass-produced export wares. Their China-centric collections, while reflecting a diasporic identity marked by “home bias,” also reveal an unconscious adoption of Western frames, raising questions about internalised Orientalism within the Chinese diaspora. Additionally, their practices highlight the absence of intergenerational transmission and repatriation of significant cultural artifacts, contrasting with the practices of Chinese diasporic collectors in the Global North. The study highlights the importance of understanding the complex emotions, fears of loss, and deeply personal connections that inform these collectors’ actions, which are rooted in memory, nostalgia, class, and networks. These dynamics contribute to a redefinition of art histories and migration in the Global South as multifaceted, temporal processes that offer a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese diaspora and the practice of art collecting.

In engaging with, reassembling, and appropriating material objects and their associated histories in South Africa, I contend that the act of collecting serves not only as a manifestation of diasporic agency in preserving memories of the past but also as a lens through which the complexities of the Chinese diaspora amid China’s growing presence in Africa can be understood. On one level, these ordinary collectors use collecting as a form of resistance against the lasting impacts of political upheaval and the epistemological inequalities imposed on grassroots communities. Their practices have played a role in reshaping the colonial legacy of “othering” within South Africa’s art-collecting landscape. Simultaneously, their agency is entangled with Chinese diasporic nationalism, reflecting a tension between internalised Eurocentric exploitation and the romanticised preservation of culture—a dynamic that warrants further exploration.

CHAPTER ONE: SHENGKAI WU – COLLECTING IN THE CONTEXT OF BANAL NATIONALISM

Beginning with Shengkai Wu's narrative, given its scholarly resemblance, appears to be the most suitable choice for my first chapter. Before delving into the chapter's introduction to present my argument, I first clarify the use of banal nationalism in this chapter. This concept, briefly introduced in the thesis' introductory section, was initially coined by social psychology scholar Michael Billig in 1995. It encompasses the 'ideological habits' that facilitate the reproduction of a nation-state (Billig 1995: 6). These habitual modes of thinking, or 'mundane way of thinking,' often allow daily slips of nationalism to go unnoticed (Billig 1995: 8). Billig's work played a crucial role in redirecting scholars' focus towards the everyday and mundane routines and discourses through which nationalism is sustained (Koch and Paasi 2016). According to Billig (1995: 38), the nation must be consistently represented in various forms, permeating both physical and symbolic environments as well as the daily routines of individuals. In this study, Shengkai Wu's collecting practices are considered as routinised habits of thinking, demonstrating how the nation-state of China is continuously experienced and reproduced in South Africa through "Chinese" objects and symbols. Particularly, the use of banality within the context of diasporic nation-state re-imagining (Nieswand 2012: 1878) emphasises that what ordinary actors perceive as reality is not necessarily shaped by louder voices or the spectacle of mainstream discourse.

The second term that I need to unpack in the chapter is the complexity of Semi-Colonialism, in the case of this chapter is mainly about the British colonial presence in China and its material culture that is continuously being contested and reimagined in the contemporary discourse of collecting (Mu 2003: 71). My framing of "semi-colonial objects" collected by Shengkai Wu in South Africa is directly related to the historiography of "semi-colonialism". The concept of "semi-colonialism," or "semi-colony," has a unique historical origin. Emerging from the early twentieth-century critiques of imperialism by figures like 'J. A. Hobson and Vladimir Lenin,' the term originally referred to regions such as 'China, Persia, Siam, and the Ottoman Empire' (Reinhardt 2020: 3). These areas, while not 'formal colonies,' were clearly under 'the domination of external powers' (Reinhardt 2020: 3). Mao adopted the term in the 1920s and 1930s to denote the "coexistence of colonialism and native feudal structure" (Yang 2019: para. 10; Mao 1960: 9-20). While earlier research has focused on the agency of foreign actors and the

influence of the West, recent scholarly works have highlighted the active involvement and cooperation of Qing authorities in establishing legal institutions in the treaty ports of China (Yang 2019: para.11). This study incorporates the perspectives of both Anne Reinhardt (2020) and Taoyu Yang (2019), suggesting that the agency of both Chinese and British actors should be considered with equal attention. Therefore, the term “semi-colonial objects” is explored as co-constituted artefacts created by both British and Chinese actors on the ground, moving beyond the conventional perception of a ‘domination-submission dichotomy’ (Yang 2019: para.10).

In this section I unfold how Shengkai Wu lost his entire stamp collection during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. After emigrating to South Africa in 1990, Wu acquired a “Shanghai Large Dragon”; these stamps carry a controversial history, emblematic of the conflicts surrounding Chinese sovereignty and foreign imperial expansion. Notably, they faced partial rejection within the Chinese philatelic community due to their perceived “foreign identity,” symbolising a sense of humiliation. Wu’s acquisition of this stamp spurred a collection of several unique Chinese semi-colonial objects in South Africa over the years. Employing a critical textual and visual analysis of Wu’s writings and interviews, this study utilises the border aesthetics framework to unravel the interplay of “Chineseness” and foreign influences within the objects’ design and creation process. This dynamic interplay is deeply embedded within the micro-narratives of both the objects themselves and the immigrant collector. By highlighting the often overlooked Chinese agency in the creation of these objects, this research illustrates how individual mobility between China and Africa can contribute to a nuanced understanding of the role of aesthetics (Rancière 2009; 2011) through collecting practices, redefining what is visible and meaningful in the context of China’s semi-colonial borderlands. In essence, this section demonstrates how a focus on objects of border aesthetics can empower previously suppressed individual agency in China through their experiences of mobility in Africa.

The second section uncovers Wu’s relationship with a Tang blue-and-white ceramic piece that he collected in South Africa. “Blue-and-white” refers to a type of stoneware or porcelain particularly associated with China and maritime trade, featuring the use of cobalt oxide to adorn the white ceramic surface with blue designs. The archetypal Chinese blue-and-white porcelain flourished during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 CE) in Jingdezhen, the “porcelain city” of China, and continued throughout the Ming (1368–1644 CE) and Qing (1644–1912 CE) dynasties. This section attempts to depart from the notion of a unified market or experience

regarding the archetypal blue-and-white ceramics. It does so by examining the engagement of Shengkai Wu with a Tang plate that travelled from China to South Africa. The study explores metaphorically how the collector, as a form of interference, disrupts the “idealised narratives” of blue-and-white ceramics. This interference is manifested in historical configurations wherein ceramic technology, linguistic dilemmas and implicit cultural expression intersect in the emerging discourse of Tang blue-and-white. Considering that Chinese historical traded porcelains in South African museums face challenges in the context of decolonisation due to colonial associations, the study also questions whether focusing on the Tang dynasty ceramic plate and Chinese communities could provide an alternative approach to determining the placement of Chinese ceramic art in South Africa, deviating from the Eurocentric colonial historical framework concerning lineage.

Shengkai Wu: In the Politics and Poetics of Philately

This section unearths Shengkai Wu’s biography stories in relation to stamp collecting as a measurement to reflect the broader historiography and nationalist emotions of stamp collecting in China and South Africa and questions the agency of his collecting and studying the semi-colonial philately materials from China in South Africa in the Chinese diaspora. It argues that the collecting experiences as well as the semi-colonial materials are sources for a sense of everyday forms of nationhood impulse in subtle and mundane routines, practices, and objects, as conceptualized by Michael Billig (1995). These elements play a role in configuring the movement and re-assemblage of artifacts and people within the discourse of China–Africa relations.

Vicissitudes as a Stamp Collector in the Politics of Philately in China (1950s–1970s)

During the period of the 1950s to the 1970s, Chinese stamps were regarded as socialist propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party. As a result, few scholarly studies had considered them as important research materials due to their political connotations. Consequently, Luming Zhang, a scholar in Asian studies (2020: 8), argues that this approach excludes alternative interpretations and leads to limited scholarship on stamps during Mao’s era. Through a critical archival study of the Chinese official philately journal *Jiyou* (集邮 Philately], from 1955 to 1966, Zhang provides a glimpse into the visualisation of history in the Mao era within the field of philately in China. This thesis reiterates the value of philately archives during this period with a

nuanced approach – viewing them as a biographical pathway (Hu 2023). By contextualising Wu’s stamp-collecting trajectory within the broader societal and cultural matrix, it attempts to decipher the reasons why many collectors like Wu lost their stamp collections during the Cultural Revolution.



Figure 1.1: Shengkai Wu at the South African Antique, Art & Design Association JHB Expo, 2015. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Shengkai Wu (figure 1.1), was born in 1952 into an affluent family in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China. Prior to his birth, stamp collecting in China had a nearly century-long history and intricately intersects with the process of modern state formation in China. Historian Lane Jeremy Harris (2012) illuminates the role played by the imperial Chinese post office in transforming an agrarian empire into a modern nation state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This transformation was closely tied to the evolution of philately in China, representing an integral facet of the nation’s modernisation efforts. Philately historian Yimin Liu (1993: 4) observed how the local Chinese terminology for stamps shifted from the unfamiliar terms “图记纸” (graphic paper) and “信片” (postcard) to the gradual acceptance and establishment of a modern postal system, closely related to the weakening of the Qing Dynasty due to unequal treaties with Britain, France, Russia, the United States, and Japan. .

The initiation of the first treaty port post office in Shanghai in 1886, initially catering to the expatriate community, marked the inception of stamp collecting as a predominantly foreign activity in semi-colonial China during the nineteenth century. Due to the colonial origins of this philatelic history, for decades research on philatelic history adhered to the ‘impact-response’ model (Harris 2012: 25), focusing on the rise of anti-imperialist nationalism as a central framework for comprehending the emergence and development of stamp collecting within China from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. In the five decades preceding Wu’s birth, stamp-collecting activities slowly disseminated and took roots among Chinese practitioners, particularly those in industries engaging in frequent foreign exchanges. This phenomenon was particularly notable in treaty ports like Shanghai, where residents had exceptional opportunities to cultivate extensive collections during that era (Liu 1993: 37–64).

Navigating a Space of Philately in Between a Hobby or a Group Activity

The unprecedented popularity of stamp collecting began in 1949, with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. During the 1950s, stamp collecting experienced a surge in popularity, becoming a widely practised activity across the country (Huang 2001: 1039). This was due to the early positioning of stamp collecting in the newly founded People’s Republic of China as ‘a propaganda and educational tool, utilising realism in art’ to strengthen socialist ideological education (Liu 1993: 174). Educational institutions in the 1950s also devoted efforts to promote stamp collecting among young people, with many schools and factories in large and medium-sized cities forming stamp collecting groups. Luming Zhang (2020: 49) notes that the transition from old China to the new socialist China brought about a change in the official philately narrative. To legitimise and promote philately, authorities strategically replaced the term “*aihao*” (hobby) with “*huodong*” (activity). This subtle yet deliberate change in terminology aimed to present philately as more than just a leisurely pursuit but rather as a socially significant and widely participated movement.

Against this historical backdrop, at the tender age of six, Wu began his stamp collecting journey. His mother used to bring home recycled envelopes from her workplace. He engaged in a meticulous process where stamp papers salvaged from these envelopes in dustbins were delicately washed and carefully dried (Wu 2023). Despite the unprecedentedly political connotation underpinning the practice of philately in the public domain as a collective activity, to serve the socialist construction in new China, before the Cultural Revolution, individuals were

still allowed a safe space to engage in philately as a hobby in their private life. Wu emphasises his mother's primary influence on his stamp collecting journey. During the period of 1950s–1966, Wu collected a large number of commemorative and special issue stamps (老纪特)¹⁸ that are referred to by modern philatelists as antiques or vintage stamps. Commemorative stamps function as a type of federal souvenir that, when saved, became miniature memorials.

¹⁸ These commemorative and special issue stamps were issued in China from the establishment of New China until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. They were discontinued when the issuance of stamps featured the Chinese character "文"(wen) which means the Cultural Revolution (Wu 2011).



Figure 1.2: The front cover of *Jiyou* (集邮) a nationally well-received philately magazine, founded in 1955, issue No.6, 1966. The last stamp, the founding ceremony, commemorating 71.1-1, was issued on 1 July 1, 1950, marked as Commemorative Issue 4, Commencement of the People's Republic of China. It is one of the commemorative stamps issued by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications of the People's Republic of China to celebrate the founding of the People's Republic of China and the birth of the Communist Party of China. This stamp was designed based on the oil painting *Founding Ceremony* by the artist Dong Xiwen. The image also appeared in New year prints.

Among them, three stamps were a special issue by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications in 1965 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Zunyi Conference, the completion of the Long March by the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. This was the last issue of *Jiyou* before the journal (figure 1.2) was discontinued due to the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Wu had all the commemorative and special issue of stamps as shown on the front cover in his collection. These stamps were meticulously designed, based on oil paintings by revolutionary realist artists.¹⁹

Stanley Brunn (2022: 28), a geography scholar, in his discussion on stamps as symbols of visual nationalism, argues that stamps are crucial “place” elements in a state’s visual history, as these tiny pieces of visual history produced by the state intended to present an image for the state as well as for those beyond its borders. Wu’s early years of philately practice were based on the material condition of philately during this time when these commemorative and special issues of symbolic nationalism dominated the philately circle. They have become precious historical artefacts, serving as miniature memorials for the major historical events and figures in the narrative of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. These stamps not only respond to the visual construction of Chinese nationalism in the early days of New China in terms of their themes and subjects but also demonstrate how early revolutionary realist art entered the public consciousness through mediums like stamps. They represent an organised “activity” promotion model, becoming a popular microcosmic art form appreciated and followed by young people of that era.

Although stamp collecting, as a widely promoted collective activity among young people, has been overlooked by general historians due to its role as a tool for political propaganda, there has not been enough research on the relationship between its unprecedented popularity promoted by

¹⁹ The stamps in Fig. 1.2 feature Mao Zedong’s portrait, no. 109.3–2 (top left), created by Peng Bin based on Mao’s poem *Memories of Qinhuang* no. 109.3–3 (second row on the right), and the oil painting *On the Eve of the Decisive Battle* (third row left), no. 109.3–1, created by Gao Hong from the Chinese Revolutionary Military Museum. It depicts the scene of the Mao Zisu Campaign on the eve of the Liaoshen, Huaihai, and Pingjin Campaigns during the Liberation War period. On August 10, 1957, a set of four stamps was issued to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. One of the stamps, commemorating 41.4–2, depicts the *Meeting at Jinggangshan* and was designed based on the oil painting by Wang Shikuo. Commemorating 36.2–2, *Crossing the Snowy Mountains*, is one of the two stamps issued in 1955 to commemorate the completion of the Long March by the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army. This stamp was designed based on the oil painting by Li Zongjin/Huang Pixing.

the state and individual collectors. Particularly, there has not been adequate attention given to interpreting the influence on stamp collectors like Wu, who grew up in such environment. Following the Soviet government's redefinition of stamp collecting to align with its totalitarian goals, affecting everyday life and the state's relations with philatelists. Many schools integrated Russian language instruction and encouraged students to correspond with peers in socialist countries (Li 1993: 182). It led to widespread stamp exchanges as an ideological collective activity. For example, students at Beijing Foreign Trade College frequently exchanged stamps with Soviet and Eastern European students, maintaining contact even after parting ways (Li 1993: 182). Reflecting on this period of stamp collecting experiences, Wu's strongest connection lies not in the collective memory of his youth as an ideological collective activity but rather emphasises stamp collecting as a personal hobby that creates a microcosmic world (Wu 2023b). In this process, individuals find not only how they are shaped and grow but also experience spiritual fulfilment:

The stamp itself is a small piece, occupying an area of a few square centimetres. It is a form of microcosmic art, encompassing various aspects of technology, knowledge and artistry. The process of creating stamps involves designing drafts, sketching, engraving and producing printing plates. When you look through a magnifying glass, the meticulously engraved patterns consist of countless tiny dots and lines, forming an exquisitely detailed work of art. This artwork represents a microcosmic world, which stimulates enthusiasts to delve into its intricacies. They explore the lines, the arrangement of dots, the quality of dots, the lengths of lines, the angles of straight lines, curves and more. There are numerous research topics within philately. Through these studies, enthusiasts find immense satisfaction on a spiritual level (Wu 2023b).

Concurrently, while learning about stamp collecting and delving into the microcosmic world, Wu's stamp album expanded in tandem with the development of his character and his perception of the world, for instance, his keen attention to detail, focus on gathering and analysing historical knowledge and persistent dedication to his pursuit, research and knowledge sharing. By physically exploring each stamp and envelope, carefully examining the design of unique stamp patterns within their historical context, exploring various postal routes and identifying subtle signs of paper aging, Wu embarked on a series of philatelic pursuits that eventually shaped his qualities as a discerning academic collector in the later years.

A Dangerous Possession: Philately as a “Capitalistic or Counter-Revolutionary” Act in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)

Despite the unprecedented popularity of stamp collecting since the 1950s, the politics of stamp collecting in New China constitutes an integral part of the socialist construction. It was subjected to a process of configuration of China’s domestic and international relations in a large web of brother countries of the socialist world. Specifically, it explored the development of philately in the Soviet Union as a potential benchmark for studying the feasibility of developing philately within the socialist context of China. The widely acclaimed philately magazine, *Jiyou* [集邮], founded in 1955, initiated a thematic discussion titled ‘How Collectors Should Treat Stamps from Capitalist Countries’ starting from the 10th issue in 1958. This emphasised that philately must adhere to political guidance to observe every aspect of philatelic activities.

As the radical socialist ideology increasingly dominated every aspect of society, the philatelic space also became a battleground for class struggle, leaving virtually no room for stamp collecting as a mere hobby. Starting from the third issue in 1965, *Jiyou* (集邮) continued to open a series of discussions on ‘How to Achieve the Revolutionization of Philately’ (Han1965: 9)

By the time of the Cultural Revolution, philately gradually came to a halt as it was considered “capitalistic” or “counter revolutionary” (Wu 2023b). Consequentially, despite stamps being traded on the black market, people were cautious and fearful of engaging in such activities. Political interference centralised in class struggle has transformed a hobby of Wu’s childhood to a political act of bourgeois sentiment and counter revolution. Wu’s years of pride and dedication became dangerous evidence of capitalist stance. Wu (2022a) recalled the time of Cultural Revolution when an individual’s home could be ransacked at any time by the Red Guards, how ordinary objects were destroyed or transformed by his parents pre-emptively. His father’s ties were shredded and repurposed as a mop, and his mother’s wedding ring with precious gemstones was flushed down the toilet. Historian Denise Y. Ho (2018: 278) articulates the ways of linking objects and class status as a strategy of ‘curating revolution’ that formed part of the class education exhibitions for the Red Guards and broad political propaganda.

Wu’s personal narrative confirms Ho’s critical reflection that in the radical era of high socialism, making revolutionary material means material has direct ideological consequences that impact every day’s lived experiences. In a co-edited volume on material conditions and materiality in Mao’s China, Jennifer Altehenger and Denise Y. Ho (2022: 22) argue that objects

played a critical role in socialist theory and praxis. Personal belongings were not only loaded with class, but also mediators of political consciousness. Philately's colonial origins as well as the urban practice settings outside the context of peasantry in the rural areas had contributed to the negative impact on philately during the Cultural Revolution. *JiYyou's* last issue before the Cultural Revolution in 1966, states that philately has no value in the Cultural Revolution (Renmin Youdian Chubanshe 1966: 1), therefore it calls for collectors to devote time on the revolution's more pressing demands.

Two years after the official call for suppressing philately, in 1968, at the age of 16, Wu and his family were sent to different rural areas for "re-education". Before departure, the lingering fear of political victimisation as a youth from a perilous background (Hu 2023: 57) compelled him to give away his entire collection to avoid any potential trouble. Saturated with the emotion of great pain and the vivid memories of how he accumulated his collection one by one since childhood, Wu (2023b) reiterated in a recent interview that these stamps, once symbols of the exploiting capitalist class, have been re-envisioned as valuable historical artefacts appreciated profoundly by the contemporary philately market.

The vicissitudes of Wu's philatelic experiences reflect a microcosm of the challenges faced by a generation of stamp collectors in the emerging People's Republic of China. Within the mainstream socialist narrative, collectors who grew up in the old society and were passionate about Qing Dynasty, Republic of China, European and American postal items, became targets for transformation. These experts, proficient in philatelic theory and practice, could not become the leading force in guiding the development of philately in the new China. Instead, a large number of new collectors, including cadres, workers, teachers, students and soldiers, focused on collecting stamps from the new China and Eastern European countries like the Soviet Union. According to observations by Li Yimin, their vast numbers quickly led to a market dominated by stamps at low prices. During the Cultural Revolution, these newly joined proletarian stamp collectors, especially individuals like Wu, who were categorised as classes in need of transformation, were forced to stop stamp collecting. Some had their collections confiscated and philately was labelled as 'engaging in espionage activities' (Li 1993: 195).

The aching loss for Wu as well as these collectors invites us to question: why collecting and appreciating and preserving the state-issued stamps of national importance became a criminal act during the Cultural Revolution? In seeking to overcome the opposition between nationalism and

socialism within the turmoil years, Arif Dirlik (2005: 111–112), the prominent historian and cultural critic, espouses the belief that Chinese communism and its relationship with the broader notions of nationalism and class struggle is a complex which is a result of adapting Marxist–Leninist principles to suit the particular conditions and needs of China during various periods of its history. The opposition was geared to deny that the radical Chinese socialism was not “real” socialism. He argues that it was a nationalism that expressed itself through the categories of socialism. In his account, nationalism and socialism were correlated during the years of the Cultural Revolution. It is critical to note that the nationalism that was shaped by socialism was a result of class struggle since 1949, which he defines as a type of ‘revolutionary nationalism’. He also points out that after the establishment of new China, instead of retreating from revolution and focusing on the development in the material sphere, the communist party ‘turned away from the revolutionary past’ and employed ‘revolutionary nationalism’ to disguise its abandonment of revolutionary socialism (Dirlik 2005: 25–27). It resonates with Mao’s conceptualisation *On Contradiction* which is central to Mao’s Marxism. ‘On Contradiction’ as Dirlik (2005: 132) deciphers it, is ‘a revolutionary hermeneutics’ and ‘an interpretative strategy’ to make continuous revolution. It justifies the theoretical and practical needs for a national revolution based on class struggle after the establishment of a new China. As Mao identifies that the primary contradiction is the internal contradiction within the people of different classes, Dirlik (2005: 363) further argues that the operation of an authentic revolution entails a new language of its own: ‘The struggle to create a new language of revolution is but a struggle to assert the hegemony of revolution over its historical inheritance.’ Therefore, cultural revolution is underpinned on forgetting, eclipsing and manipulating the “revolutionary past” by inventing a group of new revolutionary vocabulary through class struggle. It includes forgetting and relabelling stamps of national importance during the establishment of China as ‘capitalistic stances’ to serve the purpose of class struggle. Meanwhile, the identification of classes is also dependent on the strategic terminology of labelling materiality and its process of production based on a radical socialist ideology. The practice of philately, as a result, is also a practice of re-naming as discussed by Luming Zhang (2020: 48) in the 1950s to the 1960s led by the official philately narratives in employing Dirlik’s conception of revolutionary language. One cannot avoid further questioning the implication of this terminology game through rejection of the past’s terminology. That is, the practice of new terminology in creating a new system of material

culture and its relationship with people as means of negation towards historical inheritance. Philately, despite being through a short period of transformation since 1949, was a practice profoundly being labelled as a capitalist act from the past that does not reflect the culture of proletariat and peasantry classes. Therefore, philately was not permitted in Wu's years in the re-education camp. Wu's relationship with the problematic objects were subjected to a transformation in line with the practice that follows the culture of the proletariat and peasantry classes. From the case of Wu, this reconfiguration of material culture in relation to class transformation has profoundly undermined the foundation of individual's existence outside state revolutionary rhetoric. Objects and people are deprived of individual agency from the fundamental issue of identity to a sense of individual ownership. It includes stamps' ownership of their own history as symbolic nationalism of the early New China. The stamps' history and Wu's own philately history were subjected to the practice of this new terminology game on the premise of addressing a new national contradiction through class struggle. The life of intensive labour on the re-education farm in the Jiangxi Production and Construction Corps was a time of void for a stamp collector. Being distant from the material culture of his desire led to the suppression of his sense of agency as a collector. The stamp collector Wu was made to be a farm worker, a screw in the giant building of socialist construction, which was deprived of personal spiritual pursuits, appreciating and collecting a micro art form.

Philately Leads to a Career Path Oriented Towards International Exchanges and Information Gathering and Analysis

In the early 1970s, Wu returned to Nanchang after spending his youth on a farm and sought to reintegrate into city life. His years of experience in philately, including collecting and analysing stamps from overseas letters, instilled in him the awareness of the importance of communication with the outside world as means of learning and progressing in a global context. This was particularly the case during the period of the Cultural Revolution, when China's philately development stagnated while world philately had progressed further. Wu secretly picked up his philately hobby again after his return. It was a time when China was still closed-off in terms of information, the prevailing rigid ideology discouraging learning foreign languages due to perceived capitalist associations. However, Wu was determined to learn English at night while working during the day at a tractor factory, driven by an eagerness to understand the outside world:

During that time, I had to work at the factory during the day and attend evening classes to learn English. Learning a foreign language during that era carried significant political risks. Mildly, it could label you as ‘worshiping foreign cultures’ and more severely, it could accuse you of attempting to ‘restore capitalism’. Pursuing English studies caused my father to worry, and he scolded me countless times. The factory where I worked produced hand tractors, and its full name was “Jiangxi Hand Tractor Factory.” (Wu 2023b).



Figure 1.3: A group photo of the closing ceremony of the 2nd Scientific and Technological English Class at Nanchang Vocational University, taken in May 1977. Wu is on the left in the second row. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Wu’s proactive efforts to connect with the international community and his skills of information collecting and analysis, identifying the gap within a system of knowledge, honed through philately, prepared him to secure a position at the Jiangxi Scientific and Technological Information Centre. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, China had begun to shift from an ideology centred on class struggle to economic reform and opening up to the world. Working at the research institute, Wu published several papers based on analysing foreign scientific and

technological information research²⁰ since the early 1980s. He aimed to provide relevant fields with latest updates and valuable insights so that researchers in China could make better informed decisions about their research directions within their areas of expertise. Wu promoted SCI and SSCI indexes as critical tools for scholarly understanding of research papers and their citations, allowing researchers to gauge their position in the field (Wu 2023b). He positions China within the Third World as a research community in relation to the West in his publications including: *A proper understanding of the position of the Third World in the international scientific community from the perspective of bibliometrics*,²¹ in 1984. In discussing his motivation for writing the papers, Wu states:

In 1979 and the early 1980s, China was relatively backward compared to developed countries, and there was a significant gap. One should have self-awareness, regardless of the time and place, and first understand their *position* in the world. Only by understanding one's *position* and the actual situation can one set clear goals and have a clearer vision without getting confused. Based on one's current *position* and development status, policies can then be formulated. This was the original intention behind writing these articles.

In the process of repositioning China within the global context, especially in relation to the West which was largely considered to be well-developed, Wu also undergoes a personal transformation, redefining his sense of purpose within a reformed China. He transitions from being a young individual in need of political re-education from the past to becoming a talented and capable leader, guiding the advancement of science and technology in this new era.

During his tenure at the Jiangxi Science and Technology Exchange Centre, Wu assisted in the introduction of foreign experts and organised overseas visits and training for Chinese technical

²⁰ Wu, S. K. 吴绳楷 (1984). Guowai dui ligong zazhi bei yinyong qingkuang de diaocha yanjiu 国外对理工杂志被引用情况的调查研究[An Investigative Study on the Citation Situation of Foreign Scientific and Technical Journals]. *Library and Information Work*, 28(3), 15.; Wu, S. K. 吴绳楷 (1984). Guanyu Shuang yinju leifenfa ji disan shijie keyan huodong kaocha 关于双引聚类分析法及第三世界科研活动考察. [On the Dual Citation Cluster Analysis Method and an Investigation into Scientific Research Activities in the Third World] *Information Science*, (3), 11–17.

²¹ Wu, S. 吴绳楷 (1984). Understanding the Position of the Third World in the International Scientific Community from a Bibliometric Perspective (从文献计量角度正确认识第三世界在国际科学共同体中的地位. *Journal of Library Science*.

and managerial personnel. For instance, he facilitated technical exchanges between Japanese porcelain experts, scholars and Chinese experts from Jingdezhen, the renowned porcelain-making centre. More detailed discussions concerning his ceramic collecting will be presented in the section two, a case study of a blue-decorated Tang plate.

Continuing Traditional Philately

Wu meticulously studies Chinese-related stamps discovered in South Africa. He uncovers details such as design patterns, plate varieties, paper and colour variations, flaws and printing errors, among other aspects. I shall elaborate on a used Qing flying goose postage stamp (figure 1.4) and a commemorative postage stamp issued for the first anniversary of the establishment of the New China (figure 1.5) as examples.



Figure 1.4: A used unusual, blue-coloured flying Goose Postage Stamp, printed in 1898 in London. It was designed by R.A. De Villard, a clerk in the Imperial Maritime Customs Service of Qing government and approved by the government's foreign affairs office. Dimensions: 22.5mm x 25.5mm. Shengkai Wu's Private Collection. Photo Courtesy of Shengkai Wu.



Figure 1.5: Commemorative postage stamp (Issue 6, Series 5–2) for the first anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, issued by China Post, with a flying Chinese national flag. Dimensions: 32mm x 45mm. Shengkai Wu's collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Wu published his research and images of these two collectibles on the influential Chinese social media platform, Sina Blog, conveying his new discoveries in South Africa (Wu 2015; Wu 2016).²² His blog posts appear to present a rational and meticulous research-oriented tone, introducing variations found in the two stamps he encountered in South Africa to the public in

²²Wu, S.K. (2015) Xinde Yimei Qingdai Lanse 5 Yuan Panlong Jiupiao (Shaibao Jiu) 新得一枚清代蓝色 5 元蟠龙旧票(晒宝九) [Acquired a used Qing Dynasty 5 Yuan Panlong Postage Stamp (Displaying Treasure No. Nine)], *Sina*, weblog post, 31 December, viewed 14 September 2023, <https://blog.sina.cn/dpool/blog/u/3117034161#type=1>.

Wu, S.K. (2016) Ji 6 (5–2) Youpiao Faxian Piaofu Bianyi (Shaibao Shi) 纪 6 (5–2) 邮票发现票幅变异 (晒宝十) [A Commemorative stamp from series No. 6 (5–2) with Variations in Perforation (Displaying Treasure No. Ten)], *Sina*, weblog post, 28 April, viewed 14 September 2023, https://blog.sina.cn/dpool/blog/s/blog_b9ca2ab10102wd25.html?type=1.

China. In his articles, Wu expresses appreciation for the visual effects of these two stamps, especially highlighting the use of Chinese semiotics intricately connected to Chinese culture and historical trajectory. For example, the depiction of flying geese amidst auspicious clouds is described by Wu (2015) in a highly poetic visual narrative as “geese soaring among auspicious clouds,” rooted in the simple yet rhythmic lines and auspicious symbolism²³ of Chinese traditional visual culture. The symbolic significance of the flying goose and auspicious clouds from Chinese folklore is creatively applied to modern postal communication in China.

Wu (2016) believes that the phrase ‘grand beauty in simplicity’ is most fitting to describe the early stamps issued by New China. The stamp commemorating the first anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (figure 1.5), features a brightly waving five-starred red flag. Wu articulates that the designer Sun Chuanzhe symbolically conveys the meaning of the Chinese national flag in a concise manner. As a Chinese immigrant collector, Wu (2016) feels that the stamp design effectively communicates the heroic spirit of ‘New China fearlessly facing challenges and bravely moving forward’ during that time. China is constantly “flagged” and reproduced through these symbolic objects in the context of Billig’s (1995) banal nationalism.

Wu’s decision to establish a presence on Weibo, which gained prominence around 2008, underlines the concept of diaspora in relation to the recent advancements in digital communication platforms. His articles—explicitly directed at online Chinese readers—indicate that, in addition to the “flagged” objects of Chinese nationalism, this form of social media has evolved into a significant daily sphere of banal nationalism wherein “digital diasporas” emerge. Such platforms facilitate ‘new possible cartographies to map the self’ amid the increasingly complex dynamics of the Global South and migration (Ponzanesi 2020: 977).

Notably, Wu actively engages with Chinese social media and news channels, remaining well-informed about the latest developments in China and around the globe. However, he does not align with the idealised vision of digital diasporic spaces, which typically feature close-knit

²³ According to historian Lane J. Harris (2008, p.89), the choice of the flying goose as a symbol for the Post Office was an attempt to draw a connection to traditional practices, symbolising the postal service through an image that had historical ties to letter transmission. Accounts of folklore from ancient times suggest that geese were once employed to transport correspondence between different provinces, with letters affixed to their feet. Harris argues that this association between geese and letter delivery was first adopted as the symbol of the modern Post Office in 1897 through the issuance of the flying goose postage stamps by the Qing government (Harris, L.J., 2008. *Standard messages: Institutional identity and symbolism in Chinese postal flags, 1896–1949*. *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology*, 15, pp.81–105).

digital communities characterised by strong bonds and active interactions (Ponzanesi 2020: 981). His reluctance to engage directly or belong to any such groups mirrors his low-key profile in the offline world. Nevertheless, through his Chinese articles on Weibo, he constructs a space of diasporic Chinese nationalism that outweighs his experience of homemaking in South Africa.

His digital traces reveal the intricate complexities and nuances of digital diaspora and diasporic life, wherein diverse forms of connectivity and self-mapping coexist and ‘shape different scales, moments, and instances of belonging across boundaries and time’ (Ponzanesi 2020: 980). This situation also raises critical questions regarding the blind spots or obscured narratives within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa, particularly as new immigrant collectors are consistently drawn towards China—an inclination that is both conscious and facilitated by the habitual use of Chinese-language digital infrastructure. While this connectivity may appear mundane, it represents a Sinocentric mode of relating that contributes to an unsettled existence in South Africa.

In addition, based on traditional philatelic research, he uses more text to describe the variations in these two stamps in terms of colour and size, which have not been mentioned in philatelic studies until now. To do this, he spends a considerable amount of time crossing borders between China and South Africa to verify. Taking the flying goose stamp as an example, the versions commonly seen are in green and pink, with no record of the blue version he encountered. Wu consulted Spink China Hong Kong Company and Beijing China Stamp Museum by phone and received inconsistent answers. Mr. Guan, a staff member at the Beijing China Stamp Museum, believed that the blue colour was formed through chemical treatment and had no collection or research value. Based on his careful observation and research of the physical object in South Africa, Wu disagreed with this judgment. He brought the stamp to Beijing to consult Mr. Guan in person and after seeing the actual item, Mr. Guan ‘examined it repeatedly, remaining silent for a long time’ (Wu 2015). Even after discussing it with colleagues, Mr. Guan still could not make a definite conclusion and suggested that Wu leave the stamp for ink and paper analysis and identification.

Wu’s narrative reflects his enthusiasm and long-term dedication to the study of these old stamps in traditional philatelic research. His philatelic experience in South Africa not only expands valuable overseas perspectives on the understanding of old Chinese stamps but also serves as an important means for him, as an immigrant in South Africa, to maintain connections

with China. Through his experiences in South Africa that transcend borders, on the one hand, he prevents himself from unilaterally dismissing the aesthetic value of Chinese designs in stamps just because the designers and printing companies are foreigners. On the other hand, he does not limit himself to the authoritative influence of existing Chinese experts, and the communication and verification process with Chinese experts also demonstrates his uniqueness and freedom in constructing his own philatelic knowledge based on physical objects. Wu's philatelic experience in South Africa thus fully demonstrates the gradual restoration of his agency as an individual.

Moving into South Africa: Engaging in Philately in South Africa as a Chinese Immigrant

Towards the late 1980s, after working for a Chinese state-owned enterprise in Botswana, Wu immigrated to South Africa in 1990. As a newcomer to the continent, stamp collecting became one of the crucial ways for him to integrate into South African society while maintaining connections with China. Every month, he attends various stamp fairs across the Gauteng Province, organised by members of the Philatelic Federation of South Africa.²⁴ Through routinised practices, China becomes unconsciously reimagined in relation to a localised South African context in a quiet and mundane manner, which has drawn little scholarly attention in the field of China-Africa relations.

Over the past 23 years, Wu has consistently participated in stamp-collecting events and stamp auctions within the South African philatelic communities. His presence spans from the market in a church in Benoni and Edenvale in the south of Johannesburg to the Pretoria Stamp Fair held in the Greek Orthodox Church Hall in Brooklyn and to the relatively new Kyalami Stamp Fair at the Kyalami Country Club. Years of engagement in the South African philatelic scene have not only allowed Wu to further develop his personal philatelic expertise but have also presented new, diverse and complex dimensions to his individual agency within a new transnational context.

On the one hand, Wu's experiences in various facets of the South African stamp-collecting community reflect the diverse faces of philately in South Africa, contributing to the

²⁴ The Philatelic Federation of South Africa was founded in 1975, with clubs and societies for stamp collectors and philatelists across the globe. It actively promotes philately in South Africa through various activities, such as fairs, exhibitions and publications. The first issue of the *Journal of the South African Philatelists* was published on 1 February 1923. The emblem of the PFSA (Postal and Philatelic Society of Africa) features a representative postal stone that holds historical significance related to the early days of Cape history. During this time, letters intended for delivery by passing ships or addressed to them were concealed beneath these stones. The oldest recorded engraving on such a stone dates back to 1618.

configuration of his positionality as a Chinese immigrant in a new context. On the other hand, through a specific analysis of the stamps collected in South Africa and Wu's discourse, his individual agency is demonstrated in pioneering new perspectives for the development of Chinese philatelic studies in South Africa. In particular, this research angle explores how, as an immigrant, Wu's observations and interactions within the South African stamp-collecting community contribute to the study of Chinese stamps present in South Africa. The research extends beyond traditional philatelic studies, evolving into an investigation of gaps in South African and Chinese philatelic studies based on the unique geographical context of South Africa.

Transforming from a Post-Mao Collector Shengkai Wu to David Wu with a Local Face

I am introverted by nature and do not enjoy socialising with people. Despite having had many years of interactions with antique dealers and philatelists, I haven't developed deep relationships with them. They usually approach me with questions or seek information when they encounter something they don't understand, and I am happy to provide them with some information, which they appreciate. – (Wu 2023c)

Influenced by the impact of the Cultural Revolution on philately and his quiet and cautious personality, in his early years in South Africa, Wu quietly immersed himself in the joy of the freedom of philately. He viewed stamp collecting as a way to recover his agency, purely as an individual hobby.

He began re-collecting the old special commemoration stamps lost during the Cultural Revolution and Qing Dynasty Chinese stamps. The presence of these old special commemoration stamps and even earlier Qing Dynasty stamps in South Africa is partly due to the country's long-standing and well-established philatelic history, which has maintained close exchanges with international philatelic associations and markets. Chinese philately has always been a niche category among world stamp collectors in South Africa. According to observations by senior Chinese stamp collectors in South Africa, including André du Plessis, the Chief Operating Officer (2023),²⁵ the turning point for collecting Chinese stamps in South Africa occurred during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. At that time, Chinese collectors had to sell a large number of Chinese stamps at low prices to foreign markets. Some of these old Qing

²⁵ Interview with André du Plessis by Binjun Hu. 22 August 2023, Johannesburg.

Dynasty stamps and commemoration stamps of the new China appeared in the South African stamp market, inspiring local collectors and philatelists to collect and study them.

In the 1980s, Chinese collectors began to reclaim these precious Chinese stamps as part of the ‘Chinese cultural heritage’ (Du Plessis 2023). The collection and trading of Chinese stamps reached its first peak in South Africa in the 1990s. Due to active purchases by Chinese collectors, from mainland China, this spurred new developments in overseas Chinese philatelic studies. Wu, entering South Africa in 1990, became one of the Chinese philatelists who, in the eyes of South African collectors, reinterpreted Chinese cultural heritage and made individual efforts to recover the Chinese cultural heritage lost abroad due to the Cultural Revolution. His collecting and research activities primarily involve continuing traditional philately and, breaking away from traditional philately, further developing contemporary Chinese philatelic studies in South Africa.

Despite his extensive engagements with local South African markets and dealers, his philatelic collections remained consistently centred on Chinese stamps. This focus can be partly attributed to a deepening sense of nationalism, intertwined with nostalgic reaches in the Chinese diaspora (Boym 2008), which led him to regard these philatelic materials as vital components of Chinese cultural heritage and a means of reconnecting with his past collections. Moreover, his profound knowledge of Chinese philately became intricately tied to his identity in South Africa as an expert in the field. This connection allowed him to relive his experiences in China, thereby narrowing his philatelic pursuits to a distinctly Chinese focus, even though the agency he once lost as a collector during the Cultural Revolution had since been reclaimed.

Wu’s Contemporary Philatelic Research Between China and South Africa

The shift from traditional philatelic research to contemporary approaches has been a gradual process that gained momentum over the past few decades. It encourages the expansion of the scope of inquiry beyond the traditional aspect of philately through interdisciplinary approaches, integrating methods and theories from different fields such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and art history (Dean 1990; Clark 1995; Behrent 2019; Brunn 2022), collecting and examining philately materials in relation to China as cultural artefacts of social, political and historical significance contributes to understanding identity formation.

The contemporary philatelic community in South Africa began researching Chinese philately relatively late (Du Plessis 2023; Wu 2023c), with the first substantial attention given to it arising from academic and philatelic interest in the history of Chinese indentured labourers in South

Africa. Collector Andre du Plessis stands out as a notable representative, gradually becoming aware of the group of Chinese indentured labourers who made a significant contribution to the development of Johannesburg's gold mines, through his research on early Johannesburg postal history. He shared his collection of postcards and letters (*qiaopi*) from Chinese indentured labourers in the South African Philatelic Association journal and participated in international exhibitions (Du Plessis 2021 & 2022).²⁶ Wu, on the other hand, was the first collector in South Africa to systematically focus on and research Chinese philatelic materials and stamps that emerged in the country. The breakthrough development of his collecting experience in South Africa lies in his interaction with both the South African and Chinese philatelic communities. He goes beyond traditional philatelic research by collecting and examining philatelic materials related to China as cultural artefacts with social, political and historical significance, contributing to identity formation. His focus on the Chinese diasporic philately materials began as early as the start of his immigrant life in South Africa. He recalls studying the book *Colour, Confusion and Concessions: The history of the Chinese in South Africa* by historian Melanie Yap at CNA in the early days when he was financially limited as a new immigrant. Images of the Chinese indentured labourers arriving in Durban from the coal-powered ships in the early 1900s are still vivid in his mind. Through the book and philately circle, he also became interested in collecting the postcards of the Chinese indentured labourers. He is aware of the few collectors who have sufficient collections of these postcards and has been actively expressing his intention of buying them since they appeared in the local philately circle. Despite unsuccessful endeavours to collect these postcards, over the years Wu have collected several unique unconventional philately artefacts that connect South Africa and China with multiple border-crossing communities of diverse cultural and geographical origins across times (figure 1.6, 1.7, 1.8 and 1.9).

²⁶ In the 2018 National Stamp Exhibition, held in Centurion, Gauteng, from the 17 to 20 October, Andre du Plessis' exhibition titled: *Johannesburg First 50 Years – From Shanty Town to World City*, won a Large Gold Prize. Following his initial discovery of the Chinese labourers as a small part of this exhibition, he further exhibited exclusively on the postcards of Chinese labourers twice including precious family letters posted to the mineworkers from China, details can be found in the bibliography (Du Plessis 2021 and 2022). Besides exhibitions, he also published on his research of his *Qiaopi* collection of the indentured labourers in South Africa (Du Plessis, A 2021, "Correspondence of the Chinese Indentured Mineworkers on the Rand –1904 to 1910, *Journal of The South African Philatelist*, volume 97:6, p.192–195).

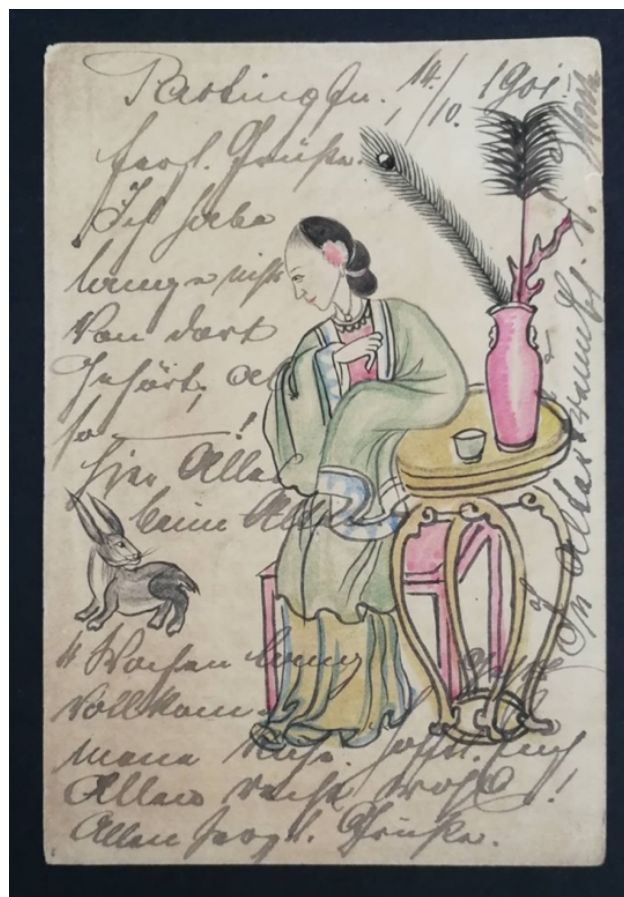


Figure 1.6 and 1.7: A Qing imperial postcard front and back. During the invasion of China by the Eight-Nation Alliance, Qing imperial postal postcards were occasionally used by foreign military forces. This postcard was appropriated by a German military officer in China and stamped with the lead seal “Kaiserlich Militar”, turning it into a military stamp. On the back, Army Lieutenant Kraz wrote a letter to his girlfriend in Germany on April 10, 1901, from Baodingfu (Hebei). 64 x 44 centimetres. The postcard features a watercolour painting of a Chinese lady painted by an unknown Chinese artist (Mu and Kathan 2007: 128–130). Dimensions: 123×77mm. Shengkai Wu’s collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.



Figure 1.8: A late Qing passport in the style of blue lithographic printing with written calligraphy of specific dates and name of a foreign holder, Lieutenant Cecil Walker Case Morris. It was jointly issued by the British Consulate General in Canton and Chinese official, with an English and Chinese converged red official stamp impression, on the 20 June 1906, valid till 19 June 1907. Morris participated in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion and the Eight-Nation Alliance campaign. Dimensions: 64 cm x 44cm. Shengkai Wu's collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Wu conducted detailed research on each of these artefacts in South Africa. He co-authored an article in *Collection* (收藏) – an influential Chinese journal in the field of antiques and collecting – with Branda Kathana, a German immigrant antique dealer in Johannesburg, due to her assistance in translation and archival studies on the German Chinese postcard (Mu and Kathana

2007). He also wrote an article on the Sinablog to reveal his discovery of the Qing passport and his interaction with the antique dealer James about the story of Lieutenant Cecil Walker Case Morris (Wu 2007).

Among these objects, it is also worthwhile to emphasise Wu's long-term engagement with the Shayuchung stamp cover (figure 1.9), as it is closely connecting him to the history of Chinese immigration in South Africa and his identity construction of South Africa as the 'second hometown' (Hu 2023: 58).

The intertwined life histories of Shengkai Wu and the stamp cover have been published in a book chapter (Hu 2023), through a combined methodology that incorporates the concept of object biography and individual biography, within the broader context of the China–Africa discourse, the chapter argues that Wu and the stamp cover engaged in a reciprocal process of mutual knowledge creation as part of their identity negotiations.



Figure 1.9: The only Shayuchung²⁷ stamp cover known to exist on the African continent. It was mailed from Huiyang, Guangdong Province, China to Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 1940. It was postmarked by Shayuchung postal office and placed on a ship to Hong Kong. Having stayed in Hong Kong for three days, it left for South Africa by air. Dimensions: 64 cm x 44cm. Shengkai Wu's collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

After a decade of archival studies and site visits in South Africa, America and China, Wu eventually found the only Shayuchung stamp cover known to exist on the African continent through partnership with a local philatelist. His years of searching without knowing whether one existed in Africa leads us to question his strong drive. Remarkably, Wu went beyond the

²⁷ Shayuchung is a village in Shenzhen, China. During the second Sino–Japanese war (1937–1945), a secret transit post office was established in the village from 18 October 1939 to 7 February 1941, in defiance of the Japanese navy's strategic blockade of China's coastline. Approximately five million letters were secretly posted from Shayuchung post office to the rest of the world (Hu 2023).

traditional philatelic study by treating the stamp cover as an important Chinese diasporic artefact in South Africa, connecting South Africa to the early migration history of Guangdong coastal residents to South Africa. After obtaining this object, in his shop in Edenvale his daily routine was to ask older South African Chinese customers about the letter's recipient, 黄仕清 (Shiqing Huang/W. Leeson). Later, he managed to establish contact with W. Leeson's granddaughter through a Chinese church, leading to an exhilarating moment when she recognised her father, Shanqiang Huang's handwriting on the stamped cover. Shanqiang Huang was born in 1919 in Huiyang, Guangdong. At the age of 19, he made his journey to South Africa to join his adoptive father, W. Leeson. In a conversation with Mrs. Huang, Shanqiang Huang's wife, she revealed a poignant family story: in either July or August of 1938, Huang had undertaken a voyage back to Huiyang to bring their son to South Africa. However, as 1940 unfolded, the tightening grip of the Imperial Japanese Army in the Pacific obstructed their return to South Africa due to the unavailability of sea access. In desperation, Huang wrote to his adoptive father to inform him of the challenging situation in China. The address on the cover corresponded to a small grocery store opened by W. Leeson in Port Elizabeth. Wu related the whole journey of investigating the history of W Leeson's family and the stamp cover in *Collection* (收藏) in 2005 (Mu 2005).²⁸

In my interview, Wu consistently reiterates the profound historical importance of the stamp cover within the context of the Sino–Japanese War. He highlights the unique aspect of this artefact as the sole Shayuchung stamp cover known to exist on the African continent. The Shayuchung Club, a philately organisation with over 400 members worldwide, situated in China, acknowledged Wu's discovery and its significant contribution to expanding the historical footprint of Shayuchung's postal history into Africa.²⁹ Wu's passion for uncovering the stamp

²⁸ Mu Jie is Sheng Kai Wu's pen name, which he used in all the articles he published in the Chinese journal *Collection* (收藏). Reference: Mu, J.木皆. (2005). *Guangdong Shayuchung Zhuankou Nanfei qianzi fengyan* 广东沙鱼涌转口南非欠资封研[‘study on “Short-paid Letter” Mailed from Shayuchung of Guangdong to South Africa]. *Collection* 收藏 [*Shoucang*]]152 (8):94–96.

²⁹ Interview with Yi Jian, the founder and the chair of Shayuchung club June 2021. According to Yi Jian, the establishment of the club was for two reasons: 1. The passion of overseas Chinese for the study of Shayuchung's postal history; 2. Shayuchung represents the history of resistance during the Sino–Japanese War, embodying the patriotic sentiments of Chinese at home and abroad.

cover's lineage reflects his desire to bring recognition and honour to his 'second hometown (第二故乡),' South Africa, as a Chinese immigrant (Wu 2021b).

Interestingly, not long after Wu's article was published, two strangers from China, 'dusty and weary' just landed from a flight, suddenly appeared in his shop. They were there on behalf of their employer, inquiring if Wu would be willing to sell his stamp cover (Wu 2022a). As a highly discreet senior collector in South Africa, Wu was profoundly surprised by their swift approach. He could not fathom how they managed to locate him, and his shop tucked away in a corner of Africa. He politely declined their request, emphasising in the interview that some Chinese collectors have a 'keen sense of smell'. In particular, some newly affluent collectors have professional teams and funds to search for unique collections globally. However, what he found most difficult to part with were the years of dedication and emotions he had invested in a particular object during his time in South Africa. These, he emphasised, were the aspects he could not relinquish (Wu 2022). The stamp cover becomes an object of diasporic agency infused with strongly localised sentimental attachment to South Africa, allows him to navigate his identity in a transnational context. It not only connects him to the local Chinese communities but also allows him to make sense of his philatelic activities in South Africa. His encounter with the delegates of a strange collector from China reflects that South Africa is closely connected to China in the philately market in an implicit way that is unknown to the general public.

Collecting in Local Faces

Despite mostly keeping a low profile and immersing himself in his personal world of collecting hobbies, Wu gradually garnered attention and recognition among his peers in the South African philatelic community due to his successful endeavours with Chinese stamps. He developed long-term, simple yet robust relationships with several renowned South African stamp dealers, including the recently deceased world-famous South African stamp dealer, David G. Crocker. Before his passing, Crocker used to travel monthly from Montagu in the Western Cape to Johannesburg to participate in South African stamp fairs (Wu 2023b). As selling Chinese stamps constituted a significant part of his business, Crocker often invited Wu to assist in appraising and communicating with Chinese buyers who had limited knowledge of stamps and faced language barriers (Wu 2023b). Reflecting on his experience of being integrated into the circle of Chinese buyers within the South African philatelic community, Wu said, 'The Chinese spread the word.

These stamp dealers in the market will call my name; for business, they suggest Chinese buyers ask for Mr. Wu' (Wu 2023b). This reputation led to Wu becoming a recognised intermediary between local Chinese philatelic traders and Chinese stamp buyers in South Africa. On the one hand, Wu felt gratified that he could facilitate communication between South African stamp dealers and Chinese buyers. On the other, his personal and leisurely collecting activities faced profound challenges. He mentioned how Chinese buyers would compete with him when they saw him bidding, knowing that he is an expert on philately. They would compete with him for any item he showed interest in (Wu 2023b).

This growing reputation also pushed Wu towards relying more on developing partnerships with local traders in his collecting practices, as he does not have enough funds comparable to the emerging Chinese businessmen in the South African antiquities market. During auctions, if telephone bidding was possible, Wu would bid over the phone himself. If it was a live auction, he would let his local partner, Oscar Marino, bid on his behalf. Consequently, Shengkai Wu transformed into Oscar Marino at various auctions. Eventually, Oscar's face also became familiar to a few Chinese collectors. This situation created a closer connection between Wu and the local community but also made him vulnerable to his local partners. After years of close collaboration in philately and collecting Chinese antiques, Wu's closest partner, Oscar Marino, succumbed to the temptation of financial gain and privately sold a pair of polychrome-glazed Buddhist lions from the Late Ming Dynasty (16th/17th century), which they had jointly purchased at the South African National Antiques Fair in 2011. Wu found out about the sale when a friend informed him that these lions were successfully sold at the Fine Chinese Art auction section of Bonhams' official website in 2018. The most recent appearance of these lions in the public eye was at the centenary exhibition of the Oriental Ceramics Society (OCS) at the Brunei Gallery in London University (figure 1.10).



Figure 1.10: The pair of lions at the entrance of the centenary exhibition of the Oriental Ceramic Society (OCS) at the Brunei Gallery in London University. Photo taken by Yixin Lin.

They now belong to a private collector in the UK. It is worth noting that in the auction catalogue of Bonhams in 2018 and the exhibition display records at SOAS in 2021, the public provenance of these lions is only associated with celebrities and has no connection with remote South Africa, Shengkai Wu, or other collectors in South Africa:

Provenance: Collection of the grandson of the Daoguang Emperor, by repute C.T. Loo & Co. (labels) Cornelius Ruxton Love Jr. (1904–1971) and Audrey B. Love (1903–2003), New York, Christie's New York, The C. Ruxton and Audrey B. Love Collection, 20 October 2004, lot 317.³⁰

The appearance of the lions represents a rare occurrence of significant Chinese art pieces in South Africa, a region traditionally considered a desert for collecting Chinese art when compared

³⁰ Details can be obtained from: Bonhams 2018, 'Lot 70: a very rare pair of monumental Fahua Buddhist Lions on Stands...', Fine Chinese Art 17 May, viewed 20 September 2023, <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/24525/lot/70/a-very-rare-pair-of-monumental-fahua-buddhist-lions-on-stands-late-ming-dynasty-16th-17th-century-4/>.

to Western countries and China itself (Esmyol 1999). Their brief stay in South Africa and their brief encounter with Wu were like dust gently brushed off the lions, leaving no trace in mainstream art history. One might question how many shadows of ordinary collectors are hidden or erased behind all the celebrity artefacts.

After outlining Wu's experiences in the South African philatelic community and his partnership with local faces in collecting, this section further uses Wu's collection in detail to explore how postcolonial-era Chinese collectors in South Africa provide new insights and reflections on the circulation of ordinary individuals and ordinary artefacts between the Chinese diaspora and local communities in South Africa.

Collecting Chinese Semi-Colonial Philately Materials in South Africa: a Complex Space of Border Aesthetics

This subsection explores the intricate world of semi-colonial Chinese objects that emerged in South Africa and were collected by Wu, with a specific focus on 'Shanghai Large Dragon' stamps issued by the British-dominated Shanghai Municipal Council's local post office between 1865 and 1867. These objects carry a controversial history, emblematic of the conflicts surrounding Chinese sovereignty and foreign imperial expansion.

Due to the historical legacy of British colonisation and the significant influx of European immigrants (Erickson 1976), the development of philately in South Africa has remained closely connected with the North. The Philatelic Federation of South Africa (PFSA) not only participates in international exhibitions but also hosts world-class philatelic competitions. Because of this historical context, early philatelic items from China's semi-colonial and colonial periods have continuously surfaced in the South African philatelic community as a result of long-term global exchanges between people and objects.

Wu has been actively collecting early stamps related to China and conducting in-depth research. As mentioned earlier, in 2003 and 2007, using the pen name 'Mu Jie', Wu published two articles related to semi-colonial period philatelic items in authoritative Chinese collecting journals titled respectively: 'Another Appearance of "Shanghai Big Dragon" and its One Cent (Silver) Stamp' and 'Germany's Battlefield Stamp in China and the First Postcard of Qing Dynasty Stamped with "KM."' Why did Wu collect these two philatelic items and publish them in Chinese journals? Through textual and visual analysis of Wu's writings on these philatelic items, this subsection seeks to explore how Shengkai Wu, within the context of the African

Chinese diaspora in the postcolonial period, interprets the migration experiences between China and South Africa and how this interpretation enlightens knowledge production within the Global South framework. Can the collecting of philatelic items from China's semi-colonial period offer a way of decolonisation through mobility between China and Africa? These philatelic items serve as symbolic frontiers that represent moments of conflict, exploration, expansion, or negotiation in a nation's history.

“Chineseness” and “Britishness” in a “Shanghai Large Dragon” Stamp

The early history of postage stamps in China carries its own unique national context. After China joining the World Trade Organization, the internationalisation of philately in China and its integration with global philatelic practices have an inevitable course of action. Therefore, we must consider the uniqueness of our own nation while also considering the inevitable reality of aligning with the international world. Whether “Shanghai Large Dragons” should be surnamed (xing 姓) as “Chinese” or “foreign”, along with their historical merits and shortcomings, constitutes a sensitive issue that marks the inception of the postal history in China. This issue will ultimately be laid bare before the Chinese philatelists (Mu 2003: 71).

This excerpt from Wu's article, serves as a critical introduction to the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps (figure 1.11) issued by the British-dominated Shanghai Municipal Council's local post office between 1865 and 1867.



Figure 1.11: A “Shanghai Large Dragon”, One cent (Sliver) Stamp collected by Wu in South Africa. The Chinese Text reads ‘上海工部书信馆一分银’, (Shanghai Local Post Office, 1 Candarins). Dimensions: 2.8 x 2.5cm. Shengkai Wu’s collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Shortly after the British prevailed in the Opium War (1839–1842) and the establishment of the Unequal Treaties,³¹ a compact yet diverse British and foreign community started forming in the treaty ports strewn across China’s coastline (Harris 2018). Among these ports, Shanghai emerged as a standout nucleus of the British-dominated informal empire in Asia. This development took place against the backdrop of a semi-colonial historical context, marked by the

³¹ Unequal treaties were agreements imposed on China by foreign powers during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Key aspects of the treaties include extraterritoriality, trade concessions, unequal tariffs and land circumscriptions including Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in the Treaty of Nanking (1842) (Zhuo 2021). However, there is no agreement about ‘the actual numbers of treaties signed between China and foreign countries’ that counted as “unequal” (Wang 2008: 2). These Unequal treaties, known as *guochi*, is constructed as ‘the Chinese collective memory of the nation’s humiliating experience’ (Wang 2008: 2). John K. Fairbank, Eckstein, and Yang, (1960) refers to the one hundred years from 1842 to 1943 as the “treaty century”.

ongoing turmoil faced by the late imperial Chinese government due to internal uprisings and external conflicts. It was within this complex environment that both the Shanghai Local Post Office and the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamp came into existence led by a small transnational foreign community residing in Shanghai. The historiography of this stamp is marked by considerable controversy, due to its inherent entanglement of conflicts involving Chinese sovereignty and foreign imperialist expansion. The tendency to approach the study of the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps from a nation-state perspective as an infringement on Chinese sovereignty has persisted since the time of Sir Robert Hart’s establishment of the Qing Imperial Post Office.³² This perspective is reflected in scholarly research focusing on modern China’s state formation and postal communications (Cheng 1970; Harris 2012).

Collecting and study of the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps has also been intertwined with the development of Chinese nationalism in different periods and geographical locations, while being influenced by the historical fact that the stamps, as well as philately as a foreign novelty and practice, entered China. As a result, the initial significant philatelic publications concerning the “Shanghai Large Dragons” were authored by W.B. Thornhill in 1895 and John N. Luff in 1897. Since the Republican era, some Chinese nationalist philatelists have labelled the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps as symbols of national humiliation, leading to their exclusion from the categorisation of Chinese stamps, or they have been collected and studied by a minority of pioneering philatelists as evidence that should remember national shame (Liu 1993). During the Cultural Revolution, a large number of Chinese stamps were lost or destroyed but collecting and study of the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps continued to develop steadily outside China. Taiwanese philatelist Lu Jiafu and American philatelist Chow Wei-Liang, due to their greater opportunities to access these stamps and the practical need for collecting, have focused more on studying the different printings of these stamps.³³

³² Sir Robert Hart regarded the self-proclaimed local post offices by foreigners in China as an encroachment upon China's sovereignty and a breach of the appropriate and widely acknowledged State monopoly. Inspector General’s Circulars, Circular No. 767, Inspector General Robert Hart, Postal No. 28, 13 February 1897 in SHAC137.2023–1.

³³ Chow, Wei-Liang, and Kullman, W.L. (1996). Shanghai large dragons: the first issue of the Shanghai local post. Pressroom; Lu, J. F. (1994). Zhongguo jingnei zui zao de youzheng: Shanghai gongbuju shuxinguan (中国境内最早的邮政:上海工部书信管) [The earliest postal service within China’s borders: The Shanghai Municipal Council’s Local Post Office], *You shi yanjiu* [Research on postal history] 7 (September 1994): 3–29.

In comparison to philatelic research conducted overseas, interest in the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps remained dominated by a “impact-response” national humiliation perspective in China until the 1990s and was not given much attention, while the interest in these stamps within the South African philatelic community also began to emerge in the 1990s. After residing in South Africa for approximately seven years, Wu obtained a “Shanghai Large Dragon” in about 1997 from an old philatelic friend named John in Edendale, an eastern suburb of Johannesburg.

Notably, in the introductory text, Wu employed anthropomorphism by metaphorically assigning surnames to the stamps. He effectively conveyed that the stamps’ contested identity in terms of their classification and lineage remained a central issue in the Chinese philatelic community. Regarding whether the stamps should be categorised as having a Chinese or British identity, Wu, in conjunction with an analysis of the international philatelic landscape in 2003 when the article was published, suggested that Chinese philatelists should approach the sensitive matter of stamp identity with openness and inclusivity.

By using the conceptual framework of border aesthetics (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017; Schimanski and Nyman 2021), this research aims to elucidate Wu’s position and uncover the intricate interplay of Chinese and British elements within the stamp’s design and printing process. This interplay is woven into the micro-narratives of both the stamp and the immigrant collector. By highlighting the often overlooked Chinese agency in the stamp’s creation, this research illustrates how collectors can contribute to the liberating role of aesthetics through their collection. In this context, collecting becomes a means of redistributing the visible and sensory. Through the construction of an entangled Chinese–British identity for the stamp, Wu’s case underscores the contingent affect inherent in objects from borderland contexts. These objects exemplify an evolving process in which specific modes of identity presentation are privileged in various national or transnational contexts.

Starting From the Name: the “Shanghai Large Dragons”

The postage stamp, “Shanghai Large Dragon” has yet to acquire a standardised nomenclature. In his exposition of this particular category of postage stamps, Wu employs quotation marks to underline their diverse and informally configured nature. He references two designations commonly employed by collectors within China: “Shanghai Large Dragons”(上海大龙) and “Gongbu Large Dragons”(工部大龙). The appellation “Gongbu” (工部) serves as an abbreviated

reference to the stamp's issuing entity, the Shanghai Local Post Office (上海工部书信馆). This nomenclatural diversity mirrors the stamps' foreign provenance and their informal characteristics, as the Shanghai Local Post Office operated independently from the British colonial administration and the Qing court. Wu posits that these stamps, as well as the Shanghai Local Post Office, were conceived and administered by 'foreigners in the leased territories' with the primary purpose of facilitating communication among their expatriate counterparts (Wu 2023c). He extends this narrative by contextualising the emergence of both the institution and the "Shanghai Large Dragons" as responses to the immediate exigencies of the diminutive transnational community situated in the minor urban settlements adjacent to the treaty port. Importantly, as Wu contends, the perception of the Shanghai Local Post Office as a "local" institution stemmed solely from its management by a foreign local authority, the Shanghai Local Municipal Council – an entity existing informally beyond the purview of the Qing court.

Acknowledging the prevailing foreign influence on the stamps' identity and the contentious implications of their informal territorial status, Wu categorises the "Shanghai Large Dragons" within the classification of Chinese Treaty Port Stamps (Mu 2003:70). Despite the distinctive foreign elements in their composition, Wu avers that these stamps occupy a momentous position in China's nascent postal history, particularly due to their role in inaugurating the trajectory of modern postal practices within China:

It stands as China's earliest postage stamp, and furthermore, it was the first to venture into the realm of postal communication. Its issuance predates the Large Dragons, introduced during the Qing Customs Post trial in 1878, by a remarkable 13 years (Mu 2003: 70).

Notably, in Wu's text, he compares the "Shanghai Large Dragon" to China's first stamp in the mainstream narrative, which was issued by the Qing imperial court. The "Shanghai Large Dragon" had already been facilitating modern postal communication before the Qing government issued its first stamp. Wu proposes in his article that when analysing the role of the "Shanghai Large Dragon" stamps in postal communication, one must consider the specific national conditions of China at that time. His viewpoint aligns with that of Chow Wei Liang, an expert in the international study of these stamps.

It cannot be denied that the foreign identity of the stamp is crucial, given that the issuing institution, the Shanghai Local Post Office, primarily served the needs of foreigners in China. However, in the China of that time, other post offices coexisted, particularly the Chinese Customs Post, which shared similarities with it. Chow (1996) points out that the Shanghai Local Post had a considerable degree of usage by Chinese individuals linked to foreign business enterprises. On the other hand, the Chinese Customs Post was primarily utilised by foreigners and was established from the outset to exclusively manage their mail. It is worth highlighting that the release of the “Shanghai Large Dragons” in 1865 by the Shanghai Local Post was driven, at least in part, by the aim to stimulate the Chinese public’s utilisation of its services (Chow 1996).

Chow’s reflection works in tandem with Wu’s call for investigating the stamps within the historical context of China. Particularly, when looking at the issue from the perspective of the Chinese philatelic community, one must not only recognise the prominent foreign elements in the “Shanghai Large Dragons” stamps but also analyse the overlooked hidden Chinese factors and different layers of Chinese agency, to characterise the identity of the stamps. Considering the informal status of the “Shanghai Large Dragons” during their issuance period, Wu points out that there are very few verifiable historical records, emphasising the need for careful historical research and analysis to discern the stamps’ Chinese characteristics.

Extraterritoriality and Its Ambivalences

Wu, starting from a traditional philatelic format analysis, explores the fusion of Chinese and Western elements in the construction of the “Shanghai Large Dragon”. In his article, he conducts a detailed analysis of the stamp’s design:

The main image and text of the “Shanghai Large Dragon” are arranged in the centre and around the “井” character. This simple layout is clearly influenced by the world’s first set of stamps in 1840 – the British Penny Black – and especially the first set of stamps issued in Hong Kong, in 1862 (Mu Jie 2003: 7).

From the text, one can see Wu draws an intertextual analysis, in comparing the design of the “Shanghai Large Dragon” with two prominent stamps issued by the British government, the world’s first stamp, the Penny Black (figure 1.12) in 1840, and colonial Hong Kong’s first stamp (figure 1.13) in 1862, respectively.

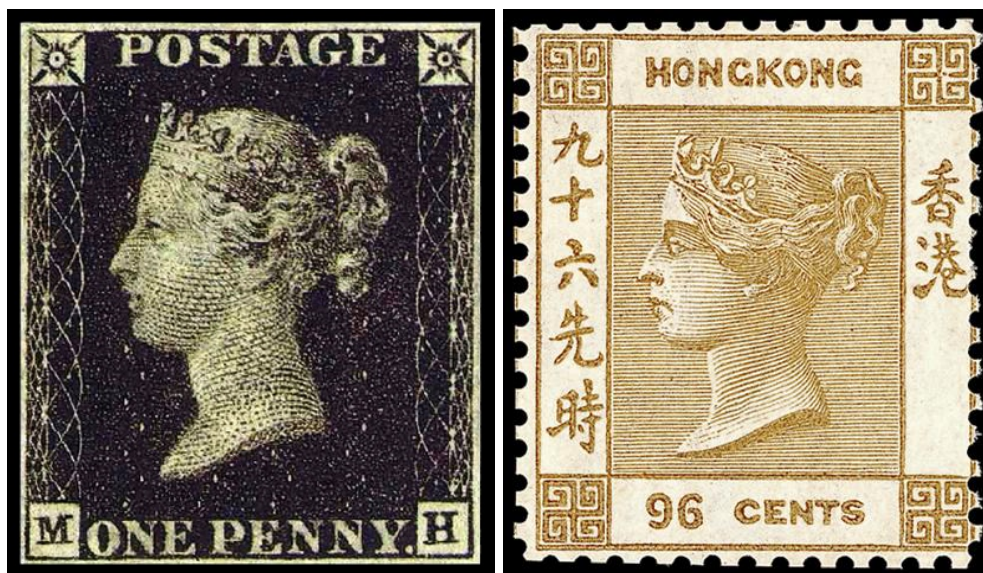


Figure 1.12: The Penny Black, the world's first adhesive postage stamp, issued in the United Kingdom in 1840. The stamp features a profile of Queen Victoria based on an engraving by Charles Heath and his son Frederick, based on a sketch provided by English artist Henry Corbould. It remains a popular British cultural icon (Hill 1940). Dimensions: 19 x 22 mm.³⁴

Figure 1.13: The first set of stamps issued in Hong Kong, issued by the British colonial government in 1862. Queen Victoria's profile as the centre, with Chinese and English inscriptions surrounding the centre image. Dimensions: 20 x 24 mm.³⁵

He notices a shared simplistic “井” pattern in the contour of the three stamps, which demarcates the central image and wording designs around the piece. He attributes the visual similarity of a “井” pattern appeared in the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamp to the influence of the two stamps, particularly the first series of Hong Kong stamps issued by the British Colonial government in Hong Kong. This first series of Hong Kong stamps followed the Penny Black in adopting the head of the sovereign, Queen Victoria's, profile as the centre, with Chinese and English inscriptions surrounding the central image. It was engraved by Ferdinand Joubert and printed by De La Rue³⁶, a British company specialising in trade identity protection. They are the

³⁴ Hill, H. W. (1940). *The Fight for the Penny Post*. London: Warne. pp. 75–7. Image source: Wikimedia, n.d., viewed 17 January 2024, < https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Penny_Black.jpg>.

³⁵ Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postage_stamps_and_postal_history_of_Hong_Kong#/media/File:HKStamp96cents.jpg. [Accessed: 17 January 2024].

³⁶ Bush, S.N., 1977. *The De La Rue 'key plate' designs for the stamps of the British colonies*.

first series of stamps presenting a clearly converged British and Chinese visual. Hong Kong appears strangely as one word “HONGKONG” right above the centre of Victoria’s profile. The one-word naming indicates the early stage of encountering and a process of translating, integrating and transforming Hong Kong from a small Chinese island into a British colony in Asia. The Chinese characters are printed in *guangeti* (馆阁体) style, also known as the academic style of *kaishu*, espoused by the Qing Court and the higher bureaucracy.³⁷ The four corners of the stamp are decorated with motif of angled spirals which also appear on the crossbeams of a roof of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City (Figure 1.14). The corner symbol could be the *huiwen* (回纹) in Chinese culture or a meander pattern from European culture transmitted to Asia through Buddhist art.³⁸

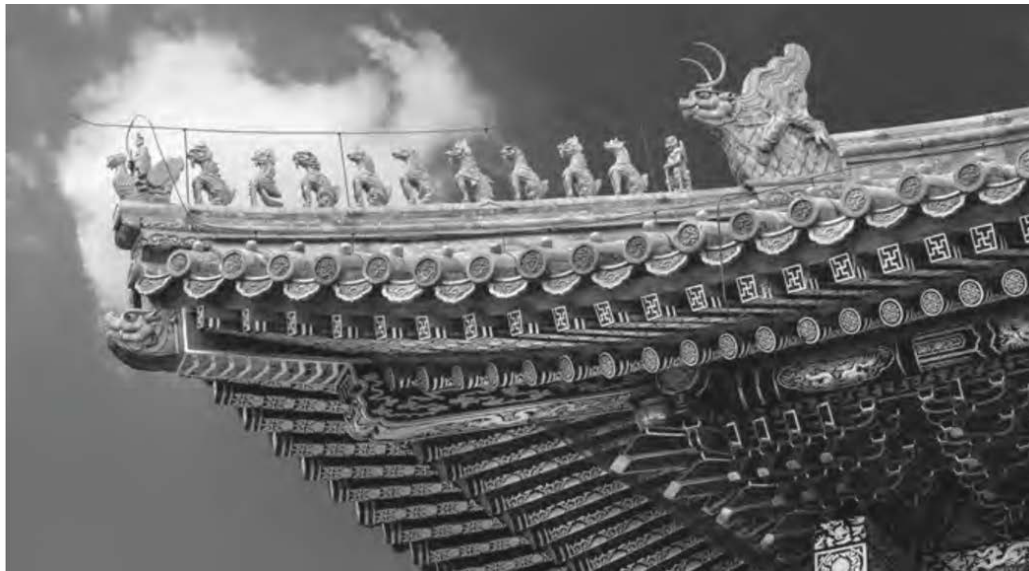


Figure 1.14: Intricate decorations with different motifs on the crossbeams and a roof eave on the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the image is quoted from Gao, J., (2016:17). Symbolism in the Forbidden City. *Education about Asia*, 21(3), image source: © chuyuss/Shutterstock photo.

³⁷ Guangeti (馆阁体) is referred as the “academy style” or “examination-hall style” due to this style emphasising neatness and balance. It was developed as a “model-style” for the national examinations (Yang 2023). Due to its authority status, promoted by the Court and higher bureaucracy, it was widely used in formal documents during the Qing dynasty. (Yang 2023).

³⁸ Art historian Jeong-Hee Lee-Kalisch (2018:111–130) examines the meander ornament in terms of its cultural origins and diversity between the West and the East. She argues that Chinese meander patterns, known as *huiwen* or *Leiwen*, first appeared on bronzes during China’s early Zhou period. Interestingly, the Greek meander patterns from the eighth to the fifth century BCE bear a striking resemblance to the Shang bronzes dating back to the twelfth century BCE. While there might have been a transmission of these patterns through Silk Road trade and Buddhist art, Lee-Kalisch concludes that the meander pattern is a universal symbol regardless of its region of origin.

Despite the distinctive Chinese visual elements in the first series of Hong Kong stamps, it is clearly a British colonial stamp with a touch of local presence, as the predominant centrepiece is the profile of Queen Victoria. The post office in Hong Kong was directly under control of the British government in London. Interestingly, compared to the design of the Hong Kong stamps, – notwithstanding the contour similarity observed by Wu – the “Shanghai Large Dragon”, unlike the typical early British colonial stamps featuring Victoria’s profile in the centre, instead for the first time, feature a carved dragon as the main image. Wu attributes great significance to the iconography of dragon on the stamps as follows: “The dragon is the totem of China, a symbol of the nation, and it is also the first set of stamps to feature the Chinese dragon totem as the main design” (Mu Jie 2003: 7).



Figure: 1.15: The “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamp in Wu’s article (Mu Jie 2003: 7). A “Shanghai Big Dragon”, One cent (Sliver) Stamp collected by Wu in South Africa. The Chinese Text reads ‘上海工部书信馆 一分银’, (Shanghai

Local Post Office, 1 Candarins). Dimensions: 2.8 x 2.5cm. Shengkai Wu's collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Wu's accounts signify a twofold perspective. On the one hand, he is drawn to the stamp's Chinese aesthetic and values its historical significance as the inaugural employment of a dragon in Chinese philatelic history. On the other hand, the symbolic power of the dragon, serving as 'a national totem', acts as an *effective trigger* (Sleeboom 2002) of Chinese national sentiment in the contemporary context of border crossing for Chinese immigrants like Wu, who traverse between South Africa and China.

In the cultural turn within border and borderland studies, border is increasingly perceived as having 'an aesthetic dimension' (dell'Agnes, Amilhat Szary 2015). In the context of the aestheticisation of border studies, 'border poetics' emerged as an approach in the 2000s, analysing literary narratives of bordering experiences (Schimanski, Wolfe 2007; Schimanski 2006; Viljoen 2013). Subsequently, this interdisciplinary inquiry extended its scope to encompass other forms of media, including border-centric films, music and artworks (Ganivet 2019; Schimanski 2019). The stamp can arguably be seen as an artefact embodying border aesthetics, as it is intrinsically related to an influx of border-crossing experiences that leave traces of cultural and social configurations where visible coexists paradoxically with the invisible (Schimanski 2019). It is essential to unearth the embedded 'political aesthetics' (Ranci re 2004) when deciphering the in/visibility inherent in the use of the dragon design within the stamp's role in this influx, as it underpins the dynamic interaction among geographical, symbolic, temporal, epistemological and media-related boundaries (Schimanski 2019). How does the dragon symbol on the stamp, as well as the process of creating the "Shanghai Large Dragons," relate to border-crossing processes within the early British settlers' community? Furthermore, how do the border-crossing processes elicit Wu's nationalist sentiments, as he appreciates while questioning the stamp's ambivalent identity. As border theorist Chiara Brambilla (2015) and Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman (2021) argue, it is the locus where border crossings and bordering processes unfold, giving rise to new affiliations and transformations. Can the stamp be regarded as a site of identity negotiation within the borderscape, involving various actors across time? It plays a role in shaping, redefining and unfolding the aesthetics of border visibility and invisibility, ultimately leading to fresh senses of belonging and transformation.

The In/visibility in the Centre-stage "Chinese" Dragon

The term “totem” was translated into Chinese as “图腾” in 1903 when scholar Yan Fu translated the work of British jurist Edward Jenks, *A History of Politics* (1900), introducing Western totemic theories to the Chinese academic community (Shi 2012: 7). In the early studies of totems in China, the dragon was just one many. Anthropologist Margaret Sleeboom (2002: 312), who focuses on nationalist scholars as her research subjects, argues that the prominence of the dragon totem became significant during the May Fourth Movement in 1919 when Chinese nationalist scholars selectively used cohesive symbolic representations in constructing nation-state ideologies. Folklorist Shi Aidong (2012: 16) points out that a comprehensive discussion of the dragon and totems, unifying various totems under the dragon, served as a cultural strategy for ‘uniting and saving the country’. The most influential work in this regard was the ‘dragon-is-totem’ thesis published by Wen Yiduo in 1942. The formation of the dragon totem was a radical “academic salvation” project of knowledge production in response to Chinese intellectuals facing imperialist aggression since the late Qing dynasty. Inspired by totemism theories during the Sino–Japanese War, it aimed to politically and culturally affirm the complete unity of the Chinese nation (Shi 2012:16).

Since the late 1980s, the conceptualisation of the dragon as a national totem has been continuously reinforced through the interplay between academic theory, the contingent need for nationalism and popular culture. The popular song “The Descendants of the Dragon” (long de chuanren) in Taiwan aptly caters to the diverse regional Chinese identity needs under contemporary Chinese nationalist consciousness. Popular culture also contributes to the continuous reinterpretation of dragon imagery worldwide, including in philately and Chinese antiquities. For Wu, as an immigrant in South Africa, the dragon imagery evokes national emotions, invigorating the process of belonging and reshaping the “dragon totem” within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa through Chinese philatelic research.

Designating the dragon as the central motif endowed this stamp with specific semiotic power in the eyes of believers like Wu in the contemporary era. In contrast to Hong Kong stamps featuring the British Queen’s portrait, the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps highlight their “Chineseness”. However, the concept of the dragon as the Chinese national totem only emerged decades after the issuance of the “Shanghai Large Dragons”. Returning to Wu’s emphasis on the specific historical conditions of the time (*guoqing*), Wu is not only influenced by the contemporary dragon totem’s symbolic power but also senses the significance of the dragon’s

appearance on a stamp for the first time in modern China by an institution other than the Qing authority. During the time of stamp issuance, the dragon had been exclusively linked to the imperial authority, mythicised for centuries as the progenitor of the ancient rulers. The dragon was perceived by common people as the symbolic power of Qing rule and they were forbidden to relate to the dragon in design and decoration (Sleeboom 2002: 303). According to Yin Dexiang (2008: 189–190), three years prior to the stamp’s issuance, the Qing government began using the dragon as the flag of the Qing dynasty (figure 1.16).

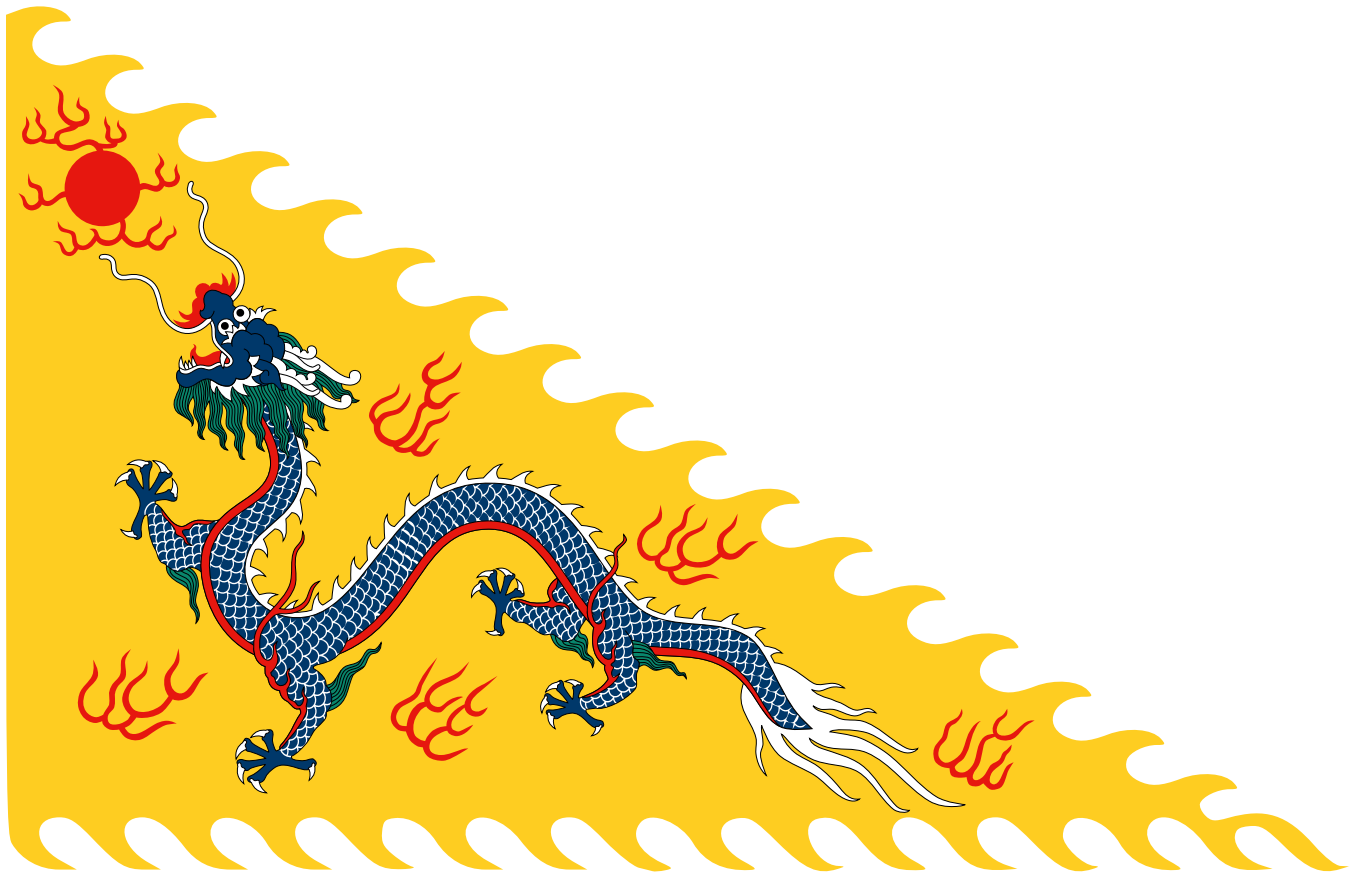


Figure 1.16: A five-clawed dragon is used as the flag of the Qing dynasty, adopted in 1862.³⁹ The design of the flag was mostly based on the Plain Yellow Banner. The flaming pearl on top of the dragon’s head symbolises wealth, good luck and prosperity (Wikipedia: n.d.).

The direct cause of this measure was the increasing traffic of foreign-flag ships along China’s coast after the Opium Wars, intensifying conflicts between the Qing navy, foreign merchant ships and warships (Yin 2008:190). After the Nanking Treaty, foreign-flagged ships transitioned

³⁹ The image is accessed through [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_the_Qing_dynasty#/media/File:Flag_of_China_\(1862–1889\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_the_Qing_dynasty#/media/File:Flag_of_China_(1862–1889).svg).

from facilitating trade solely between the Qing dynasty and foreign locations to offering services to Chinese merchants and traders operating within the country (Reinhardt 2018: 23). The growing encounters with foreign flags by the Qing government and Chinese merchants in the treaty ports gradually led the Qing government to understand the serious significance of national sovereignty represented by Western flags (Yin 2008: 190). Consequently, the dragon became a symbol of modern China's national image. The symbolic association of the dragon with the authoritarian monarchy was closely linked to the legitimacy of the Qing Empire. Simultaneously, it reflected the horizontal development impact on foreign relations within the historical context. The symbolic relationship between the dragon and the autocratic monarchy faced continuous challenges during Western imperial expansion.

The “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps exemplify this challenge by breaking the exclusivity of the dragon's use by the Qing court. How did Shanghai's foreign settlers understand the symbolic meaning of the dragon during their early encounters with China? Why did the Shanghai Local Post choose a dragon as the stamp's central image? Historical records available for examination are limited. Wu responds to the hidden Chinese agency in the use of the dragon as the central image by highlighting the stamp's design and printing process. He notes, ‘the centre of the stamp features an inverted S-shaped cloud and water dragon image’ with artistic cloud patterns distributed around the dragon's body (Mu 2003: 70). Wu points out that below the dragon, the stamp's bottom edge is adorned with the traditional ‘sea-water river-cliff pattern’ (WeChat, 8 September 2023). The sea-water river-cliff pattern originated in the Ming and Qing periods as a traditional Chinese motif, mainly composed of mountain and water patterns. In contrast to other auspicious palace patterns, the sea-water river-cliff pattern's special significance lies in its close association with territory and rule. In ancient China, the term for surging seawater was synonymous with “tide”, sharing the same pronunciation as the word for “dynasty” in Chinese (Zhu 2021:130). The sea-water pattern symbolised a smooth and prosperous official career, complemented by mountain and water landscape patterns expressing wishes for longevity. The inclusion of river cliffs in the design signified a permanent defence of territory. Consequently, the river-cliff and water pattern served as a profound expression of blessings for both the land and its officials (Yang 2013: 81–83; Zhu 2021:130). The pattern was commonly used in imperial rank badges (figure 1.17) and the decoration of Chinese robes for social governance purposes.



Figure 1.17: An imperial robe with a bright yellow satin ground, Yongzheng period of the Qing dynasty. The bright yellow was reserved exclusively for esteemed members of the imperial family, namely the Emperor, Empress and Dowager Empress. This robe is adorned with nine meticulously embroidered dragons in gold thread, interspersed with auspicious motifs. This artefact was featured in Sotheby's Auction of Important Chinese Art on 19 September 2023 (Sotheby 2023).⁴⁰

Notably the lower border of the robe illustrated features the sea-water river-cliff pattern, reminiscent of the border design found in the “Shanghai Large Dragons”. Currently, there is no historical evidence to discern whether the foreign personnel from the Shanghai Ministry of Industry and Information deliberately incorporated the sea-water river-cliff pattern’s symbolism into the stamp design or merely replicated the traditional dragon pattern and combined it with the sea-water river-cliff pattern found in palace attire. However, at the very least, their intention does not contradict the local self-management system in place during the stamp issuance period and

⁴⁰ Lot 624, Sotheby's Important Chinese Art auction on 19 September of 2023, accessed on 23 September 2023 <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2023/important-chinese-art-3/an-imperial-yellow-ground-satin-embroidered-dragon>.

the expectations for the smooth development of Shanghai, an emerging borderland. In the article, Wu specifically points out that the dragon on the stamp has only four claws, vehemently rejecting the notion of a fifth claw: ‘The five-clawed dragon is a specific ornament for the Chinese emperor. Anyone else using it would face execution’ (8 September 2023).

The seemingly deformed fifth claw represents the ingenuity of Chinese craftsmen in avoiding risks while carving the “Shanghai Large Dragon”. Strictly speaking, the “Shanghai Large Dragon” is a four-clawed dragon. Wu implies that the dragon’s design did not violate Qing laws, presenting a visual identity in line with the Shanghai Ministry of Industry and Information’s status as ‘a local postal institution’. In addition to detailed analysis of the dragon’s main design pattern, Wu also analyses the stamp’s dies and printing process, based on known variations. He observes: ‘The central dragon image and the surrounding Chinese and English characters, as well as numbers and borders, are all detachable’ (2003: 70). Such a combination allows for a certain degree of unpredictability in the final product, depending largely on the manual operation of Chinese workers during the printing process and the layout tension between different plates in the same assembly process. Consequently, Wu points out that there have been as many as 78 different layouts of the “Shanghai Large Dragons” so far. Wu’s discussion on the randomness of the layout formation aligns with early British philatelic publications describing the production process of the “Shanghai Large Dragon”.

According to American philatelist Richard Frajola and Sydney Cline (2023), the earliest documented account of the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps can be traced back to an article in *The London and China Telegraph*, printed in London, dated October 10, 1865.⁴¹ The article criticised the appearance of the dragon as ‘unmistakable as a caterpillar glowworm’ that failed ‘the intention to represent a dragon’. Frajola and Cline also quoted more discussion by Stampede, who wrote from Shanghai in the *Stamp Collector’s Magazine*, in the 1 June issue, 1866:

Now, as to the stamps. You say they are *engraved*, but that is not the case, as they are *struck off* by hand from wooden or ivory dies, doubtless made here by the natives: in fact,

⁴¹ Richard Frajola and Sydney Cline co-authored a study titled *the Large Dragon Postage Stamps of the Shanghai Local Post Office, a Catalog of the 1865 Provisional Issues*, published on Richard Frajola’s website, on the 7 June 2023, accessed on 23 September https://www.rfrajola.com/SLPO/SLPO_Bundle.pdf. The study was referred by historian Lane J. Harris.

a few days ago, a friend of mine informed me that he went to the post office for some stamps, and that, not having the ones he required already printed, they struck off some while he waited.

The ‘caterpillar glowworm-like dragon’ and the on-site ‘struck off’ performance-like method of producing stamps resonate with Wu’s accounts of the spontaneity in the formation of the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamp layouts, particularly the overlooked Chinese agency of folk craftsmen in the semi-colonial philatelic community. In Wu’s perspective, each stamp is a micro-art object due to its unique visual appearance. Using his own collection as an example, he decoded how the arrangement of different blocks during printing generated a specific visual effect, as shown in figure 1.11. In this arrangement, the blocks “Shanghai” and “L.P.O” are not in a straight line, and the border lines next to the characters “部” and “工” are fractured. Upon meticulous observation through a magnifying glass, he pointed out a small blank spot near the right side of the dragon, close to the border, indicating damage to the printing block itself. Similar to Chinese folk prints, despite mass production, each stamp records a momentary interaction between ink, template, manual pressure and paper texture, displaying different rendering effects. These seemingly “rough” variations, in contrast to the intricate and exquisite Hong Kong stamps mechanically produced by British companies, present entirely different aesthetic styles.

Wu’s accounts have redistributed what is sensory and visible through uncovering the overlooked Chinese agency in the stamp’s creation. Despite the British dominance in its formation, its issuance partly aimed to encourage the use of the post office’s facilities by the Chinese public (Chow 1996). The movement of “division/co-authoring” in the Chinese–British stamp falls into an ambivalent space of borders itself that is subjected to the contingent interpretations by different actors. The stamp is torn in-between a “cosmopolitan identity” of a semi-colonial Chinese borderland and a symbolism of humiliation in the nation-state framework. The in/visibility is also subjected to a discussive bordering process. The Chinese influence on the foreign settlers in the borderland, particularly concerning the aesthetic and symbolic power of the dragon, could be observed through Orientalism in nationalist texts, where Western sources such as the informal and rhetorical presentation of *Punch* magazine were utilised to discuss the Western reinvention of China through the process of “othering” the dragon or the ‘dragonisation of China’ (Tao 2009: 21, 213). Chinese agency becomes visible by focusing on immigrants with

border-crossing experiences, such as Wu, as well as researching the foreign community surviving in the borderlands of semi-colonial China (Boyed 2012; Hillier 2020). This approach presents a more nuanced understanding of how the symbolic power of the dragon in late Qing China is encountered and experienced in a complex manner among expatriate communities and local Chinese residents, beyond the prevailing Orientalism portrayed in Chinese nationalist texts. Julia Boyed (2012: 216) quoted a Frenchman writing in the 1860s noting the surprising number of Chinese who owned portable printing presses:

One could say that the streets are libraries: Not only are courts, pagodas, temples, shops, front doors, private houses, passages covered with comment of all kind but teacups, plates, vases and fans become anthologies of poetry and proverbs. In the poorest villages, where even the barest necessities are lacking, one will always find posters.

It is hard to envisage the symbolic power of the dragon had on the foreign settlers in Shanghai who decided to employ a dragon for the stamp. The dragon undoubtedly had replaced Queen Victoria as the central visual subject on the first postage stamp in Chinese postal history. Wu's contemporary emotional response to the dragon as a totem reflects the historical significance of the "Shanghai Large Dragon" stamps their emphasis on Chinese identity in a diaspora. Nieswand (2012: 1874) observes the increasing politicisation of diaspora as an identity discourse, yet there remains a limited understanding of its integration into the everyday lives of immigrants as a mundane aspect. Wu's engagement with the "Shanghai Large Dragon" offers a valuable perspective to interpret the Chinese diaspora in South Africa as a 'political and social form' (Nieswand 2012: 1874). The complexity of the dragon symbolism, coupled with Wu's willingness to confront controversial semi-colonial history, exemplifies the 'recurrent replication' of banal nationalism through routinised practice. This allows Wu to connect with "home" in a nostalgic manner while simultaneously distinguishing between those who are 'at home' "confined" in the "humiliation" narratives and those, like himself, who are 'in the diaspora' (Nieswand 2012: 1875).

It also highlights how postage stamps, as a traditional means of communication, have strengthened the connection of the dragon to China in the global context of circulation and influenced the construction of modern Chinese national identity. The "Shanghai Large Dragon" stamps appeared in circulation and international exchanges before the formation of the modern Chinese nation state, especially in bringing the modern Chinese symbolism of the dragon into the

field of diplomacy. Wu and the stamp indicate an important process the symbolic discursive space in early China's modern nation-state symbolic formation.

As a Chinese immigrant, Wu proposes an open-ended approach to the ambivalence of the stamp beyond the framework of nation-state. However, the stamp triggers a sense of subtle and implicit nationalism in the Chinese diaspora (Billig 1995). It encompasses the subtle and often unnoticed ways in which nationalist sentiments are reinforced and reproduced in the daily lives of an individual collector. These expressions of nationalism can include symbols, such as the dragon and cultural practices of collecting that promote a sense of national identity and belonging.

In summary, this section explores the complex realm of semi-colonial Chinese artefacts that surfaced in South Africa, particularly centring on the "Shanghai Large Dragon" stamps issued by the British-administered Shanghai Municipal Council's local post office from 1865 to 1867. These stamps hold a contentious historical significance, symbolizing the struggles concerning Chinese autonomy and foreign imperial expansion. By emphasising the frequently neglected role of Chinese agency in producing these objects, this study demonstrates how individual mobility between China and Africa can enhance the emancipatory potential of aesthetics through collecting, reshaping what is perceptible and significant within the framework of China's semi-colonial territories. It posits that these semi-colonial objects, characterized by their unique blending of aesthetics, establish a platform for diasporic banal nationalism (Billig 1995) bridging China and Africa, consistently drawing Chinese immigrants towards China as they negotiate their transnational identities.

"Noise" or Message: a "Tang Blue-and-white" Plate in Circulation

Besides Philately materials, Shengkasi Wu's other major focus is on Chinese ceramics. Similar to the commemorative stamps in relation to the establishment and dissemination of socialist new China and image, Chinese ceramics, especially blue-and-white was not only part of a daily material culture, but represents national image-building, deeply rooted in the national discourse in the early years of New China (Pan and Kim 2022). Departing from the field of Chinese philately, this section conducts a case study of Shengkai Wu in the field of Chinese ceramic collecting.

On the evening of 6 September 2000, at the opening sale of an Asian Art Exhibition at the New Gallery in Johannesburg, among various exquisite Asia art objects Wu pointed out a small

plate in a corner (figure 1.18), labelled as “China · Tang · Dynasty· AD 750 · Blue Spots· Small Plate,” to the gallery owner Sue Ollemans, a renowned Asian art collector, expert and dealer in South Africa, UK and Hong Kong:

- “This is [a] blue-and-white from Tang dynasty, isn’t it?”
- Ollemans, surprised: ‘No, so amazing if it was!’ (Wu 2001 and 2023).

Shengkai Wu disagreed with Ollemans, and he acquired the plate a few days after the exhibition.



Figure 1.18: The “Tang blue-and-white” plate in the exhibition. It features underglaze dark blue spots, creating a watercolour-like blending effect spreading outwards. A clear glaze with a yellowish undertone covers a body that is not entirely pure white with an off-white hue. Dimensions: 2.3cm high, diameter 10.8cm, foot ring diameter 7.0cm.

Shengkai Wu's collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.



Figure 1.19: An archetypal blue-and-white porcelain cup with a bird-on-rock motif made in the seventeenth century in China. It is also called a crow cup or Kraai kop. Van Ewijk Van de Bilt Collection in Iziko Museum of South Africa (Esmyol, 2023: 125)



Figure 1.20: The image is from Sue Ollemans' catalogue for *Auspicious Creatures*, an exhibition she held in Hong Kong at the Artfield Gallery, 248–9 Prince's Gallery, Central Hong Kong, from 14 to 28 October 2000. It was held one month later than her exhibition in Johannesburg. The Tang dish was not featured in the exhibition catalogue in Johannesburg, but these dishes were labelled as blue-and-white in the catalogue by Sue Ollemans. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Why was there a controversy regarding this plate in Tang dynasty⁴² (618 to 907 AD) in 2000? “Blue-and-white” refers to a type of ceramic particularly associated with China and the maritime

⁴²The Tang dynasty is often referred to as China's “golden age,” representing one of the most glorious periods in Chinese history. It featured significant achievements in art, literature, technology, and international trade. The

trade, featuring the use of cobalt oxide to adorn the white ceramic surface with blue designs. The cobalt was painted beneath or on a transparent glaze and fired at high temperatures, producing an enduring blue hue on the white ceramic surface. The archetypal Chinese blue-and-white porcelain, figures 2 and 3 in Ollemans' catalogue, flourished during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD) in Jingdezhen, the “porcelain city”, and continued throughout Ming (1368–1644 AD) and Qing (1644–1912 AD) dynasties (Zhang and Pollard 2022: 1394). It is often depicted in scholarly and popular literature as a transformative force, influencing the world through its global consumption and imitation in what ceramic scholar Stacey Pierson describes as ‘idealised narratives’. (2012: 9).⁴³ Given the historical tendency of numerous studies to focus on the

capital of the Tang dynasty, Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), and the famous export harbour Yangzhou, were cosmopolitan hubs, attracting scholars, traders, and artists from different parts of the world, including Korea, Japan, and the Persian Gulf. The evolution of Chinese ceramics reached a pivotal stage in Tang dynasty in the aspects of the refinement of techniques, the introduction of new styles, and the flourishing of the porcelain industry. Key developments that led to the birth of Tang blue-and-white ceramics included the emergence of *Sancai* ware and white porcelain, as well as the influence of foreign cultures. *Sancai* ware, renowned for its vibrant tricolored glazes, typically consisted of green, amber, and cream hues and was used to decorate a variety of vessels, including figurines and tomb objects. Tang artisans also improved the art of creating white porcelain, which was made in the Baihe kiln in Northern Wei dynasty (386 to 534 AD). By the end of Tang dynasty, white porcelain had reached the standards of modern high-quality daily-use fine porcelain in terms of whiteness (Li et al., 2017: 143). The extensive trade and dynamic interactions along the Silk Road trade routes initiated a global diaspora in Central Asia, the Middle East, and even as far as Europe, leading to the incorporation of cobalt blue motifs, diverse shapes, and styles in Chinese pottery. For a concise introduction to the Tang Dynasty, refer to Lewis, M.E., 2009, "China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty" (Vol. 3), Harvard University Press, and Benn, C.D., 2004, "China's Golden Age: Everyday Life in the Tang Dynasty," Oxford University Press, USA. Supplementary discussion on the connections between *Sancai* ware, white porcelain, and Tang blue-and-white ceramics, can be found in the references: Li, W., Lu, X., Luo, H., Sun, X., Liu, L., Zhao, Z. and Guo, M. (2017). A Landmark in the History of Chinese Ceramics: the Invention of Blue-and-white Porcelain in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.). *STAR: Science & Technology of Archaeological Research*, 3(2), pp.358–365. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20548923.2016.1272310>. and Zhang, Y. and Pollard, A.M. (2022). The Archaeological and Scientific Analysis of Blue-decorated Ceramics in the Tang and Song Dynasties. *Archaeometry*, 64(6). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/arcn.12794>.

⁴³ Pierson (2012: 9–10) references art historian John Carswell's work, *Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and Its Impact on the Western World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), as a classic example, arguing its influence on subsequent research regarding Chinese blue-and-white ceramics, such as Robert Finlay's *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). These studies suggest that Chinese blue-and-white porcelain had a significant impact, reshaping and at times even “destroying” pottery traditions in nearly every society it encountered through its worldwide consumption and imitation. Pierson advocates for a more nuanced and less universalising approach to the study of Chinese ceramics and their global diffusion. She emphasises that Chinese ceramics should be viewed both as a concept and a product, shaped by ‘localized patterns of consumption and appropriation’, in addition to the global influences that have been identified. Esther Esmyol (2023: 123–139) further develops a complex and localized narrative based on her observations in Southern Africa. She traces the presence of Chinese trade ceramics in Southern Africa from ancient kingdom sites during precolonial

receiving end, particularly the destinations of traded Chinese blue-and-white wares, this study attempts to diverge from the notion of a unified market or experience concerning exported blue-and-white ceramics. Instead, it seeks to incorporate the Chinese perspective into the discourse surrounding the global circulation of Chinese blue-and-white wares in South Africa. This objective is pursued through an examination of the interaction involving a Chinese collector and a Tang dynasty (618 to 907 AD) plate that traversed between China and South Africa.

An Emerging Controversial Discourse on Tang Blue-and-white Ceramics

Initially, it was believed that Chinese blue-and-white ceramics originated in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD) with the largest production of Jingdezhen's blue-and-white porcelain as the representatives and main focal point. The famous “David Vases” (figure 1.21) at the Percival David Museum in SOAS, London were the dating benchmarks, notable for their inscriptions with the date 1351, firmly placing them within the Yuan dynasty.⁴⁴

times to the European colonial period when specific ceramic wares symbolised social status. Esmyol continues her investigation into the contemporary era, focusing on the appropriation of these ceramics by South African artists.

⁴⁴ In a pioneering study in 1952, John Alexander Pope, well known by Chinese scholars and collectors, attributed all blue-and-white pieces sharing stylistic similarities with the David vases to the Yuan dynasty (John Alexander Pope, *Fourteenth-century Blue-and-white, A Group of Chinese Porcelains in the Topkapi Sarayi Muzesi, Istanbul* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, vol. 2, no. 1, 1952, 69.)



Figure 1.21: The David Vases, © The Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art in SOAS, London (SOAS 2015)⁴⁵

Small narratives on different origins emerged in China, attempting to push the origins of blue-and-white back a few centuries since the discovery of high-fired Tang blue-and-white fragments in Yangzhou in 1975 (Nanjing Museum 1977) and Song blue-and-white (960–1279 AD) shards in Zhejiang in 1957 and 1970 (Chen et al., 1978).⁴⁶ Despite these accounts and pieces of evidence, they were mostly ignored, awaiting additional archaeological proof. Furthermore, technically, their dense, slip-covered, non-white compositions present a challenge for ceramic experts and archaeologists when it comes to affirming their classification as “proper porcelain”

⁴⁵ Available at: <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/centenarytimeline/files/2015/11/David-vases1.jpg>. [Accessed 17 Jan. 2024].

⁴⁶ Two archaeological discoveries of Song blue-and-white fragments were made in Zhejiang province. The first one was in Longquan County in 1957. Thirteen fragments of blue-and-white bowls were excavated at the base of the Golden Sand Pagoda. The bricks of the pagoda base bear an inscription dating back to the second year of the Taiping Xingguo era of the Northern Song Dynasty (977 AD). The second one was made in 1970; at the base of the Huancui Pagoda in Shaoxing City, a fragment of the belly of a blue-and-white bowl was unearthed. The pagoda's inscription dates to the first year of the Xianchun era of the Southern Song Dynasty (1265 AD).

(Krahl 2010: 311). Among English texts, Adam Kessler's 1994 research stands as one of the earliest requests to consider different origins for blue-and-white ceramics, challenging the established Yuan Dynasty framework. Justin Leung (2006: 3) argues that the reluctance to reconsider the dating of blue-and-white ceramics does not stem from a lack of evidence but rather from the methodologies employed by scholars in recording and interpreting historical events. Curators, scholars and art dealers have embraced John Pope's logic since the 1950s, establishing the Yuan origins of blue-and-white ceramics as the prevailing framework for comprehending Chinese blue-and-white ceramics (Leung 2006; Gerritsen 2020).

In 1977, Mao Wenqi, based in Hong Kong, argued in an article that the tripod censer with cobalt blue decoration (figure 1.21) exhibited in the Feng Pingshan museum of Hong Kong University (present-day University of Hong Kong Museum and Art Gallery) was an "early blue-and-white" in Tang dynasty (Feng 1980:7).⁴⁷ Mao's article caught the attention of one of the most prominent Chinese ceramic scholars, Feng Xianming. After examining the object in Hong Kong, Feng identified it as a product of the Gongxian Kiln, establishing that underglaze decoration in cobalt blue could be traced back to the Tang dynasty (Feng 1980). In recent years, the tripod censer has become a frequently referenced benchmark in Chinese academic and collector circles as an early example of blue-and-white (Cheng et al., 2016: 315; Wen 2021: 168 and Fang 2023: 327).

⁴⁷Mao Wenqi's article titled 'Early Blue and White,' published in the spring issue of *Oriental Art* in 1977, was referenced by Feng Xianming in their 1980 article titled 'A Few Questions Regarding the Origins of Blue-and-White', which was published in *Cultural Relics (Wen Wu 文物)*. Despite diligent efforts, the author has been unable to locate the specific journal named *Oriental Art* where Mao Wenqi's article was published.



Figure 1.22: Tang blue-and-white tripod censer © University of Hong Kong Museum and Art Gallery, HKU.C.1953.0028 (Wen 2021:169)

Wu found inspiration in Mao's article and Feng's reflections on the origins of blue-and-white. Driven by his interest in these origins, in 2000, when Wu encountered the cobalt blue decorated plate in Johannesburg, despite the idea of Tang blue-and-white ceramics remaining a novel and controversial concept that was not widely embraced by the art market in South Africa, China and the rest of the world, without hesitation, Wu acquired the plate following the exhibition.

In 2001, Wu submitted a manuscript (figure 1.24), titled 'A small Tang-blue-and-white dish' (唐代青花小瓷盘), by 'Mu Jie 木皆',⁴⁸ South Africa', to an accredited Chinese journal named *Cultural Relics in Southern China* (南方文物), arguing that the plate he bought in South Africa was a "Tang blue-and-white" from Gongxian Kiln. It was dismissed as mere 'noise' by the chief editor (Wu 2022b). Interestingly, in 2004, Wu's manuscript was published in the same journal (fig. 1.25) and a part of the manuscript appeared in another journal named *Shoucangjie* (收藏界 *Collectors' World*).

⁴⁸ Mu Jie is Shengkai Wu's Chinese pen name.

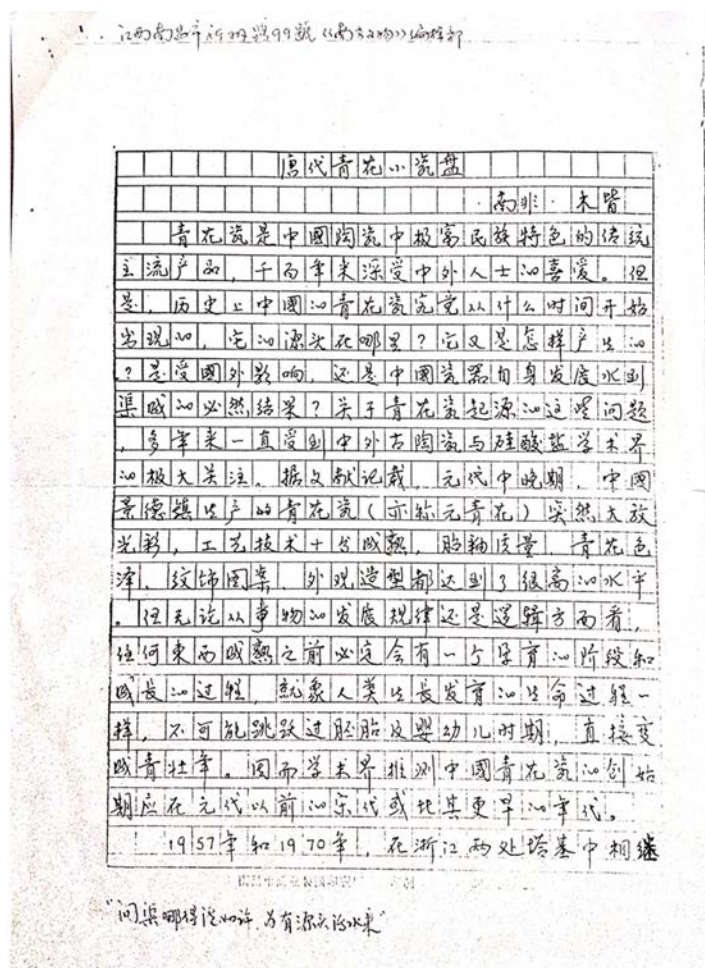


Figure 1.24: The front page of Shengkai Wu's unpublished manuscript on the "Tang blue-and-white" plate, written in 2001.



Figure 1.25: The front page of the 2004 article is titled “The Elegance of Small Vessels: A Marvelous Encounter – A Study and Appreciation of Tang Blue-and-White Plate and Song Dynasty Yingqing Nine-Dragon Vase (小器婉约是称奇—唐代青花瓷盘, 宋代影青九联瓷瓶的鉴与赏)” in *Collectors' World* (收藏界) (2), pp. 21–24, authored by Li Fang, Liu Shuhua and Deng Jingxiang.

The contradictory reactions to his manuscript in the Chinese ceramic discourse were attributed to the fact that the concept of Tang blue-and-white ceramics was still not widely embraced in 2000 despite a few archaeological studies have been issued. It was only a few years after the discovery of three intact pieces of blue-and-white porcelain (fig. 1.26) on the Indonesia Belitung shipwreck in Tang dynasty,⁴⁹ that the concept of Tang blue-and-white ceramics began

⁴⁹ In 1998, a ninth-century AD merchant ship, an Arab dhow, was discovered shipwrecked on a reef just off the coast of Belitung, a small island in the Java Sea. The ship had remained buried at sea for more than a millennium, its

to draw considerable attention worldwide. This new archaeological discovery has sparked a surge in publications, both in Chinese and English, since the late 2000s (Jiang 2009; Wood and Tite 2009; Krah, 2011; Wood and Priestman 2016; Li et al. 2017; Zhang 2018; Wen 2021; Zhang and Pollard 2022).



Figure 1.26: A blue-and-white dish from the Belitung Shipwreck. Tang Dynasty. Art Science Museum, Singapore. [photograph-online].⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the discourse surrounding Tang blue-and-white ceramics remains contentious. Qiqi Jiang (2009: 209) raises concerns about labelling these ceramics as “Tang blue-and-white,” as it might erroneously imply that the production of archetypal blue-and-white porcelain originated in the Tang dynasty. In her analysis of the three Tang blue-and-white stoneware artefacts discovered on the Belitung shipwreck, ceramic expert Regina Krah (2011: 209)

contents protected from erosion by their packing and the conditions of the silty sea floor. Subsequently, a publication written by ceramic expert Regina Krah in 2011 formally introduced the three intact Tang blue-and-white plates discovered in the shipwreck, among a remarkable assemblage of more than 60,000 glazed bowls, ewers, and other ceramics.

⁵⁰ Available at:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dish_with_floral_lozenge_motif_from_the_Belitung_shipwreck,_ArtScience_Museum,_Singapore_-_20110618.jpg.

critiques recent Chinese publications for categorising cobalt-decorated burial pottery as additional ‘specimens of so-called Tang blue-and-white ware’. She asserts that these items have limited relevance for the study of high-fired Tang blue-and-white ceramics, indicating the need for a more precise classification system. Justin Leung (2009: 5) approaches the topic from a different angle by employing Prasenjit Duara’s framework of the “nation” (2008) as a linear and evolutionary concept. Leung critiques Chinese publications on Tang blue-and-white vessels, arguing that Chinese historians, focused on the notion of the nation and considering blue-and-white wares as Chinese national treasures, have paid inadequate attention to the origins of Song blue-and-white ceramics. Instead, they have attempted to amalgamate the development of Tang blue-and-white wares with the archetypal Yuan blue-and-white porcelain. Leung’s critique sheds light on the selective historical perspective employed by many Chinese scholars and collectors, including Shengkai Wu, who seek to trace the origins of blue-and-white in relation to Tang blue-and-white wares.

These ongoing debates demonstrate the complexity of classifying and interpreting Tang blue-and-white ceramics in navigating the intricate nuances of this emerging subject within the realms of archaeology and art history. In light of the contentious debate surrounding Tang blue-and-white wares, this study expands the contested conceptualisation of these artefacts beyond the realm of predominantly archaeological and scientific analyses. Instead, it explores a translational artefact of the China–Africa material heritage related to migration from the anthropology of art point of view, tracing blue-and-white ceramics as one of Shengkai Wu’s biographical ‘life projects’ (Gell 1998: 11). This investigation delves into the intricate cultural and social exchanges arising from cross-border movements of people, objects and ideas. Taking inspiration from Brian Larkin’s case study in Nigeria (2020) and Alfred Gell’s concept of the ‘abduction of agency’ (1998), the study explores how the immigrant collector, as a form of *interference*, disrupts the dominant perception of blue-and-white ceramics as the archetypal models in both China and South Africa. This interference is manifested in historical configurations wherein ceramic technology, linguistic dilemmas and implicit transcultural expression intersect in the emerging discourse of Tang blue-and-white ceramics. I argue that the collector’s ‘noisy’ advancement of “proto-Tang blue-and-white” signifies the temporality of Tang blue-and-white ceramics as an experiential framework in the global flow of Chinese blue-and-white ceramics. Considering that Chinese historical trade porcelains in South African museums face challenges

in the context of decolonisation due to colonial associations, the paper also questions whether focusing on the Tang dynasty ceramic plate outside the museum context could provide an alternative approach to determining the placement of Chinese ceramic art in South Africa, deviating from the Eurocentric colonial historical framework concerning lineage and aesthetics.

Following Shengkai Wu's Migration Trajectory: A Brief History of Jingdezhen and Archetypal Blue-and-white Porcelain

Jingdezhen is located in the Northeastern part of Jiangxi Province, approximately 260 kilometres away from the capital city, Nanchang, where Shengkai Wu was born. For many, the name of Jingdezhen resembles the archetypal blue-and-white porcelain. It is often referred to as the 'porcelain capital' of China (Gillette 2018) or 'the city of blue-and-white' (Gerritsen 2020). Jingdezhen's history of making archetypal blue-and-white porcelain began in the early fourteenth century in the final decades of the Yuan Dynasty (1260–1368 AD) when the Mongols ruled China. Cobalt oxide was imported from Persia by Quanzhou merchants to Jingdezhen primarily in raw mineral form and being processed into blue pigments named "Muslim blue" or *huihui qing* (Finlay 2010: 158; Liu 1982). Experimenting with the precious imported commodity, Jingdezhen ceramicists painted various decorative patterns on unfired porcelain bodies that appealed to the Middle Eastern and other international markets. The whole process was executed under strict control by the imperial porcelain bureau which was dominated by Mongols and Persians in the Yuan dynasty (Finlay 2010: 158; Gerritsen 2020: 148–149). According to art historian Robert Finlay (2010:158), motifs were sourced from Middle Eastern tapestries, war banners and imperial garments to be decorated on ceramics in Jingdezhen. Other critical natural material that gave birth to the archetypal blue-and-white porcelain was the 'natural binary formula' of China stone⁵¹ mines containing Kaolin,⁵² which were named "Yutu"

⁵¹ China stone, known as *Cishi* (瓷石) in Chinese and referred to as porcelain stone in English, is a feldspar-rich rock that has been used in the production of ceramics and porcelain since ancient times. The name 'China stone' originated from its historical use in Chinese ceramics and is considered the material foundation for the invention of Chinese porcelain (Yu 1996). Feldspar, a common mineral found in various locations worldwide, is often mined for its unique properties that make it valuable in the ceramics industry.

⁴⁰ Kaolin (高岭土), named after the Gaoling mountains near Jingdezhen, provided the white clay crucial for the structure of porcelain bodies due to its high melting point at very high temperatures (Gerritsen 2020: 64). The understanding of kaolin in the Chinese context is an evolving process, representing a historical exploration in the utilisation and development of mineral resources around Jingdezhen by potters. Recent studies by Chinese archaeologists indicate that the testing results of the mixed use of porcelain stone (China stone) and kaolin were not

(御土) or “*Ma cang tu*” (麻仓土), had been sourced from the nearby mountains since the end of the Southern Song and beginning of the Yuan dynasty (Xu et al, 2017; Xiao and Ai 2020).

Although kaolin is found in various regions globally, finding viable deposits of kaolin has been historically rare, not only in China but worldwide. As a result, until Europeans discovered the binary formula and beds of kaolin in Saxony at the beginning of eighteenth century, Jingdezhen possessed an unparalleled combination of top-quality natural resources, centuries of accumulated technologies and a vast skilled manpower essential for porcelain production, a unique blend that had no parallel elsewhere in the world (Gerritsen 2020: 5). A large quantity of blue-and-white porcelain travelled from Jingdezhen to the outside world and ended up in institutional and private ceramic collections and archaeological sites worldwide, including in South Africa.



Fig 1.27: ‘A bird’s eye view of Jingdezhen showing some of its chimneys’ by Frank B. Lentz.⁵³ During a visit in 1920, Lentz tallied 78 prominent yellow chimneys, representing approximately half of the city’s total smokestacks. At its zenith, Jingdezhen reportedly boasted several thousand kilns. *National Geographic*, Nov. 1920 (pp.391–406).

The decline of Jingdezhen’s blue-and-white porcelain production began when foreign countries emerged as new global porcelain producers and exporters, underpinned by the Western

an intentional innovation of a binary formula by Jingdezhen ceramists in the Yuan dynasty. Instead, the true binary formula originated in the late Ming to early Qing period and was widely employed during the Qing Dynasty. The emergence and widespread use of the binary formula were facilitated by the extensive development of kaolin from Gaoling Mountain in Jingdezhen during the Jiajing–Wanli period (Xu et al. 2017; Xiao and Ai 2020; Finlay 2010:138).

⁵³ Website: <https://gotheborg.com/natgeograph/index.shtml>; accessed on the 18 nov.2023.

industrial revolution. Additionally, foreign intrusion and domestic uprisings following the two opium wars (1839–1840) and the Boxer Rebellion (1850–1864) had impacted Jingdezhen's blue-and-white production. The decline in government support for Jingdezhen was worsened by the competition from international porcelain and ceramic providers. English, German, Japanese, Russian and American porcelain was being sold in China, including in Jiangxi Province. Following concessions forced upon the Qing government by foreign powers, the machine-made porcelain from these countries surpassed the sales of Jingdezhen products in certain regions of China (Gillette 2018:35; Cao 2008; Jiang 1936:265). Nevertheless, in the turbulent years, Jingdezhen continued to attract a few foreign visitors and high-quality handmade blue-and-white porcelain orders from overseas due to its historical and technical significance of large-scale traditional production in East Asia.

In 1949, when the Communist Party army entered Jingdezhen, the locals were in a desperate situation of starvation and most of the workshops were closed due to the long decades of war. The new China began to restore and develop the ceramic industry of Jingdezhen, assembling dispersed artisans back to the city to accomplish a series of new designs. These designs included state banquet tableware (figure 1.28 and 1.29), exhibition porcelain, official tableware and tribute porcelain meant for 'presenting an image of new China in diplomatic use' (Gu 2016: 14; Li 2021:11).





Figure 1.28 and 1.29: Two sets of blue-and-white state banquet tableware⁵⁴ in Chinese and Western styles, designed by Danian Zhu during the years 1952 to 1954 (Li 2021). They were used to establish the national image of the newly founded People's Republic of China on diplomatic occasions. The Chinese style is blue-and-white overglaze enamel tableware with intertwined branches and peony patterns, while the Western style comprises a set of blue-and-white begonia state banquet tableware.

Seizing the opportunity, the city initiated a process of transformation led by the newly established state-owned ceramic factories and numerous private workshops in transforming its traditional, diverse and handmade porcelain craft industry into a centralised, mechanised and modernised industrial sector (Li 2021). However, the process was not consistent as it was disrupted by radical socialist movements such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Apart from the destruction of the machinery introduced in the early years of the founding of the country and the persecution of porcelain factory workers, unrealistic and radical mechanisation projects not only undermined the achievements of previous mechanisation efforts but also severely suppressed the inheritance and development of traditional manual craftsmanship (Yang 1991: 121–143). For example, the mechanisation and automation production line project for blue-and-white porcelain initiated in 1975 ended in failure (Wan and Zheng 2020).

Experiencing Jingdezhen in the Early 1980s: A Localised, Production-Orientated Sentimental Understanding of Blue-and-White Ceramics

Wu's engagement with Jingdezhen started during his tenure at the Jiangxi Provincial Centre for International Science and Technology Exchange in the early 1980s. It was a time when China

⁵⁴ Two photos are from Li Yin's Master thesis, titled 'Jingdezhen's Blue and White Art and Historical Development (1949–1966)', 2021, Jingdezhen Ceramic University.

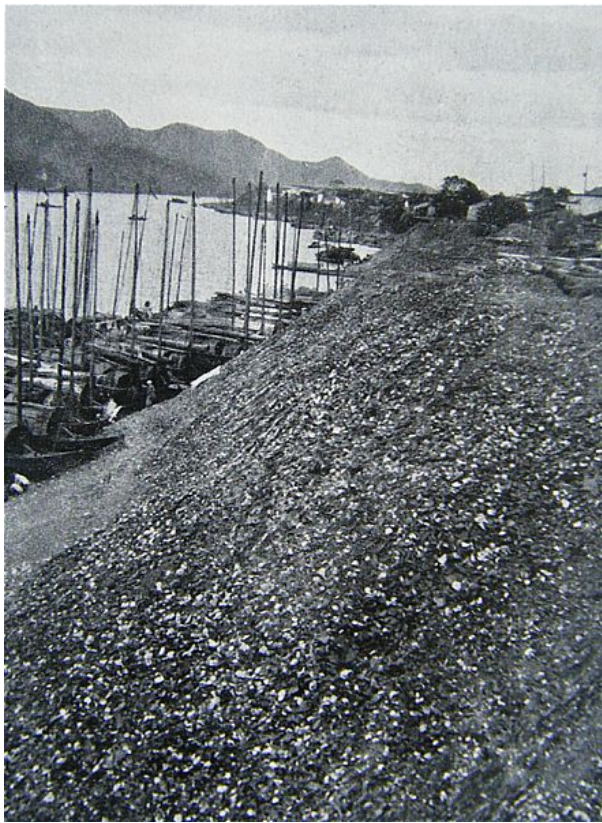
had just initiated economic reform in 1978, transforming a closed-off environment to an open economy. As they departed from the Cultural Revolution, several prominent state-owned ceramic factories in Jingdezhen eagerly sought collaboration with their international counterparts. Wu facilitated these connections and invited Japanese experts to Jingdezhen for site visits and academic conferences. Alongside these formal activities, he also had informal contact with artisans and their families and was exposed to the daily life of Jingdezhen people in the 1980s. These immersive engagements cultivated a complex, localised sentimental understanding of blue-and-white ceramics for Wu. On the one hand, Wu gained invaluable first-hand insights into the nuanced archetypal blue-and-white porcelain in Jingdezhen, including exquisite pieces made for the emperors and fine or coarse pieces made for the export markets. Even within an established model of blue-and-white porcelain made for the imperial court, the exact composition of the clay body as well as cobalt pigment in each piece could be different in term of modern ceramic technology, which challenges the somewhat sweeping unified understanding of blue-and-white porcelain. On the other hand, contemplating the nature held within the object, tactile experiences, such as touching these pieces, elicits an affective feeling for and communicative channel with the artisans based on direct material mediation of the objects as the virtuosity and intuition of the artisans are ‘inscribed as a quality of the object’ (Küchler and Timothy 2020:5). Therefore, an intriguing aspect of Wu’s exploration was his scrutiny of established canons, especially his direct contact with official blue-and-white *yang* (prototypes) (fig. 1.30).



Figure 1.30: An unfinished blue and white porcelain *yang* with inscription on the bottom that denotes its serial number, dated to 1741 in Shanghai Museum (Chen 2022: 227).

According to archaeologist Guangyao Wang (2006: 6, 23), official *yang* refers to the standardised samples set by the government since the Western Zhou period (1046 BC to 771 BC), constituting a part of the ancient Chinese official handicraft production system, serving as a primary method for the government to determine product categories and ensure product quality during the production process. Ceramic official *yang* appears in various classical texts as early as the Tang dynasty, such as in records in *Tang Huiyao* (唐会要), under the section *Taxation*, ‘Yizhou (modern-day Sichuan) has been consistently one of the significant locations for manufacturing ritual vessels since the early Tang Dynasty. The official standard system likely had a strong social foundation in the Shu region’ (Wang 2006:23). Official ceramic *yang* gradually evolves from ritual exemplars to incorporate ‘prescriptive design models to inform production in the recent early modern period’ (Chen 2022: 227). Wang (2006: 8–13) delineates official *yang* primarily into three categories: physical ceramic samples, painted patterns and

wooden models.⁵⁵ Wu questions the creation of official *yang* (prototypes) and expressed a keen interest in items that deviated from these prescribed ideals. The standards for crafting these official items were exceedingly stringent, encompassing technical, social and religious aspects, including demanding a clear and loyal lineage of craftsmanship (Wu 2022). This inquiry led Wu to ponder the significance of pieces that did not meet the criteria of “perfect samples”, often resulting in their destruction and burial in the official kilns underground, instructed by the imperial ceramic inspectors (Wu 2022). The tension between perfect samples and flawed samples in sustaining desired ideals of official *yang* inspired him to critically engage the scale of official *yang*, which, in his eyes, is not limited to the archival records of three categories in the official kilns, but also includes touching, observing the repaired flawed samples and unearthed sherds (fig. 1.28) as references for historical replicas.



⁵⁵ As per Guangyao Wang (2006), ceramic samples in a tangible form denote porcelain objects identified as prototypes during production in the imperial kilns, potentially including antiques from preceding dynasties. Painted patterns encompass diverse designs crafted by palace artists following the emperor's directives, dispatched to the kilns as guidelines for firing various porcelain shapes and patterns. Wooden models entail craftsmen in the Inner Palace utilising wood to craft various objects based on the emperor's instructions.

Figure 1.31: Frank B. Lentz recorded fragments of porcelain found in the streambed several miles downstream from the city, carried there by high water. These deposits seemed to be in layers of 30 to 40 feet thick, accumulated over centuries from the discarded materials of the kilns. Photograph by Frank B. Lentz. *National Geographic*, Nov. 1920, pp.391–406.

Figure 1.32: The contemporary sherd antique market in Jingdezhen provides traces of a connection to centuries of blue-and-white porcelain production, considered an important *yang* source for engagement by Wu. Photography by Brian Kohl. 2015-2016. [photograph online].⁵⁶

Wu unravelled the intricate layers of the blue-and-white tradition, revealing the nuanced processes involved in crafting different standards and archetypal *yang* and brands. The formation of an ideal brand was not only based on the well-researched “perfect samples” but also contributed to the shadowed, countless flawed samples or transitional products that were outside the established canons and standards. Wu considers the birth of archetypal blue-and-white as an evolving technologically, culturally and socially accumulated process that in earlier stages of development took place before the Yuan dynasty (Wu 2022b). This critical approach to archetypal blue-and-white porcelain in Jingdezhen led him to appeal to the cobalt-decorated Tang dish he encountered in South Africa (Wu 2022b).

Historical Tendencies and Contemporary Appropriation: Diverse Registers of Blue-and-white Ceramics in South Africa

Despite a rich history of ceramic-making, South Africa has predominantly been a consumer rather than a producer of blue-and-white ceramics. These ceramics were positioned as ready-made commodities, constituting a vital aspect of the local material culture with historical and aesthetic significance, especially in the narratives of the Cape of Good Hope (1652–1795) (Woodward 1974, 1982; Hall et al. 1990; Malan 1993; Klose 1997; Schrire 2014; Lucas 2006; Esmyol 2020, 2023). The discourse on blue-and-white in South Africa appears more relevant in understanding how these ceramics were consumed and appropriated in local settings, serving as decorative art or daily tableware. This discourse does not extensively delve into the origins of blue-and-white ceramics, such as when and how it was first made in China or the transitional stages before different archetypal blue-and-white ceramics took shape.

Following these local historical tendencies, the discourse of Tang blue-and-white ceramics has not featured in the discussions of Asian ceramic studies or Chinese art in South Africa. By

⁵⁶ Available at: <https://www.briankohlceramics.com/residencies>.

uncovering the intimate engagement with blue-and-white ceramics by local collectors and ceramic experts, I posit that South Africa's omission from the discourse on Tang blue-and-white ceramics can be attributed, in part, to the prevalent focus on appropriating these ceramics within the colonial material culture, immersing contemporary expressions of belonging or social-political commentary in the South African context. Additionally, this absence is also a consequence of the limited involvement from the local Chinese communities in engaging with the collections of blue-and-white ceramics.

Blue-and-white Ceramics in South Africa as a Colonial Legacy

Africa is not an ideal place to collect Chinese art but we all found ways. It is fitting, somehow, that a trade route between Europe and Asia established the country [South Africa] in which we grew up and also sparked the interest we have in all things Chinese (Ollemans 2016: iii)

In the introduction to a prominent South African Chinese art collector Johann Kritzinger's *Youxiantang Collection of Chinese Art* (Kritzinger and Kritzinger 2016), Sue Ollemans (2016: iii), reveals the challenging positionality and sentimental connections to Chinese objects deeply rooted in historical trade. Ollemans' remark may not align with the experiences of local indigenous Khoisan peoples, as discussed in recent conversations about archives and archiving by scholars in southern Africa and elsewhere, challenging the epistemologies of knowledge production regarding the times before European colonialism (Blundell et al., 2022). However, it sheds light on a long and influential historical entanglement of Chinese art, particularly blue-and-white ceramics, with a localised European tradition in South Africa. This symbolic connection marks the beginning of European settlement in South Africa, ultimately playing a role in shaping the cultural landscape of the modern nation state of South Africa. Ollemans' remark is echoed by many South Africans who share a similar sentimental attachment to blue-and-white ceramics, contributing to their sense of belonging in contemporary South Africa (Klose 1997; Schrire 2014; Esmyol 2020, 2023).

Waves of historical and contemporary traded blue-and-white ceramics from Asia and Europe conflate with precolonial trade, colonial settlers and postcolonial migration movements and trade that have left diverse registers of blue-and-white ceramics in archaeological sites, private houses, museum collections and antique markets. Studies of blue-and-white ceramics in South Africa

have mainly focused on the intersection of historical trade routes (Smith 1986; Prinsloo et al. 2005) and the archaeology of ancient kingdom sites during precolonial time and colonial settlement in southern Africa (Woodward 1974; Klose 1997; Klose 2007; Klose and Malan 2000). Small fragments of blue-and-white porcelain made in China were found in Mapungubwe, brought in by Swahili traders spanning from Mozambique and Kenya during the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries (Huffman 2009: 51). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a large quantity of Asian ceramics, mostly blue-and-white porcelain, was found on board with slaves, along with Asian exotics (spice, tea, silks, etc.) shipped from Asia by European traders, such as Portuguese East-Indiamen and the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) – the Dutch East India Company (Turner 1988 and 2019). South Africa occupied a very marginal position in the trade; nevertheless, it grew from a refreshment station for passing ships into a colony in 1652. Archaeologist Gavin Lucas (2006: 191) points out that despite minimal legal trade and official cargo offloading, widespread illicit private trading provided enough commodities to meet the local demand. As a result, the free population could acquire the porcelain in the same way as their counterparts in the Netherlands.

The earliest finds of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain at archaeological land sites include fragments of Kraak porcelain.⁵⁷ These had been found in the area around Van Riebeeck's former fort as well as at Wagenaar's reservoir (Malan and Klose 2014:163; Esmiol 2023:129). Additionally, blue-and-white sherds were regularly found on beaches near shipwrecks along the coastline of South Africa, which have attracted ongoing salvage exploration by divers throughout history (Turner 1988).

The archaeological discoveries were a direct historical material experience of the origins of blue-and-white ceramics specifically related to the South African context. As a result, it has ignited enthusiasm among generations of South African collectors and art dealers, leading them to actively collect, study and trade blue-and-white ceramics. The Jerling Collection, for instance, finds its roots in the archaeological findings of the São Gonçalo shipwrecks in 1630, originally destined for Europe (Strauss & Co 2021: 20). Blue-and-white porcelain sherds uncovered near

⁵⁷ Kraak ware denotes a specific category of blue-and-white export porcelain crafted from approximately 1573 in private kilns situated in Jingdezhen. These ceramics were discovered aboard Portuguese ships in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, decorated with various motifs, and are depicted in Dutch paintings (Esmiol 2023).

Jerling's residence in Plettenberg Bay prompted the Jewish couple to pursue a lifelong passion for collecting such pieces, a pursuit that began in the 1980s (Strauss & Co 2021: 20). They procured items from diverse dealers in Johannesburg, including Sotheby's, Parke Bernet, La Chine des Ts'ing, Disegno Interior Design Studio, and Gray's in London.



Figure 1.33: In the auction held on 12 October 1982, at 6E Mutual Square, Rosebank, Johannesburg, Sue Ollemans of La Chine des Ts'ing sold a 17th-century Chinese Swatow blue-and-white dish to the Jerling family, featuring a phoenix amidst flowers and bamboo. This piece was later part of the April 2021 sale by Strauss & Co, titled "19th Century, Modern, Post-War and Contemporary Art, Decorative Arts, Jewellery and Wine," listed as lot 184 (Strauss & Co 2021: 20).

The origin of the *Youxiantang* collection of Chinese art, as Johann Kritzinger (2016: iii) articulates, was to collect Chinese blue-and-white ware for decoration in 1983. From a book published about a shipwreck in the Cape, Johann began his long-term partnership with Ollemans in growing his Chinese art collection. Despite blue-and-white ceramics not being his focus, the two pieces in his collection retain 'a special nostalgic significance' for the family (Kritzinger 2016:279).



Figure 1.34: Kraak porcelain bowl, in Wanli, Ming dynasty, featuring a hare in a garden in the centre of the piece with ten alternating panels of peaches and blossoms. The piece was acquired through Sue Ollemans. *The Youxiantang Collection*. Photography by Monique Mance-O'Shea and Ninna Zilla Bekink. (Kritzinger 2016: 282).



Figure 1.35: A late 17th-century Japanese blue-and-white Arita with a central rondel with the VOC monogram, flanked by two birds perched amidst pomegranate and camelia with six alternating panels of peony and bamboo. Dimensions: diameter 38,5cm. This piece was sold by Sue Ollemans in 2000 and resold by Russell Kaplan in an auction titled 'Grande Wunderkammer Auction', held from 23 November to 3 December 2023.



Figure 1.36: An exhibition catalogue of Sue Ollemans in 2002, featured a similar Japanese blue-and-white Arita dish on the cover. [photography] Photos Courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Notably, blue-and-white ceramics in South Africa are not limited to those of Chinese origin. Japanese imitations of Chinese porcelain, known as Arita (fig. 1.35 and 1.36), as well as Persian fritware, were alternative replacements brought in by the VOC during China's transitional war period (1646 and 1720) from the Ming dynasty to the Qing dynasty. In contrast to Shengkai Wu, who shows limited interest in Japanese blue-and-white imitations in South Africa, Arita blue-and-white porcelain from Japan has sparked considerable attention among South African

collectors, curators and ceramic experts (Woodward, 1974). Woodward (1974: 17–31) contends that Arita bears particular relevance to South Africa, presenting a comprehensive array of designs painted in underglaze blue featuring the V.O.C. lettering of the Dutch East India Company. The enduring practice of family private trade ensured a continuous influx of these items to the Cape throughout the eighteenth century, establishing them as an integral component of Cape tableware. Expanding on Woodward's insights, a collaborative exhibition by Sue Ollemans, Michael Stevenson and Deon Viljoen titled 'The Cape House: Decorative Arts relating to the Cape of Good Hope' in 1999 showcased Arita blue-and-white porcelain alongside furniture and pictures historically appropriate for Cape house interiors. The exhibition aimed to present a contemporary 'imaginative re-interpretation in frontier society' of the Cape of Good Hope (Sue et al., 1999: 4; 20–28).

The Cape's first official consignments of Chinese porcelain from Jingdezhen only arrived in 1678 and 1681. Among the fine blue-and-white porcelain that arrived in South Africa through private trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the blue-and-white ceramics in South Africa also feature a style of densely potted, cheaper version, known as coarse ware or provincial ware, which was primarily produced in China for the Asian market. Within this group, falls Swatow-style, as shown in the Jerling collection (figure. 1.33), a type of coarse ceramics made in Zhangzhou near Fujian province in China. Coarse wares were found in the Cape inventories in kitchens and other rooms; however, no explicit evidence indicates they were used by slaves (Klose 2007: 49; Malan 2007; Klose and Schrire 2014: 106).

Since the ceramic revolution took place in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, industrially manufactured ware, including refined, printed blue-and-white wares began to change the Asian-dominated market in South Africa (Klose and Malan 2000). Drawing insights from excavations conducted in and around Cape Town, specifically at locations like Tennant Street, archaeologists and ceramic experts Jane Klose and Antonia Malan (2000: 50) note that industrial wares, such as Staffordshire wares, emerged as the predominant ceramic artefacts in collections from various nineteenth-century colonial South African sites by the conclusion of the century.

The grand narrative of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain being *destructive* of all potteries it encountered (Pierson 2012: 9–10) seems to issue from an illusion of false grandeur,⁵⁸ which places the blue-and-white ceramics as the main inflicting body and overlooks the agency of the local appropriators such as the V.O.C, collectors, art dealers and various foreign contributors beyond China. Moreover, the validity of this claim is further called into question by the absence of local African and Chinese narratives concerning blue-and-white ceramics.

‘Hyphenated Seeing’: Multiple Origins and Displacement of the Present

Examining the blue-and-white porcelain pieces with explicit provenance ties to Sue Ollemans reveals her particular affinity for archetypal blue-and-white porcelain, especially with the V.O.C monogram of the Dutch East India Company. This preference was notable from the 1980s to 2002 when Ollemans actively curated exhibitions focusing on the stories of the Dutch East India Company. These blue-and-white porcelain pieces held a profound significance for her, serving as iconic homemaking necessities in Cape houses and contributing more to her feelings of “at-homeness” than the Tang blue-decorated plate from China sold during the same period.

The notion of a ‘hyphenated condition’ in diasporic discussions was initially introduced by the American Chinese writer Diana Chang in 1976 (Ling 1980: 69). Chang describes the ‘bifocalness’ of her identity as an ongoing effort to maintain equilibrium, metaphorically teetering on the edge of a hyphen, sometimes leaning towards one side and then attempting to regain balance, only to sway towards the other side (Ling 1980: 69). In a film study, *A Letter to My Cousin in China*, Ruth Simbao (2023: 28–49) further posits the concept of ‘hyphenated seeing’ to decipher how South African Chinese photographer Henion Han navigated a traumatic experience of “seeing” and recording the process of reburying the remains of his family caught in-between the geopolitical tension of multiple Chinas and homemaking in Chinese diaspora.

Building upon Simbao’s notion of hyphenated seeing to understand Henion Han’s “collaboration” with his camera, I consider the way Sue Ollemans engages with blue-and-white ceramics in South Africa as constituting a form of hyphenated seeing in cultivating a sense of

⁵⁸ African philosopher John Ayotunde (Tunde) Isola Bewaji responded to the author's presentation during a seminar at Rhodes University in 2023 by proposing a diverse array of African pottery, exemplified by figures like Ladi Kwali, and various forms of art such as the Terracotta of Nupe and Ife Art from different African communities. These examples were put forward to counter the popular narrative of “destruction” associated with Chinese blue-and-white porcelain (Carswell 1985; Finlay 2010), offering a nuanced African perspective.

belonging and navigating her identity. Growing up in South Africa, taken to Hong Kong as a child in 1965, later trained at the Percival David Foundation, SOAS, London, in the 1970s, and leading a life continuously spanning London, Hong Kong and South Africa, Ollemans has constructed an Asian art trade career that connects the East to Europe. Just as she positions South Africa as a hub originating from ‘extensive trade between the East and Europe’ (Ollemans 2023), these archetypal blue-and-white pieces symbolise the origin of her identity and materialise the condition of “hyphenated seeing” and the feeling of being at home as she continues to live amid cities in South African historical traded ceramic networks.

Ollemans’ approach to hyphenated seeing in relation to the legacy of historical traded ceramics reflects her engagement with issues of identity and belonging in a unique and personal manner. As noted by ceramist Ann Marais (2018:21) and Esther Esmyol (2020:16), this introspective process is not unique to Ollemans; it constitutes a shared condition among the descendants of early settlers who are situated within the intricate intersection of historical trade ceramics and the enduring legacy of the colonial era in South African history. Within this context, individuals grapple with a “hybrid existence”, carrying a dual consciousness that encompasses both European and African facets (Esmyol 2020:16).

Denying the Colonial Hyphen: From ‘Irritating’⁵⁹ Objects to the Emerging New Chinese Voices

Since the 1990s, emerging revisionist ceramic discourses aiming to recover neglected traditions of African indigenous pottery, while critically reflecting on a constructed “sense of African-ness”, have progressively influenced curatorial practices in South African museums as part of a broader decolonising research in art history (Marschall 1999; Perrill 2008; Gers 2019:19; Buss 2018; Watt 2022:237; Nxumalo 2023). Blue-and-white artefacts, as well as significant Chinese ceramic collections, such as the Davis Collection of Chinese ceramics at the Iziko Museum

⁵⁹ Art ethnographer Julia Kelly characterised the under-researched or unusual objects of non-Western materials in collections as ‘irritating’, with the ability to ‘annoy and provoke’ Western tradition of ethnographic and archaeological principles (2007: 2–3). Drawing inspiration from Kelly’s conceptualisation, in the South African context, art historian Nicola Kritzinger (2023: 141–153) introduces the concept of ‘irritating objects’ to characterise certain overlooked Chinese ceramics within South African museums. The lack of critical engagement with these objects, Kritzinger argues, is primarily attributable to a deficiency in East Asian expertise in South Africa. From a broader socio-political point of view, I extend the “irritating” objects to encompass the well-researched blue-and-white ceramics, posing challenges for curators. These ceramics present a dilemma in contemporary South Africa by embodying enduring colonial connotations and facing the risk of theft due to their market value.

(Esmyol 1999), associated with colonial legacy, appear to be regarded as “irritating” objects in the context of the curatorial shift. They are often left behind in the museum storerooms (Ollemans 2023; Kritzinger 2023: 141). The occurrences of thefts in museums,⁶⁰ against the backdrop of the highly appreciated international market value for some of these Chinese pieces, become a disturbing distress that Ollemans grapples with as she senses a displacement of the present when the material condition of her constructed hyphenated seeing is dismantling (Ollemans 2023).

In the midst of this Chinese ceramic artefacts’ crisis, a notable lack of interest from local Chinese communities has been observed by ceramic experts (Ollemans 2023). Ollemans advocates for a curatorial strategy to bring more exposure to the “irritating” Chinese artefacts within local Chinese communities. Substantial research on the ground is required to provide a comprehensive and potent explanation for this phenomenon, considering the complex and multiple Chinese communities across history. Based on existing material culture studies on Chinese communities in South Africa and my preliminary contact with a few community members, it seems that the disjuncture between local Chinese communities and Chinese ceramic collections in museums was historically related to the “othering” of Chinese immigrants from the colonial period to the Apartheid era. Trapped in the dichotomy of Black and white discourse, the small population was neglected in public culture, aside from historical records on Chinese indentured labourers or forced removal histories, which fits into the mainstream narratives of anti-colonial and apartheid struggles. The blue-and-white ceramics in the museums had not been incorporated into the ways local Chinese communities construct their Chinese heritage but were more relevant to the colonial European heritage tradition formation.

Notably, the increasing China–Africa discourse has introduced new lineage to the matrix of blue-and-white ceramics in the contemporary context, transcending the traditional colonial framework in South Africa. A recent and noteworthy example is a blue-and-white vase (figure 1.37) donated by Xi Jinping, who became the President of China in 2013. This diplomatic gift was presented to the University Museum of Pretoria in 2010 during an official trip to South Africa (De Kamper 2018: 71).

⁶⁰ As per Gerard De Kamper, in 2010, during the exhibition *101 Ceramics from the Collections of the University of Pretoria*, a theft occurred, and a Chinese Yuan Dynasty Longquan celadon vase was stolen from the exhibition (De Kamper 2018:71).



Figure 1.37: An exquisite imitation of a Qianlong dragon blue-and-white vase, featuring a five-clawed dragon adorned with auspicious clouds and bats, symbolising wishes of good luck to South Africa and the museum. The University of Pretoria has the largest Chinese ceramic collection in South Africa. Photo provided by Gerard Christiaan De Kamper.

Since the late 1980s, with the influx of new waves of Chinese immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China into the diverse realms of blue-and-white ceramics in South Africa, individual collectors like Shengkai Wu have begun to discern the different origins of blue-and-white artefacts in the local antique market. Wu has also introduced a new dimension of “hyphenated seeing” based on the material condition of blue-and-white ceramics exclusively made in China. His perception of blue-and-white hyphenates towards its Chinese origins as a producer with traces of prototypes. While appreciating the localised appropriation of blue-and-

white ceramics, such as the V.O.C monogram dishes, among multiple registers of archetypal blue-and-white ceramics, Wu is particularly concerned about the blue-and-white producing culture – the process of blue-and-white formation in China. Rather than simply regarding archetypal blue-and-white ceramics as a matter of commodity apart from the semiotic values they have in the South African context, Wu emphasises the importance of comprehending the origins of blue-and-white ceramics in China, introducing fresh perspectives on the object as ‘the immanent presentation of prototypical minds’ (Küchler et al. 2021: 85).

Making Noise: Moving away From Archetypal Brands

Anthropological relationships are real and biographical consequential ones, which articulate to the agent’s biographical “life project”. – (Gell 1998, 11)

In his seminal work, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, British anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998:11) considers the object as a temporal entity, with its existence and biographical evolution closely intertwined with that of its human counterparts. He describes the agency of objects as active participants, not merely passive signifiers. Implicit within this theorisation is the reciprocity in subject formation.

This study has traced Shengkai Wu’s trajectory in China concerning blue-and-white ceramics, unpacking the implicit historical and contemporary appropriation of these ceramics in the context of South Africa. Inspired by Susanne Küchler and Carroll Timothy’s recent revisit on the scholarly works of Franz Boas and Alfred Gell, this section treats ‘the formal qualities of the object itself as thought’ (2020:10). It conducts a critical analysis of Shengkai Wu’s manuscript while accumulating an object biography of the Tang plate.

The study demonstrates the way Wu employs abductive reasoning as form of interference to move away from conventional categorisation or idealised models of blue-and-white. It pushes the idea of Tang blue-and-white into larger relations of thought. This leads us to pose the questions: What is the object (the Tang cobalt-decorated plate) in relation to the idea (Tang blue-and-white)? Alternatively, how the idea of Tang blue-and-white embedded in the object?

Conceptualising the Formation of the Canon as a Gradual Development

In his 2000 manuscript, Wu initially raised questions about the sudden appearance in the global market of archetypal blue-and-white porcelain from Jingdezhen during the Yuan Dynasty. He observes that ‘the craftsmanship, quality of the body and glaze, colour of the cobalt blue,

decorative patterns and overall appearance had all reached an exceptionally high level.’ Wu’s analysis of Yuan blue-and-white porcelain contemplates the notion of “virtuosity”, emphasising the intricacies of form in upholding a ceramic canon, epitomised by Yuan blue-and-white porcelain. Virtuosity, in this context, refers to the ‘complete control of technical process’ and the ‘beauty of form, the evenness of texture’ that Yuan archetypal blue-and-white porcelain represents (Boas 1955: 17, 18).

However, Following Karel Arnaut’s line of thought, each specific technical aspect of virtuosity listed by Wu, possibly related to a ‘gradual’ development of the categorisation (2000) also involves conceptual and content codifications ‘decided by a dominant group or society as a whole’ (Kaepler, Kaufmann and Newton 1997: 309). Using a personification analogy, Wu suggests that the development of blue-and-white porcelain is comparable to human growth, undergoing a lengthy process of maturation rather than making leaps from infancy to maturity. Wu’s abductive reasoning begins with a formal analysis of the object, delving into the cobalt-decorated Tang plate to discern ‘patterns of relation’ (Bateson 1979) that connects ‘sameness and difference’ across artefacts in the archetypal blue-and-white genre and controversial objects in the grey area, such as the Tang plate in circulation.

To navigate the complexities of “sameness and difference” within one unit of analysis, while comparing the Tang plate with archetypal blue-and-white in the abductive reasoning process, Wu proposes viewing the Tang plate as a ‘proto-blue-and-white’ (原始青花). Drawing on Gregory Bateson (1979) and Alfred Gell (1998)’s arguments on model and pattern, Susanne Küchler and Carrol Timothy (2020) argue that ‘the possibility of thinking with models, is an issue of metacognition founded upon *metapattern*’, recognised through abduction.

Abduction, operating in a “backward” manner from effect to cause, holds a practical dimension. This approach enables Wu to interpret the ‘behaviour or qualities’ of the object, thereby making assumptions about its origin (Küchler and Timothy 2020: 14) and categorisation. Based on Wu’s manuscript, I attempt to uncover how, using abductive reasoning, Wu infers the patterns of relation between the archetypal blue-and-white and the Tang blue-decorated plate, particularly the way he invites the Tang plate to speak as the immanent presentation of prototypical minds. Wu does not make “noise” alone that ruptures the established canon of blue-and-white porcelain.



Figure 1.38: A profile of the Tang blue-and-white plate reveals minute clay erosion and glaze peeling along the rim. An accidentally carved line running across the middle of the body implies the moment of a spiral motion during its creation, indicative of a somewhat rustic craftsmanship. Dimensions: 2.3cm high, diameter 10.8cm, foot ring diameter 7.0cm. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.



Figure 1.39: The Tang blue-and-white plate is fully glazed on the inside, featuring circles of shadowy lines and three firing support marks at the bottom centre. The white glaze is relatively thin with a subtle yellowish tint. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.



Figure. 1.40: The outer bottom of the plate is flat, exhibiting spiral patterns and a shallow kiln crack approximately 1.5 cm in length. A red seal indicates that it has been officially registered by Chinese customs as an antiquity. Shengkai Wu's collection. Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.



Figure 1.41: The image reveals that where the very thin glaze has come off, a tiny white spot appears on the grey-yellow surface on the side of the plate, as highlighted in the red square. This indicates that a white slip was applied to the coarse body before the glaze was added to the plate (Wu 2023b). Photo courtesy of Shengkai Wu.

Through a detailed visual analysis as well as an interactive process of ‘touching and matching’ (Wu 2023b), the Tang plate exhibits distinctive *behaviours* and lacks the virtuosity embodied in the archetypal blue-and-white ceramics. Wu draws from a broad range of Chinese scholarly studies on blue-and-white ceramics, based on the Chinese tradition at that time, to understand the plate. He primarily scrutinises it in terms of ‘modelling (造型), clay body, cobalt glaze and decorative designs’, I identify these four aspects as *patterns of relation*, representing an attempt to connect the Tang plate to the archetypal blue-and-white ceramics, aiming to construct similarities between two objects of distinct behaviours.

According to Chinese ceramic specialist Feng Xianming’s archaeological report on the Gongxian kiln in 1957,⁶¹ where Tang blue-and-white porcelain was believed to be produced, Wu’s Tang plate shares the same modelling as the Gongxian white-glazed ceramic plates described by Feng, featuring a ‘straight mouth, flat bottom, full glaze inside the plate, and an unglazed centre at the bottom outside’ (Feng 1959: 56). Wu contends that this modelling can be observed in the depictions of daily utensils used by maids in Tang Dynasty murals and in the white porcelain plate unearthed from the tomb of Li Shuang (dated to 668 AD).

⁶¹ Feng, X. 冯先铭 (1959). Henan gongxian guyaozhi diaocha jiyao 河南巩县古窑址调查记要 [Summary of the Investigation of Ancient Kiln Sites in Gong County, Henan Province], Wenwu 文物[Cultural Relics], (03), 56–58.

Clay Body

The thickly potted, white-slipped body is also observed in the three blue-and-white dishes on the Belitung Shipwreck (fig. 1.26). However, despite being present in a similar coarse style, the bodies of the three Tang blue-and-white dishes appear to be denser, smoother, whiter and with fewer impurities. Sharing a similar clay composite of kaolin from Gongxian with a tint of pink colour, the Belitung shipwreck dishes appear to have a more refined clay processing skill. Additionally, they do not have firing support marks, as seen at the bottom centre of Wu's plate. The Belitung Tang blue-and-white dishes, as well as later archetypal blue-and-white porcelain, showcase more advanced firing techniques. Saggars – ceramic, box-like containers – were employed to protect the clay body, reducing the risk of kiln cracks, which is evident in Wu's plate (fig. 3.39). Consequently, Wu suggests that this plate was likely produced between the early Tang period and the Kaiyuan era of Emperor Xuanzong (618–741).

Cobalt Glaze and Decorative Designs

Throughout the Tang plate, there are scattered and well-arranged blue underglaze dots from the inside to the rim. The blue dots vary in size and shape, exhibiting dark blue hues, with some even slightly appearing black. During firing, the cobalt pigment flowed downward and diffused around the surroundings, creating a splash effect. As a result, most of the blue dots form an illusionary patch with different shades. Upon closer inspection with a microscope, Wu poetically describes the visual effect as follows: 'The transparent glaze surface, resembling delicate blossoms like cicada wings, reveals the randomly dotted underglaze blue as if a sleeping beauty lies within a crystal dome – serene, elegant, hazy and mysterious' (2000:5).

Drawing on Chinese scholarly investigations into the origins of Tang blue-and-white ceramics in the early years, Wu also pinpoints the use of cobalt blue as a decorative technique as a key aspect in exploring the birth of Tang blue-and-white. Wu suggests that the use of cobalt pigments and underglaze painting should be considered the two fundamental techniques defining Tang blue-and-white ceramics. He also rejects categorising the plate as blue *sancai*, citing substantial differences in the materials and technologies used for cobalt in *sancai* compared to the archetypal blue-and-white ceramics. In the case of blue *sancai* glaze, cobalt material was transformed into a blue lead glaze, applied to the biscuit-fired body either alone or with other coloured glazes. This was often followed by a second low-temperature firing (800–1000°C) to mature the lead glaze. In contrast, archetypal blue-and-white ceramics utilised cobalt pigment,

not a cobalt glaze, to paint motifs on the unfired body. The painted body was then coated with a transparent, colourless lime-alkali glaze, followed by a single high-temperature firing at 1250°C and above (Wood 1999: 61).

Notably, in the latest report based on an archaeological and scientific research on Tang and Song blue-and-white porcelain, Zhang Yun and A. Mark Pollard (2022:1407) use the term blue-decorated ceramics to include a discussion about Tang blue-and-white, Song blue-and-white and blue *sancai* wares in relation to the archetypal blue-and-white porcelain. They argue that the birth of Tang blue-and-white was inspired by Tang blue *sancai* as it provides the material (cobalt source) and technique of cobalt pigment/glaze. Zhang and Pollard argue that the generally agreed Tang blue-and-white porcelain in the shards occur after blue *sancai* but earlier than archetypal blue-and-white porcelain.

Wu's argument, formulated in 2000, partially aligns with the recent research by Zhang and Pollard. However, Wu teases out a looser framework for defining Tang blue-and-white ceramics, one that covers an evolving, intuitive state of Tang blue-and-white making characterised by 'less skilled' or 'experimental' ceramic technology. This evolving stage is akin to the concept described by Trevor Marchand (2009: 123) through his observation of craftspeople in Djenné, Mali and Yemen, where he characterises it as 'creative experimentation' involving a 'an understanding of the environment drawn from daily and mundane interaction' to counter material failure. This institutive process leaves traces of artefacts of failure and success before artisans finally reach a relatively stable, unified production of Tang blue-and-white porcelain in the late Tang Dynasty. Wu's framework highlights artefacts existing in a grey area with contested categorisation.

Through abductive reasoning, Wu moves away from a straight categorisation of Tang blue-and-white ceramics and archetypal blue-and-white porcelain. Instead, he positions the object as model within larger relations of thought. Despite critiques, such as those regarding 'additional specimens of so-called Tang blue-and-white ware', which reject the well-recognised category of cobalt-decorated burial ware by ceramic experts like Regina Krah (2011:209), Wu's perception reflects a process of historical configuration shared by many contemporary Chinese collectors and scholars who engage in a translational context of ceramic discourse.

Adding the Prefix “Proto”: A Linguistic and Technological Dilemma of Reading Chinese Ci (瓷)

In modern Chinese, ceramics only divide into two types, *tao* 陶 (pottery) and *ci* 瓷 (porcelain) which does not correlate with the Western tripartite system that divides ceramics into porcelain, stoneware and earthenware. The lower-fired *tao* (pottery) material corresponds to English earthenware and some categories of stoneware, whereas high-fired *ci* (porcelain) in the Chinese context covers both stoneware and porcelain (Kerr et al. 2004: 11, Ye 2011: 212; Zhang 2022: 1408).

Both Nigel Wood (2004) and Ye Zhemín (2011) have addressed the transnational challenge in associating the Chinese term *ci* with porcelain. In modern English, the term “porcelain” was coined by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century from “*porcellana*,” originally used to describe the translucent cowrie shell resembling porcelain. Marco Polo linked Chinese porcelain to this translucent white shell. However, in reality, Chinese porcelain, or *ci* (瓷), may not necessarily be white or translucent. In ancient China, the criteria for defining *ci* focused on the gloss of the glaze and the firmness of the body (Ye 2011: 212), without emphasising translucency. Classical texts describe *ci* with a jade-like hue and texture. Beyond the visual aspect of glaze gloss, *ci* in Chinese writings also refers to materials that are dense, typically high-fired. The tradition of using sound to assess the quality of *ci* when struck continues to be employed, in part, by contemporary Chinese scholars⁶² and collectors as a criterion for *ci* (Ye 2011 and Zhang 2022; Li, Chen, Pollard and Wang 2022). Although these traditional cognitive methods may not precisely determine firing temperatures according to modern scientific standards, they do reflect traces of ancient ceramic technology.

However, attempts of transcultural correlation in understanding *ci* do not work effectively in a complicated process of historical configuration, even though Chinese ceramic studies have increasingly embraced the modern ceramic technology based on clear firing temperature and laboratory content testing of clay body. As a result, what Wu refers to as *ci* or designates as ‘Tang blue-and-white *ci*’ encompasses a much broader range of ceramic objects than the archetypal blue-and-white porcelain. This broader categorisation arises from a lack of clear firing temperature distinctions in the traditional culture of *ci*. Despite the firing temperature of this

⁶² In 1960, Professor An Jinhui discovered glazed ceramics in Zhengzhou Shang city ruins, similar to those “glazed pottery” from Yin ruins discovered in 1929 (Li 1930). He defined celadon (the earliest well-known category of *ci* in a Chinese context) based on criteria: made of kaolin, sometimes mixed with quartz or feldspar powder; glazed surface; hard, well-fired, and produces a crisp sound when knocked; does not absorb moisture (An, 1960).

Tang plate being slightly below 1200°C, it could be understood as a form of “Tang blue-and-white Ci” (唐青花瓷).

In the European tradition, as Ollemans indicates, the term porcelain is reserved for the very white, high-fired ceramics that are often translucent, and the archetypal blue-and-white Chinese porcelains exported in large quantity from Jingdezhen were the most iconic examples. Therefore, Ollemans dismissed the plate as Tang blue-and white due to its firing temperature being slightly below 1200°C. Zhang Pusheng, the archaeologist who unearthed the Tang blue-and-white fragments in Yangzhou, points out that the initial stages of Tang blue-and-white’s firing temperature could be 1180 degrees ± 20 , which belongs to the stoneware under English criteria.

A parallel example could be draw in the case of “proto-celadon”. In 1971, when the Chinese government planned overseas exhibitions, green glazed ceramics (*qing ci*, referred to as “Celadon” in English) discovered in the Zhengzhou Shang city ruins, posed a naming challenge. An Jinhui suggested calling them *ci* (celadon), but Vadim Elisseeff, the French–Russian exhibition organiser, insisted on “glazed pottery” due to varying firing temperatures. To address this, the term “proto-celadon” was introduced and has been widely used since by Chinese scholars to trace the origin of celadon from the Shang and Zhou dynasties (Cao 2018; Li et al. 2022). The book *History of Chinese Ceramics* explicitly notes that celadon discovered during the Shang and Zhou dynasties represents a ‘transition period from pottery to porcelain’ and should be classified as celadon but belongs to the “primary stage” of celadon. Therefore, it is suggested to refer to it more aptly as “proto-celadon” (Li, 1978; Li et al. 2022). A recent collaborative testing by Chinese and UK archaeologists argued that proto-celadon is essentially celadon; proto-celadon is a compromised academic argument that does not have a scientific basis. Based on extensive sample testing, the article establishes a new definition of celadon with firing temperatures equal to or higher than 1100°C.

Adding a prefix to “blue-and-white” or “celadon” to establish an evolving and chronological point of view has been dismissed by archaeologists and ceramic experts in both cases of blue-and-white and celadon, as they dispute the narratives of origins in relation to a gradual development of the classification category. They propose a scientific interpretation based on sample testing to reclassify different definitions and canons. Notably, this way of interpretation relies on the availability of sufficient samples from reliable sources, such as archaeological sites. In writing the history of Chinese ceramics, Chinese scholars such as Feng Xianming (1997) and

Ye Zhemin (2011) have undergone a transitional stage since the 1970s to re-classify *ci* in China according to the “porcelain” in English criteria. The latest reports conducted by Chinese scholars on Tang blue-and-white porcelain have strictly followed the English criteria and Tang blue-and-white porcelain is generally believed to sparked briefly in late Tang (Zhang 2022; Li etc 2017).

Conclusion

Returning to an anthropology of art perspective, Francesca Bray and Barbara Hahn (2022: 276) propose a critical understanding of technology, asserting that ‘it is not an autonomous force but instead a kind of art and a type of knowledge’. They argue that material products are inextricably cultural, expressing human values and identities. One could see the growing tendency among Chinese academics to reclassify blue-and-white artefacts based on sample testing, which is essentially an object-oriented approach to materiality. It is also noteworthy to observe a broader trend in scientific ceramic studies, moving towards a more inclusive approach that incorporates the historical and cultural aspect into knowledge production. This involves considering a wider range of characteristics of the finished product into a canon, such as re-establishing temperature criteria. For instance, the new definition of firing temperature for celadon suggests ‘it should be equal to or higher than 1100°C’, in contrast to the initial sample proposed by Li firing at 1310°C $\pm 20^\circ\text{C}$ (Li et al. 2022). Notably, the firing temperature of Tang blue-and-white porcelain is 1200°C, significantly lower than the archetypal *yuan* blue-and-white porcelain, at around 1,300 to 1,400 °C.

These “compromises” or “revisions” are critical scientific signs of addressing who and what counts in the history of technology, addressing the role of “noisy” agents in a grey area. The noise Wu has created challenges the conventional narrative of archetypal blue-and-white, creating a crossways of historical configurations wherein Chinese ancient ceramic technology, the linguistic and transcultural dilemma and traditional cognitive methods intersect with an increasingly homogeneous modern understanding of technology. The temporality nature of Tang blue-and-white, seen as an experiential framework, is attributed to the cultural and positionality of various agencies. Sue Ollemans, trained in the European tradition, views the Tang blue-and-white differently from Wu, as a border-crossing Chinese immigrant collector in South Africa. The disputes about the blue-and-white underscores the ‘complicated rootedness and various lived

experiences of rootedness' (Neville 2021: 3) attached to the meaning-making of blue-and-white in South Africa.

In summary, this chapter has situated Shengkai Wu's biographical narratives within a broader historical and political context in China and South Africa, aiming to uncover how the loss of his philately collection was overcome and his personal agency as a collector restored through migration to South Africa. It also delves into detail regarding how he continues to deepen his knowledge of philately as a means to engage with local communities and find a sense of belonging in South Africa. Through a case study of a "Shanghai large dragon" stamp, the chapter illustrates how the symbolic potency of the dragon, acting as a "national totem", serves as a powerful catalyst (Sleeboom 2002) for Chinese national sentiment among contemporary Chinese immigrants like Wu, who traverse between South Africa and China.

Beyond philately studies, the chapter also examines Wu's ceramic collecting through comprehensive investigations into the histories of blue-and-white ceramics in China and South Africa, respectively. By revealing a controversial "Tang blue-and-white" plate collected by Wu in South Africa, it showcases the diverse appropriation and intricate connection between South Africa and China, consciously framing the discourse of "blue-and-white" as a field of critical inquiry for identity and material culture studies in China–Africa relations. The chapter employs highly personal and meticulous scrutiny to argue for the importance of uncovering ordinary objects and individuals that have been overshadowed by the spectacle of celebrity objects and collectors.

Notably, Shengkai Wu has encountered what Boris Nieswand (2011:124) describes as the transnational "status paradox of migration." This paradox emphasises the context-dependent valuation of resources and the relative nature of social standings within the framework of transnational migration. Nieswand's concept specifically addresses a prevalent phenomenon among a broad category of labour migrants from the Global South to the Global North. These migrants occupy an uncertain position, as they are not acknowledged as highly qualified by the standards of their host countries, yet they are not considered unskilled by the measures of their countries of origin (Nieswand 2011: 2). Shengkai Wu's case contributes to Nieswand's theorisation by offering insight into the dynamics of migration movements within the Global South, particularly how Wu's social standing shifted from an elite class in China, where he was a highly skilled government officer, to a middle-class shop owner in South Africa. This transition

has on one hand, restricted his access to highly valuable artifacts; on the other hand, it has enabled him to adopt a strategic, long-term collecting approach focused on ordinary artifacts with unique histories, informed by his particular positionality in South Africa. Similarly, Chapter Two examines how Yiyuan Yang's transnational relocation forced him to transition from a middle-class economic status in China to a low-income bracket in South Africa. I explore how this "status paradox" has shaped Yang's agency as a self-appointed collector of Chinese culture and heritage, intersecting with his growing affinity for ordinary artifacts and artisans. The connection between the status paradox of migration in the Global South and collecting practices in the Global South is further analysed in the conclusion of the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: YIYUAN YANG: A STYLE OF MYTHOREALISM

A friend who practices Tantric Buddhism told me that I have the talent for collecting in the present life because I have reincarnated for several lives..., things are from past lives and are related to past lives. The afterlife of Buddhism is not completely imaginary, but there are too few people who encounter this experience.... These objects are spiritual... active... Objects are waiting for me; this is fate. They choose me. – (Yang 2020).

How do various logics of collecting, stemming from culturally and community-constituted signifiers, either separate or together unite us in understanding collecting practices beyond the canonical paradigm in the Global South? This chapter employs an interdisciplinary approach, bridging material culture with literary theories such as mythorealism (*shenshi zhuyi* 神实主义) and border poetics. Through this lens, a more comprehensive analysis emerges concerning Yiyuan Yang's integrative approach to collecting practices, intersecting with seal-carving, calligraphy and poetry. Yang's narratives suggest a mythological, inward-looking, experiential logic in collecting, echoing the signature style of Chinese writer Yanlian Ke. This style of mythorealism anchored in Chinese folk and socialist signifiers illuminates contemporary China's complexities, encompassing rapid economic growth, temporal distortions and the darker facets of modernity (Cao 2016; Xie 2023). Lianke Yan's mythorealism disrupts the traditional linear cause-and-effect framework, which is often seen as central to literary narrative progression (Song 2016: 646). The unpredictable and ever-changing social, political, and cultural landscape in mainland China has left writers and scholars grappling with the pace of a transformative era is so rapid that fiction struggles to keep up with reality (Song 2016: 646). Lianke Yan contends that attention should instead be directed towards an 'illogical logic' and an 'irrational rationality' that transcend conventional cause-and-effect connections (Song 2016: 646). Yan's mythorealist works can be seen as relentless and meticulous attempts to track, analyse, and critique this intricate and volatile reality.

Despite addressing contentious social issues and painful historical events, Lianke Yan mitigated the overtly political tone by transcending mere opposition (Xie 2023). As Xie elucidates, Lianke Yan employed mythorealism not only to surpass the constraints of a purely argumentative storyline but also deftly shifted his focus to encompass broader themes such as humanism, existential dilemmas and spiritual challenges. Yan defines 'imaginations, metaphors,

myths, legends, dreams, fantasy, demonisation and transplantation born from everyday life and social reality’ as mythorealist methods and conduits (Yan, cited and translated in Song 2016: 645). Through these means, he reflects the perplexing realities of Maoist and post-Maoist China. Aoife Cantrill (2021: 141) argues that Yan’s novels highlight the inescapable presence of Maoist discursive legacies in contemporary society. Yan particularly illuminates how the persistent habits of labelling and categorisation keep his protagonists in a liminal state, torn between “entering the world” (rushì 入世)—which he interprets as ‘active participation in social change’—and ‘withdrawing from the world’ (chushi 出世) (Cantrill 2021: 142; Liu 2015). The ongoing influence of social categories and labels, determining who is “in” and who is “out,” continues to shape Yan’s own experience as a writer to this day (Cantrill 2021: 142).

Yiyuan Yang, a poet, calligraphy and seal-carving artist, Taiqi master and collector based in South Africa, grapples with a similar complex “burden” of implications of Maoist China. His trajectory spans from Beijing to the Loess Plateau, leading him around Europe before settling in Johannesburg in 1992. I read his collecting practices as a mythorealist form of “writing.” Through storytelling, artefacts, imagery, metaphors, myths, legends, Yang employs non-narrative vocabularies to navigate the complexities of his experience. These elements serve as conduits for conveying an internal truth, reconstructing the past and negotiating the uncanny realities of the post-Mao era within the Chinese diaspora. In doing so, Yang translates fragments of history into an ambiguous and enigmatic existence (Xie 2023:114).

In Yang’s mythorealist exploration of collecting, I argue that the village and experiences of the Cultural Revolution continue to resonate with him in South Africa, embodied in objects with socialist aesthetics. Yang challenges the dominant market-oriented logic of collecting by engaging in a long-term, dedicated practice focused on liminal and less-celebrated artifacts. This approach is akin to Lianke Yan’s writing, which is driven not by the anticipation of an audience but by the need to ‘express his internal anguish’ (Cantrill 2021: 142). Similarly, Yang’s collecting is not motivated by market economy or profit but by a profound spiritual conviction to serve as a guardian of the cultural objects he encounters in South Africa (Yang 2020). In an interview conducted in 2023, Yang explicitly articulated his collecting practice as a means of ‘de-emphasising social characteristics’ (danhua shehui shuxing 淡化社会属性) to resist the mechanisms of naming and labeling, both in China during political turmoil and in South Africa as an immigrant living on the margins of society. His perspective aligns with Lianke Yan’s

exploration of a liminal social state, characterised by withdrawal from the world (chushi 出世) in his novels. Yang's self-assessed role as a self-appointed protector of Chinese culture and heritage reflects a subtle yet persistent resistance to social categorisation.

Italian literary historian and theorist Franco Moretti contends that when navigating geographic or national boundaries in literature, figurative language takes precedence (Schimanski and Wolfe 2007:227). Drawing inspiration from Yiyuan Yang's compelling biographical narratives, especially his trajectory and collecting practices, this chapter advances the idea of border poetics developed from textual border-crossings. Utilising the textual analysis methods traditionally applied in literary studies, I examine artefacts, images and texts. I posit that these elements – artefacts, images and texts function as forms of “figurative language”, echoing the style reminiscent of mythorealism within the realm of collecting (Xie 2023; Cao 2016). Resting on instances of border-crossing, expressive tropes and acts of resistance, Yang's collecting practice depicts a borderscape that embodies a paradox, a space whose very persistence signifies ‘an irrepressible tenacity, a glimmer of hope out of hopelessness’ (Xie 2023: 136).

This chapter commences with Yang's homage to Beijing, interlacing moments of border-crossings with instances of Chinese exported specialised arts and crafts discovered in South Africa. These are acts of seal-carving and poetic metaphors that evoke memories of the homeland, serving as acts of resistance and yearning within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa. Emphasising Yang's decade as a sent-down youth on the Loess Plateau of Shanxi Province, the chapter elucidates how this experience profoundly influenced his collecting style in South Africa.

Next, the chapter critically examines Yang's collecting practices of Chinese trade coarse brassware in South Africa, linking them to the myth of Zheng He within the context of China–Africa engagement. Inspired by the way Chinese *minjian* collectors creatively leverage Chinese folk literary allusions and the effects of mainstream cultural figures, among other tactics, to vie for discursive power in public spaces and construct narratives around their own collections, I conceptualise each object within a collector's assemblage as a “non-narrative vocabulary”. By examining these objects in relation to the collector's rationale, a form of “collecting literature” emerges. I first critically scrutinise the dominant official Zheng He myth within Sino–African discourse. Subsequently, I explore how Yang strategically employs his “object vocabulary” to craft a narrative interwoven with the mythos surrounding Zheng He. I contend that the artefacts

curated by Yang exert a *minjian* coercive influence through their replication and emulation of classical artefacts from Zheng He's era in different historical times. Furthermore, they introduce novel dimensions to the prevailing Zheng He narratives in mainstream Sino–African discourse.

I illustrate how Yang's focus on collecting lesser-celebrated objects from Chinese *minjian* craftsmen embrace a humanistic approach. This perspective, characterised by empathy, re-enactment and personal commemoration, challenges the canonical history of collecting only exceptional pieces with intricate craftsmanship. I explore the significance of these lesser known but ubiquitous artefacts to collectors outside elite circles across diverse regions such as Europe, South Africa, America, India and Japan. While these items may not attract the attention of high-profile auction houses or connoisseurs, their widespread presence offers insights into border-crossing trends from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

Lastly, this chapter critically analyses a photo postcard made in 1906, titled *The Famous Repatriation Poster*, about the Chinese indentured labourers in South Africa, collected by Yiyuan Yang in South Africa. Through piercing together different individuals' engagements in relation to this colonial object collected by Yang, it fleshes out a way of seeing the history of Chinese indentured labourers in South Africa beyond Orientalism (Ngai 2017; Chua 2020a; Chua, 2020b). It advances Yang's sensitive approach to uncovering overlooked forms of silent resistance by Chinese labourers, which are buried in the historical archives in the forms of posters and seals. These silent forms demonstrate how Chinese aesthetics undergo transformation and appropriation in the diaspora in South Africa, linking different waves of Chinese mobility. The politics of Chinese aesthetics exhibited in these forms demonstrate how aesthetics actively participates in a co-constituted acculturation process between indentured labourers and the British colonial government.

Through these case studies, Yang's mythorealism approach to collecting humble artefacts, regardless of their "timid" or "crude" style, or how they might seem illogical within the market–collecting–museum paradigm, reveals his internal resistance against the amnesia that pervades the recognition that today's existence is built upon a violent omission of the modest existence of the past. The artefacts he gathers tell a story encapsulated by Kai Er (2019): 'Behind

mythorealism is a soul that earnestly stutters, tirelessly searching for things that should not be overlooked.’⁶³

Homage to Beijing: ‘New China, New Imagery’ (1949–1966)

Yiyuan Yang was born in 1952 into a renowned intellectual family in rural Hunan Province, China. His father, proficient in the traditional pedagogical practices of the private school (Sishu 私塾), excelled in venerable arts such as calligraphy, painting and seal-carving. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the country underwent a significant socialist transformation. Under Mao’s centralised planning, both classic and “minjian (民间) arts” and crafts transitioned into a strategic cultural-economic initiative. This transformation shifted from individualised, private-owned workshop models towards public-owned semi-industrial cooperatives or communes, heralding the onset of the socialist modernisation in arts and crafts. Chinese *minjian* art scholar Xiaoti Jin contextualises this transformative period within new China as a manifestation of alternative modernity (2023). The entrenched traditional knowledge systems and occupational paradigms within China underwent seismic disruptions, exacerbated by the imperatives of the initial Five-Year Plan (1953–1957). This plan prioritised robust industrialisation and urban proliferation, precipitating a marked rural-to-urban demographic influx.

Against this historical background, Yang’s first experience of border-crossing occurred at the tender age of eight months. In 1953, his family translocated to Beijing, concomitant with his father’s engagement at the Beijing Number Two Construction Company Engineering Co., Ltd. During the 1950s, Beijing emerged as the avant-garde epicentre propelling socialist cultural and artistic production. This cultural ethos was frequently encapsulated within salient socialist tropes, exemplified by phrases such as ‘new China, new imagery’ (Yang 2023b) and ‘new people, new atmosphere’ (Tian and Yan 2019; Jin 2023).⁶⁴

⁶³ Kai, E. (2020) How to Perceive Lianke Yan’s Mythorealism. Available at: <https://www.zhihu.com/question/28118016> (Accessed: 11 January 2023).

⁶⁴ The trope has a broader resonance with the 20th century global communist movement and its purpose of reshaping the individual’s mind, morals and behaviours in accordance with communist ideals. Prominent efforts include crafting the “Soviet new man” in the USSR, the “socialist new man” in China, and promoting a “Che-like” persona in Cuba (Cheng 2009; Tian and Yan, 2019).

The confluence of institutional reforms and the sculpted imagery of the “Socialist New People” profoundly influenced Yang’s upbringing. This “New People” archetype encompassed erstwhile traditional artisans who had undergone transformative reconfigurations, positioning themselves as paragons within the state-owned handicraft sector. Within this schema, art objects earmarked for exportation were designated as “specialised crafts”, with a technocentric interpretation of arts and crafts. Consequently, on 1 June 1950, the first publicly owned special craft company was officially inaugurated in Beijing.

The Concept of “Specialised Crafts” Prior to 1949

The notion of “specialised craft” has its roots in the Canton trade practices that thrived during the Qing dynasty from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. These practices encompassed commodities such as ceramics, lacquerware, embroidery, bronzes and paintings. Such items were distinguished by their specialised and localised craftsmanship, meticulously tailored to cater to European and American markets. The formation of a particular traditional art category evolved through an intricate amalgamation of local natural resources, indigenous folk culture and diverse regional production methodologies.

Historical records often designated these exported specialised crafts as regional specialities, emphasising their localised origins. Upon their integration into major overseas markets via maritime trade routes, as delineated in chapter one, certain commodities, like blue-and-white porcelain, underwent various localised adaptations. A salient manifestation of this is the Western construct termed “the invention of China”, characterised as chinoiserie. Originating in the seventeenth century, European craftsmen appropriated visual motifs from imported Chinese artefacts (Witchard et al. 2015).

Throughout the eighteenth century, there was an enduring appreciation for these imported Chinese objects, celebrated for their ‘otherworldly charm and playful exoticism’ (Porter 2015:19). Such admiration carried intricate connotations, often invoking associations with the feminine, the fanciful and the superficial, as posited by David Porter (2015:19). However, by the nineteenth century, the allure of the chinoiserie style had experienced a gradual decline within the United Kingdom (Porter 2015:19).

Intriguingly, as the twentieth century dawned, there emerged a notable trend towards negative portrayals of Chinese aesthetics, as evidenced by the depiction of horror in pith paper paintings⁶⁵ (figures 2.1 and 2.2). This trajectory implies that Chinese exported artefacts were strategically manipulated to align with the evolving political and commercial imperatives of Western imperial expansion.



Figure 2.1: *Finger Torture*. The artwork portrays a scene in which a Chinese woman is subjected to torture; her hands are bound above her head. Two individuals position a pole between her wrists, while a third person documents this punitive act. The artefact belongs to the Punishment–Execution series (watercolour on pith paper) collected by Yang in the early 1990s from a flea market in South Africa. The popularity of the series was in part attributed to the success of George Henry Mason’s book, *The Punishments of China*, published in London in 1801. (Luo 2019). In this book, plate 10 illustrates a similar scene of finger torture inflicted upon a Chinese woman (Brook, Jérôme Bourgon and Blue, 2008:174). 19th century. Yiyuan Yang’s collection. Dimensions: 18 x 30 cm. Photo Courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

⁶⁵ Pith paper paintings were introduced to Europe in the early nineteenth century by Canton traders. These paintings were executed on a paper-like substance crafted from the pith of a particular tree found in Canton. Initially termed “rice paper” and later “pith paper”, these thin sheets gained widespread popularity as an affordable canvas for Chinese export paintings (Krüger 2019). They primarily showcased China’s folklore, societal life and natural scenery, reflecting the diverse facets of life and the societal environment of that era in China. In terms of artistic style, these paintings incorporated Western techniques such as one-point perspective and chiaroscuro. Additionally, they retained characteristics of traditional Chinese painting, emphasising blank spaces and prioritising line work. Before the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century and the popularity of postcards since the 1870s onward, they were sought after by Western merchants and travellers as popular Chinese “postcards” (Shen 2012; You 2018; Luo 2019).



Figure 2.2: *Lingchi*. The artwork portrays a disturbing scene from imperial China's execution of criminal through methodical dismemberment of a living body.⁶⁶ Dimensions: 18 x 30 cm. Yiyuan Yang's collection. Photo Courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

When these pith paper paintings were created and disseminated as popular commodities, “postcards”, specialised crafts in general played a critical role in the country's livelihood. By the end of Qing dynasty, a confluence of protracted upheavals—stemming from the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion and natural calamities – precipitated widespread displacement, compelling countless individuals into vagrancy. In response, Beijing emerged as a crucible for an artistic and craft resurgence.

In 1901, Huang Siyong and his son founded the Beijing Shanhou Craft Bureau at the Liuli Factory outside the city walls of Beijing. This institution was expressly designed to uplift the

⁶⁶ In April 1905, the penalty of *lingchi* was permanently removed from the imperial law books (Brook et al. 2008). However, to cater the Euro–American fascination for these events of Chinese tortures, despite initial reluctance, Chinese artists eventually painted these punishments (Chamberlain 2014; Luo 2019). This series was one of the most popular collections of pith paper paintings circulated globally. The images reinscribed European's belief of Oriental despotism, effectively transforming ‘late imperial China into a living museum of a supposedly now transcended European past’ (Hevia 2009: 929). In 1858, a new booklet based on these export paintings, illustrated by Percy Cruikshank, was orchestrated by the then British Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston to serve the imperialistic expansionist narratives of the time (Brook, Jérôme Bourgon and Blue, 2008; Luo 2019).

dispossessed populace and underprivileged youth. It pioneered a craft-centric pedagogical approach, imparting an eclectic array of artisanal skills encompassing weaving, felting, embroidery, cloisonné enamelling, pottery and woodworking, among other disciplines (Gong 2020: 18). The exemplary calibre of their craftsmanship garnered considerable acclaim, eliciting a lot of interest from Western merchants (Yang 1966:755).

The success of the Beijing Shanhou Craft Bureau subsequently served as a model for others. Motivated by Western industrialisation paradigms, various Chinese regions embarked upon a national rejuvenation effort known as the “craft movement” led by a synergistic collaboration between government and merchants in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries (Wei 2017:142). Overall, the development of specialised crafts was instrumental in Chinese domestic social welfare and patriotic sentiment, with a focus on export to sustain this specialised craftsmanship.

Collecting “New China” Embodied in the Specialised Crafts

In the early days of the New China, Beijing stood as a crucible in which this historical trajectory continued its momentum. Crafts became essential for economic development and foreign exchange reserves, with the craft and art industry leaning heavily towards catering to burgeoning export demands. The Beijing Special Craft Company was particularly attentive to this need, prioritising products that were ‘practical, economical and aesthetically pleasing’, with a specific focus on meeting the demands of the Soviet Bloc countries (Song 2021: 14).

Against this backdrop, in November 1953, Beijing hosted the Third National Conference on Handicraft Production Cooperation. This gathering reiterated Mao Zedong’s revolutionary principles (1999: 316), emphasising the gradual socialist transformation encompassing agriculture, handicrafts and capitalist industry and commerce. Following this momentum, on 7 December of the same year, the Ministry of Culture launched the seminal *National Exhibition of Minjian Arts and Crafts* at Beijing’s Workers’ Cultural Palace. *Minjian* art refers to a distinctive category of Chinese artistic expression that encompasses a broad spectrum of traditional and popular forms, created by individuals often positioned outside formal academic or elite circles (Lufkin 2016). This art form is intimately connected to the evolving and nuanced term “minjian”, which literally translates to “among the people,” highlighting its roots in the lived experiences and cultural practices of ordinary communities (Liang 2020). Minjian art typically includes crafts, textiles, paper-cutting, folk painting, pottery, and other cultural

artifacts, all deeply embedded in local traditions, customs, and the rhythms of everyday life (Lufkin 2016).

This exhibition marked New China's first comprehensive showcase of over 3000 arts and crafts since its inception. However, certain exhibited *minjian* art forms garnered criticism, deemed somewhat "kitsch" by high art standards (Tan 2012; Knapp and Freeman 2012; Lufkin 2016). Throughout the transformation movement, the development direction of arts and crafts had continuously struggled between the academic and revolutionary factions. There had been a disconnect between the production and sales of arts and crafts and their design work. The academic faction criticised designs oriented toward exports, noting shortcomings like overemphasised decorations and unnecessary patterns that rendered works as kitsch (Song 2021: 79). Conversely, the revolutionary faction advocated for grounding in *minjian* art and specialised crafts to boost handicraft production and foreign exchange accumulation. Artisan workers, aiming to fulfil numerous export orders, find it challenging to innovate in design. As a result, some meticulously designed pieces are discarded by individuals unfamiliar with art (Song 2021: 66, 81; Jin 2023: 46).

Amidst this predicament of the transformative phase, these "kitsch" artworks and crafts produced in new China's factories and collective communes, propelled by the nation's strong will, have found their way into households in over a hundred countries. Serving as representations of the specific production techniques and characteristics of the era of New China, these specialised crafts continue to influence the art market. With subsequent waves of Chinese migration following China's economic reform, many of these items have been collected by overseas Chinese immigrants since the late 1980s.

A nuanced critique of 'totalitarian kitsch' crafts, as elucidated by Migasova (2023), necessitates decoding the oft-maligned "kitsch" art within socialist frameworks. Such an endeavour mandates an exploration into the symbiotic relationship between the era's national imagery and these ostensibly kitsch crafts, elucidating the intricate nexus 'between political, artistic utopia and quotidian existence' (Boym 1994: 356). How did artisan workers, newly transformed within state-owned factories, produce these artefacts as state-owned properties emblematic of a New China? Central to this inquiry is understanding the motivations behind why new Chinese immigrants chose to collect these arts and crafts.

For Yang, growing up in Beijing amidst this transformative epoch, institutional arts and crafts events became indelibly intertwined with his identity and recollections. Regularly unveiling his collections from South Africa – believed to encapsulate the “New China” imagery – on an overseas Chinese blogging platform, Yang’s engagement with and collecting of artefacts from this seminal period elucidate his diasporic agency within South Africa:

Being born in Beijing in the 1950s and having the chance to acquire artefacts from that era in South Africa truly feels like destiny..., [the] copper cloisonné enamelware, featuring smooth cloisonné work and elegant glaze colours. The decorative patterns on the basket handle are hand-engraved, giving an overall impression of the new look of New China.⁶⁷

The “figurative language” in this blog text is expressed in a Chinese hardstone fruit and flowers sculpture presented in a basket-form cloisonné jardinière (figures 2.3 and 2.4) collected by Yiyuan Yang in the 1990s in South Africa.

Similar to Shengkai Wu, who occasionally shares his collections online, Yang’s selection of Liuyuanwang (留园网), a digital diasporic network established on July 17, 2003, reflects a distinct engagement with the Chinese diaspora. Liuyuanwang (留园网), with users spanning over 200 countries and regions, is a commercial Chinese-language self-media community network catering specifically to overseas Chinese. Unlike Weibo, which is a mainstream Chinese social media platform predominantly used by individuals based in Mainland China, Liuyuanwang remains relatively obscure in mainstream Chinese media circles. This choice highlights Yang’s deep connection to overseas Chinese communities within a post-national context, where he situates his sense of belonging through object-led discussions within the Chinese diaspora, contrasting with the more conventional diasporic space exemplified by Shengkai Wu’s banal nationalism. This engagement can be interpreted as part of the ‘margins of the state,’ which not only gravitates towards but also reconfigures the conceptual boundaries of

⁶⁷ Wanli Guhong Ying 万里孤鸿影 (2022) *Beijing Jade Factory 1950s Gemstone Flower and Fruit (Cloisonné) Basket Huangyang*, Liuyuan blog, 24 April. Available at: <https://club.6parkbbs.com/page/index.php?app=forum&act=threadview&tid=90727>. (Accessed 03 January 2024). Wanli Gohong Ying is Yang’s pen name.

the state (Das and Poole 2004: 20). Yang's pen name, wanli guhong ying (万里孤鸿影), meaning "the lonely shadow of a wild goose over ten thousand miles," evokes the image of a solitary wild goose traversing a vast expanse. This metaphor poignantly represents his ongoing struggle with feelings of displacement and isolation in relation to his border-crossing experiences.



Figure 2.3: Yang's Chinese hardstone fruit and flowers in a cloisonné jardinière. Auspicious fruit, such as grapes, peach, cherries and pomegranate carefully displayed in the basket as an ancient art form of flower arrangement to create a pleasing aesthetic and blessings. Traditionally they were often used as offerings to adorn the altar of a Buddhist shrine or at celebrations of festivals. This cloisonné basket jardinière was made by the Beijing Jade factory circa 1950s. Yiyuan Yang's collection. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

In his narrative, Yang juxtaposed two distinct borders. The first is a sentimental synchronised act of topographical border-crossing that he shares with the artefact originating from Beijing. Despite limited official contact between South Africa and China during the 1950s, and formal

diplomatic relations only being established in the 1990s, the influx of new immigrants and artefacts from New China had begun forging a novel nexus and epistemic community in South Africa through border-crossing engagements since the late 1980s.

The second border operates on a more implicit, symbolic and temporal plane, characterised by the recurring trope of “new China, new imagery”. This theme frequently emerges in scholarly examinations of Chinese arts and culture from the high socialist era. The notion of “new China” is often construed as a carefully constructed trope of success, intricately tied to the development of state imagery spanning from 1949 to 1966. This interpretation is substantiated through archival research, literary analysis and semiotic examinations of visual arts and culture (Chen 2000; Zhou 2002; Xue 2016). Broadly, this representation serves socialist ideological dissemination, encapsulating a unified approach that combines revolutionary romanticism with revolutionary realism. This portrayal contrasts sharply with a constructed ‘old China,’ depicted as feeble, antiquated, feudalistic, capitalistic, corrupt, conservative and superstitious, awaiting liberation and transformation. Such research often originates from an ontological perspective rooted in literary and artistic traditions, focusing predominantly on mainstream art representation and overlooking the agency of exported specialised crafts and collectors on the periphery of Africa.

Yang’s narrative subtly highlights an intrinsic link between the two forms of border-crossings. His ability to navigate the border between “new China” and “old China”, as embodied in artefacts, allowed him to bond with the artefacts in South Africa. What is his idea of ‘new China, new imagery’ concerning specialised crafts during the period of 1949–1966? I return to his collections and narratives – the figurative language – to decipher his perspectives and their broader implications.

In Yang’s blog entries, artefacts of the “new China” possess an institutional identity, shaping both their material quality and stylistic attributes as coveted collectibles. Academic critiques, such as the nuanced assessment by Song (2021: 81), have illuminated the intricate craftsmanship, sophistication of handiwork and the intrinsic value of materials as defining characteristics of these artefacts in the 1950s. In a post-industrialised society, Yang places significant value on these traditional skills and the inherent worth of artistic materials (figure 2.4)



Figure 2.4: A similar vintage item in the same model on an online auction, titled *Northern School Jade Carving Essence Special Exhibition* held by the Beijing Jade Factory on 26 April 2016. Dimensions: Unknown. Its description includes “weight 604g” to indicate the value of the material.⁶⁸

The concept of “new China” captures “a new look” as articulated by Yang (2022), symbolising a modernisation process on an institutional level. This transformation involves the configuration, subversion and simplification of complex and stringent traditional patterns.

⁶⁸ The Beijing Jade Factory, established in 1958, stands as the preeminent state-owned jade carving institution within the nation’s boundaries and was accorded the status of a national intangible cultural heritage in 2008. Over the seventeen-year span of New China’s inception, the nation’s foremost artisans congregated at this esteemed establishment, collaborating on masterful creations. Several of these exquisite artworks have found their place within museum collections and have been exchanged as diplomatic gifts. Auction records pertaining to these artefacts can be accessed via the following link: <https://paimai.jd.com/album/8193> (Accessed 03 January 2024).

Yang's cloisonné jardinière, crafted by Beijing artisans, presents an earlier iteration featuring two enamelled flower patterns as depicted in figure 2.5. In contrast, the auctioned item, illustrated in figure 2.4, exhibits a simplified design.



Figure 2.5: Leveraging the unique properties of different hardstones, artists utilise a realistic technique to carve intricate fruits, leaves and flowers. The pomegranate symbolises prosperity and numerous offspring in traditional Chinese folklore. The materials' inherent warm tone and lustre, gives the item a distinctive sheen. Yiyuan Yang's collection. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

The specialised crafts emblematic of “New China” manifest a composite aesthetic resonance that engages Yang's intimate historical recollections of high socialism and a globally interconnected Chinese material culture dating back to the Qing dynasty. Notably, the category of “lifelike bonsai”, encompassing meticulously sculpted fruits and flowers, employs an array of precious materials, including but not limited to gemstones, jade, gold, silver, enamel and agate. Despite the absence of definitive records delineating the inception of this style, historical archives suggest that during the Qing Dynasty, the imperial court predominantly utilised lifelike bonsai crafted from gold, jade and other valuable gemstones. This strategic deployment aimed to augment the palace's opulence and aesthetic grandeur (figure 2.6).

The ascendancy of these lifelike bonsai can be attributed to their remarkable ability to withstand the pronounced seasonal vicissitudes characteristic of northern climates. Notably, the

rendered flora, fruits and foliage within these intricate masterpieces consistently exuded a resplendent and luminous quality, thereby solidifying their integral role within the palace milieu (The National Palace Museum n.d.).⁶⁹



Figure 2.6: A coral chrysanthemum artificial bonsai in a cloisonné jardinière that belonged to the imperial court. Made in Beijing in the Qing dynasty. Total height: 53cm, pot height: 8cm. The main scene features coral chrysanthemums and peonies, complemented by yellow plum blossoms, dyed ziziphus fruits and horn-made leaves. © Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

These artificial bonsai made exclusively for the imperial court, interacted with imperial paintings, exported paintings and prints. As Chongzheng Nie (2022: 118) notes, they allude to scenes reminiscent of antiquities (博古图), intended for admiration (fig. 2.7).

⁶⁹ National Palace Museum (n.d.) 'Preface', the introduction to the collections of lifelike bonsai in the National Palace Museum. Available at: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/Uploads/wenhua/E25/index.htm>. (Accessed 03 January 2024).



Figure 2.7: *Bo Gu Tu Tie Luo* (博古图) by Shen Shiru, Qing Dynasty, ink and colour on paper, © Collection of the Palace Museum (Nie 2022: 121). Fruits and flowers with auspicious connotations, along with pieces of bronzeware and porcelain from different imperial collections, are meticulously arranged in this composition, achieving a sense of balanced beauty.

Fruit and flowers have been enduring motifs in still-life painting since the Renaissance period (14th to 17th century), and featured prominently in both Dutch and Flemish artworks. During the Qing Dynasty, European painters at the imperial court, such as the Italian artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), combined European oil-painting techniques to create a seasonal offering painting, similar to the western still-life paintings, but depicting the traditional Chinese Dragon Boat Festival customs. In the painting (figure 2.7), prominently positioned in the lower

left corner, cherries and plums are placed within an intricately carved bronze vessel.



Figure 2.8: *Duan Wu Tu* by Giuseppe Castiglione during the Yongzheng reign of the Qing Dynasty (1723–1735), painted on silk, Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing (Nei 2022 :122).

Similar imagery also appeared in the Suzhou prints of the Qianlong period that were exported to Japan and Europe (figure 2.9).



Fig 2.9: *Sui Chao Qing Gong Tu* (Auspicious Objects for Welcoming the New Year), 18th century. Artist/maker unknown, Chinese, Colour woodcut. ©Philadelphia Museum of Art Collection. Lifelike bonsai flowers and fruit are portrayed in the prints as auspicious spring objects.

Yang Dong (2021: 26–31) posits that within these exported prints, the representation of “still life” of fruit and flowers draws inspiration from European *trompe l’oeil* still-life traditions, particularly against the backdrop of the wallpaper trade.

In March 1956, predating the establishment of the Beijing Jade Company by two years, Yerevan, the capital city of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, presented a finely crafted jade fruit platter to Zhu De, who served as the Vice Chairman of the People’s Republic of China at that juncture (Figure 2.9)



Figure 2.10: The artwork features sculptures of seven fruits: pomegranates, walnuts, grapes, apples, pears, peaches and dates. Their seemingly random arrangement adds a touch of lively and natural charm. At the bottom corner on each side of the platter, “Tumanyan k. h. 1955, Epebah”, is inscribed in Armenian and Russian respectively. © National Museum of China.

According to Jian Song (2023: 21), from its nascent stages China’s socialist reconfiguration of handicrafts was profoundly shaped by the Soviet paradigm of handicraft restructuring and cooperative craft societies. Soviet experts specialising in craft cooperatives spent extensive periods in China, providing pivotal guidance to these emerging entities. On 22 July 1957, Zhu De convened with delegates at the National Arts and Crafts Artists Conference, exhorting artisans to regard cooperatives as extensions of their homes and to craft products that were ‘abundant, high-calibre, pragmatic and aesthetically captivating’ for export (Song 2023: 95).

Since the 1950s, China has proactively engaged in international trade exhibitions organised within the socialist bloc, emphasising industrial and agricultural themes. Concurrently, the demand emanating from the Soviet Union and other socialist nations for Chinese arts and crafts has exhibited a consistent upward trajectory. Moreover, China has strategically endeavoured to broaden its export footprint, encompassing regions such as Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and the United Kingdom (Song 2023: 100).

Against this multifaceted historical backdrop, echoing influences from the Qing dynasty and sculpted by the contours of trade policies with socialist countries, the Beijing Jade Factory pioneered the design and exportation of lifelike bonsai sculptures. This venture signalled a seminal foray of such intricately crafted bonsai sculptures into the global marketplace. Given the

valuable materials, labour-intensive artisanship and specialised expertise intrinsic to their creation, these artefacts posed substantial economic implications for burgeoning China. They encapsulate the artisan-workers' conceptualisation of a potentially resonant commodity emblematic of New China's aspirations, all while strategically targeting international markets. From an aesthetic vantage point, while these pieces manifest a more economically efficient rendition than their imperial counterparts, they concurrently echo subtle resonances with European still-life traditions and the predilection for verisimilitude championed by the Soviet aesthetic paradigm.

In addition to the specialised crafts in a classic form like the cloisonné jardinière, Yang also identified another category of miniature sculpture figures that depict the “new socialist people” of China, particularly in South Africa. These artefacts, characterised by distinct ‘new China’ features, undergo a transformation upon crossing borders. In their new context, they often become untranslatable kitsch objects, either serving as exotic garden figures or being devalued and resold at local flea markets.

To illustrate this phenomenon, I reference a blog article titled ‘Boxwood Sculpture: A Little Child in Open-Crotch Pants Smelting Iron, a Time of Sighs’,⁷⁰ authored by Yiyuan Yang. In this piece, Yang delves into this specific collection category, highlighting the complexities of these artefacts’ meanings after their journey to South Africa (figures 2.10 and 2.11). Furthermore, Yang unpacks the concept of ‘new China’ as represented through these exported pieces:

I discovered this boxwood sculpture.⁷¹ Seeing my ‘can’t let go’ expression, my accompanying friends were quite puzzled because they had no idea of the historical significance embodied in this wood carving. The little child, dressed in open-crotch pants

⁷⁰ Wanli Guhong Ying (2020) ‘Boxwood Sculpture: A Little child in Open–Crotch Pants Smelting Iron, a Time of Sighs’, Liuyuan blog, 1 November. Available at: <https://club.6parkbbs.com/page/index.php?app=forum&act=threadview&tid=38436>. (Accessed 03 January 2024).

⁷¹ In the city of Yueqing, Zhejiang province, the local carving community, primarily composed *minjian*, “folk” artists, developed a traditional art form crafted from boxwood. These small artworks were exported as local specialties prior to 1949. Their artworks were most based on folk tales, mythological legends and widely acclaimed theatrical scripts. Since boxwood grows at a remarkably slow pace, adding merely an inch and a half to two inches in diameter over two decades, it possesses an incredibly fine grain, almost appearing devoid of grain altogether. This characteristic facilitates easy carving and allows it to capture intricate details in miniature artwork. Additionally, its density and resistance to splitting ensure that the carved pieces are not only durable but also resilient against wear and tear (Cammann 2012: 117)

(originally holding a long rod for the furnace, which is now missing), faces a unique ‘miniature blast furnace.’ Such miniature furnaces, designed for smelting iron, are products of a specific era. The intentions behind the creator of this wood carving are unknown. Why depict a little child in open-crotch pants ‘smelting iron’ - is it celebratory or ironic? Regardless, this export from the 1950s, which contributed to foreign exchange earnings, has been around for over half a century..., it’s now *returned* to where it came from.



Figure 2.10: This miniature, crafted from boxwood, portrays a young child wearing open-crotch pants, engaged in iron smelting during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) era in new China. The child, depicted in a walking motion towards a blazing furnace, holds a rod, now missing from the artefact’s ensemble. The piece, created by an

unidentified artist during this pivotal historical period, was acquired from a flea market in South Africa. Yiyuan Yang's collection. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.



Figure 2.11: The frontal perspective of the sculpture showcases the figure dressed in worker's attire, characterised by a smiling facial expression and creases in the clothing indicative of movement, imparting an atmosphere of jovial dynamism. Yiyuan Yang's collection. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang

Yiyuan Yang reminisces about the socio-economic and political campaign known as the Great Leap Forward, which unfolded between 1957 and 1958. As suggested by its nomenclature, China's leadership during this period posited that rapid economic advancement could be achieved through 'improvisation and mass spontaneity' (Chan 2001: 3). This ambitious

endeavour supplanted the more gradual developmental approach of the initial Five-Year Plan. A hallmark of the Great Leap Forward was the revitalisation of neglected, traditional steelworks at various scales. Initially conceived as a pragmatic solution to economic stagnation through the establishment of modest industrial facilities – less resource-intensive than expansive modern factories – the initiative soon spiralled beyond control, culminating in calamitous consequences (Wagner 2013).

While the backyard iron production aspect of the campaign endured merely a few months, this period marked a zenith in the evolution of contemporary literary illustrations and diverse forms of political propaganda art. How did steel emerge as a novel subject and thematic material within the artistic realm of new China (Jiang 2005)? During the “Seventeen-Year” era of new China, representations of steelworkers evolved in both narrative and artistic dimensions. At the linguistic compositional level, artistic renditions of workers from this period exhibited notable thematic consistency. Designers frequently adopted the stylistic elements prevalent in contemporaneous propaganda art, incorporating symbols akin to those found in New Year prints and propaganda posters (She et al. 2023:121). Notably, elements such as protective goggles, steel rods and melting furnaces (figure 2.12) recurrently manifest as structural components within these depictions (She et al. 2023:121). Such varied graphic art reports, especially children’s illustrated magazines intertwined with personal experiences, have deeply etched memories of the monumental steel production campaigns into Yang’s generational consciousness. As Yang indicates, the blazing furnace stands as an immediate signifier, a poignant emblem of that era.



Figure 2.13: Making Steel is Like Waging War; the Factory is the Battlefield, Wear the Big Red Flower, Striving for National Glory. Artist: Anqi Zhou; Medium: Unknown; Created in 1958 (Jiang 2015:60). ©CAFA Art Museum.

Discovered in South Africa, this boxwood sculpture resonated deeply with Yang due to the artist's distinctive and vivid portrayal of children during that historical epoch. With a touch of wit and precision, the artist meticulously crafted a serene yet cheerful image of a young child earnestly participating in steelmaking. The scene's design ingeniously juxtaposes the lively flames of the furnace with the child's joyful countenance. Yang (2023b) perceives this era in New China as epitomising a spiritual potential and vigour, asserting that "anyone could contribute" to constructing the socialist New China. Artists, leveraging their talents, fervently produced works to propagate this utopian vision.

During this period, children were co-opted and transformed into a novel archetype, exhibiting unparalleled determination and serving as exemplary figures and "leap forward heroes". The representation of these young children aligns with the foundational principles of structural dualism, semiotics and mythological characteristics, wherein the establishment of the "other" serves to construct and sustain dominant narratives, fulfilling the political exigencies of the Great Leap Forward by metamorphosing into "future builders" and successors of the socialist cause (Zhou 2017:65). Chang Zhou (2017: 63) points out that the characterisation during this era

resonates with the subsequent Cultural Revolution's hero archetype, emphasising the artistic requisites of realism, authenticity, luminosity and elevated style. What distinguishes this sculpture is its adept integration of personal expression within the national narrative framework. By ingeniously depicting a child in open-crotch pants, the artist's individual sentiment becomes enshrined within the artwork. For Yang, encountering this "steelworker" representation in South Africa evoked a profound sense of mythorealism, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between him and this artefact. The mythorealism subtly conveyed through such displays permeates not only the hero archetype but also the very act of engaging with the artifact itself (Cantrill 2021: 139). While the narrative often delves into surrealism and myth, the interaction with the artifact draws Yiyuan Yang into the tangible realities of reading, annotating, and acting during the Cultural Revolution and beyond (Cantrill 2021: 139). As mythorealism seeks to reveal deeper truths, the act of reading emerges as a profound "internal" process, where conscious and subconscious deliberations intertwine to guide decisions based on semiotic principles of memory (Cantrill 2021: 139). Yang perceives his interaction with this piece in South Africa as a form of mutual constitution: 'It's now *returned* to where it came from,' thus solidifying the interconnectedness between the artist, the artwork and himself.



Figure 2.14: A retrospective exhibition held in 2023, *Homage to 1953 Selected Works from the “National “Minjian Arts and Crafts Exhibition” in the TAM Collection*, at Qinghua University Art Museum. © Qinghua University Art Museum.

In contemporary academic circles, there is a reflective examination of the history surrounding specialised export craftsmanship and “minjian art” crafted for political agenda during the “Seventeen-Year” period of transition (Hang 2014 & 2019; Song 2021; Cao 2023). The discourse has evolved from a rejection of the dogmatic aesthetics of “authoritarian kitsch” – criticised for its perceived ubiquity, detachment from daily aesthetic sensibilities and perceived role as a detriment to art and modernisation – to an understanding that the craftsmanship of the so-called Seventeen-Year period of New China represents an “alternative modernity” within the Chinese context (Jin 2023; Song 2021). As summarised by Xiaoyi Jin (2023:46), the politicisation of art and the prominent role of crafts in foreign trade enhanced the economic value attributed to craftsmanship. While the economic understanding of craftsmanship aligns it with handicraft and light industry, its cultural value is deeply entrenched in the sociopolitical context, influencing contemporary development patterns. The current trajectory of Chinese craftsmanship is built upon this foundation of modernity.

For Yang in South Africa, his perspective on collecting these export items represents an alternative reflective thread from a grassroots level. These objects serve as triggers of cultural memory intertwined with nostalgia within the Chinese diaspora. Once heralded as socialist symbols of New China, their fate mirrors that of material remnants described by Russian American scholar Svetlana Boym as commonplace artefacts in post-Soviet contexts (1994:10). Without an “archaeologist” like Yiyuan Yang, they risk obscurity, relegated to basements or overshadowed by neglect. Yet, as Boym (1994:11) asserts, the notions of banality, cliché and kitsch, in their diverse artistic manifestations, have experienced profound historical transformations.

For Yang, these artefacts represent a form of “China-made” artisanal expression aimed at reconciling nostalgia through history. They encapsulate a pivotal juncture of exquisite materials and craftsmanship in New China. As art historian Jian Hang (2019:119–122) comments, ‘craftsmanship is the expression of one’s homeland’, encapsulating the quintessential thought and spirit requisite for a culminating phase, aligning with the contemporary aspirations of intangible cultural heritage. Yang’s collection in South Africa not only pays homage to New

China but also embodies a collective consciousness within the Chinese diaspora, where these widely exported artefacts circulate, engendering novel epistemological paradigms.

Materialising Borders through Collecting: Visualising Life on China's Loess Plateau in South Africa

Cultural historian Johan Schimanski and literary scholar Stephen Wolfe offer a theoretical framework that delineates five distinct planes onto which borders can be projected: topographical, symbolic, temporal, epistemological and textual (2007:217). The emergent emphasis on the material and aesthetic facets of mobility within the “cultural turn” in border studies since the 2000s (Burrell 2008; Buse and Twigg 2015; Lulle 2016; Kurki 2020; Schimanski and Nyman 2021; Moze and Spiegel 2022) highlights the centrality of images and narratives in border conceptualisations. As emphasised by Demetriou and Dimova (2018) and Green (2018), borders consist of palpable constituents. Moreover, Svend Erik Larsen (2007: 97) posits that an inherent aesthetic dimension defines every boundary.

This research augments the existing discourse by introducing a sixth dimension: the materialisation processes of borders elucidated through visual engagements, encompassing collecting and associated visual methodologies. Notably, the material and aesthetic intricacies of immigrants' border experiences within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa have been relatively underexplored. Through a case study focusing on Yiyuan Yang, this study endeavours to delineate multifaceted border planes, tracing Yang's trajectory from the crucial year of 1966, marking the onset of the Cultural Revolution, to his subsequent immigrant life in South Africa commencing in 1992.

In alignment with border theorist Henk van Houtum's assertion that a border is ‘not a noun but a verb’ (2013: 173), this research expounds collecting as iterative acts of materialisation across different temporal and spatial border contexts. Such acts not only ‘furnish’ collectors' migratory narratives but also mediate ‘materialised narratives’ of borders (Kurki 2020), covering tangible artefacts and objects. In the study, I also focus on Yang's collection of Kangxi dictionaries which encapsulates localised stone collection and carving practices spanning both Chinese and South African contexts, interwoven with memories associated with learning from these dictionaries.

In 1966, against the backdrop of the start of the Cultural Revolution, millions of educated urban youth found themselves at a confluence of political and personal intersections. This era

witnessed significant ramifications of large-scale political initiatives, advocating for continuous revolution and mass mobilisation, necessitating the relocation of urban youth to rural locales to commune with agrarian communities. Yang's second topographical border-crossing occurred during this time. In 1968, 16-year-old Yang embarked on a decade-long sojourn to the countryside, on the Loess Plateau of Ji County, Linfen District, Shanxi Province.



Figure 2.15: A village in Lifan, Ji County, where Yang spent ten years from 1968 to 1978. This photo was taken in 2007. The region boasts a distinctive landscape, characterised by silo-caves, a unique form of human habitation found on the Loess Plateau in northern China. This form consists of an excavated courtyard pit with depths ranging from six to seven metres, surrounded by cave dwellings along its perimeter. With a history spanning over 7000 years, these structures currently face precarious conditions due to rapid socio-economic transformations (Zhang et al. 2021). Photo source: Lingfen BoBao (2017).⁷²

As discussed in chapter one, the doctrine of continuous revolution engendered a new paradigm of material culture. The dwellings within the Loess Plateau metamorphosed into a constructed environment delineating a political boundary for urban youth. Yiyuan Yang, hailing from Beijing, resided in a modest local dwelling crafted from loess (mud), devoid of modern

⁷² Lingfen Bobao. (2017). 'Shanxi Ji Country's small village, on the verge of disappearing from the Loess Plateau', Sohu, 12 December. Available at: https://www.sohu.com/a/210027782_128340. (Accessed 03 January 2024).

amenities such as electricity or radio access. His living conditions proved more austere than those of local villagers, who possessed comparatively more substantial dwellings and better access to lamp oil. Over a decade, Yang returned home only twice during the Spring Festival. Concurrently, his father underwent re-education in Jiuquan, Gansu, while his brother partook in the sent-down youth movement in Shanxi Province. This left Yang's mother and sister in Beijing, navigating their challenges together.

Yang grappled with a peculiar predicament: pervasive material scarcity and detachment from the urban cultural nexus. Such geographical and informational disparities fortified existing boundaries. Mao, in his seminal 1937 treatise *On Practice*, accentuated the imperative for China's populace to engage actively in material production, advocating for resource efficiency and frugality among citizens (Altehenger and Ho 2022). For Yang, the act and subsequent practices of collecting constituted tangible materialisation, serving as both a process of making materials and an epistemology of knowing.

A decade immersed within the agrarian milieu cultivated Yang's affinity for farmers and fostered a deep-seated appreciation for northern Chinese minjian artistry. He crafted cave curtains and couplets for his compatriots, and taught himself seal-carving, calligraphy, watercolour painting and musical proficiency. The conceptualisation of borders underwent a transformative trajectory, transitioning from an obstructive barrier to a modifiable space defined by reconciliation, collaboration and coexistence (Newman 2016). Yang revered art-centric engagements as instruments of resistance, countering pervasive cultural voids. His discovery of the *Xin Guancha* (New Observation" 新观察) magazine (figures 2.16 and 2.17) in a villager's home amplified his sense of cultural connectivity. It was the seventeenth issue, published on 1 September 1954.

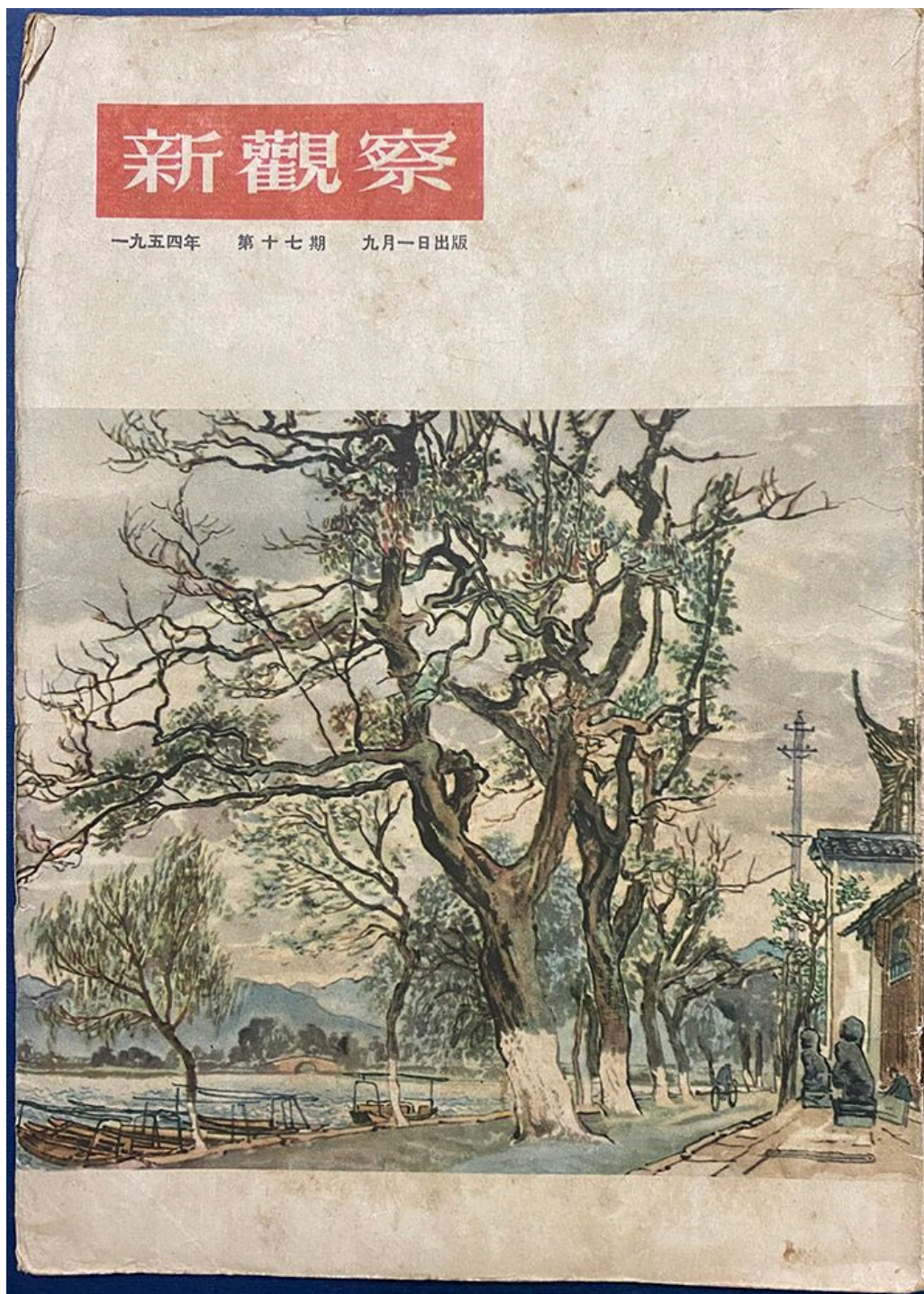


Figure 2.15: Front cover of *Xin Guan Cha* (*New Observation* 新观察) magazine, issue 17, 1 September, 1954. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

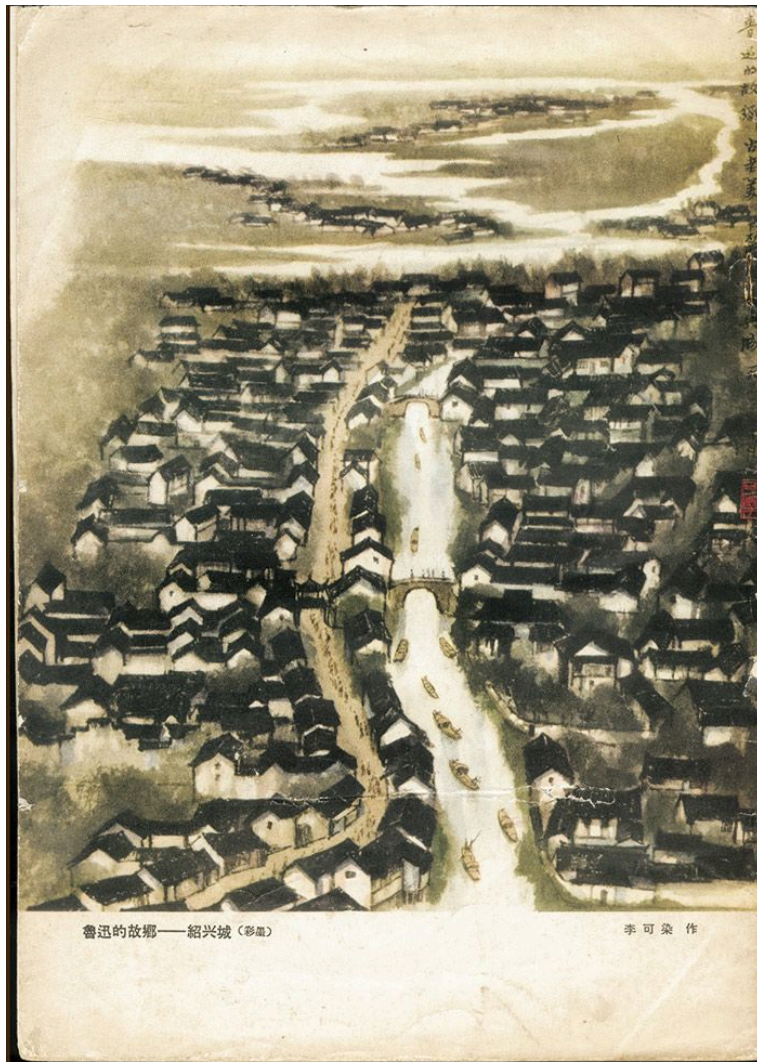


Figure 2.16: A watercolour exploration by Li Keran, titled *Luxun's hometown – Shaoxing Town*, with his seal signature on the right top, published in the *Xin Guancha*, issue 17, 1 September 1954. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

In the featured issue of the magazine, eminent artists such as Li Keran (李可染), Zhang Ding (张仃) and Luo Ming (罗铭) exemplified how Chinese painting could serve as a utilitarian socialist medium. They innovatively reformulated traditional Chinese ink painting techniques, infusing them with the aesthetic principles of Soviet revolutionary realism to depict tangible scenes.

The visual content of these artworks and the intricacies of seal carvings provided invaluable resources for Yang's artistic evolution. These materials not only facilitated his comprehension of the development of art but also enabled him to emulate the techniques of leading contemporaneous artists. Using a chisel procured from Beijing, Yang embarked on experimental

seal-carving endeavours, utilising locally sourced materials in the village. Additionally, he employed a Kangxi dictionary from the Guangxu era, borrowed from a local farmer, as a foundational resource for mastering seal script.⁷³ This experience links to Yang's early years of border-crossing interaction with local Chinese communities.

In 1992, the Shanghai Building, located in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, and formerly emblematic of the city's CBD, became the initial settlement for a cohort of mainland Chinese immigrants in South Africa. This locale also marked Yiyuan Yang's first residence upon his arrival in South Africa. Adjacent to the Shanghai Building stood a series of structures inhabited by earlier waves of Chinese immigrants. Esteemed as a member of the literati within the Chinese community, Yiyuan Yang commanded profound respect from these earlier Chinese settlers.

It was during this period that Yang's vocation as a collector commenced. Owing to his proximate interactions with earlier Chinese immigrants, Yang embarked on amassing artefacts transported to South Africa by predecessors originating from southern mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Upon encountering a Kangxi dictionary from the Guangxu era (Figure 2.17), Yang articulated:

This is the most meaningful and valuable gift I received from my time as a *yang chadui*. ... Having the complete seal-script data at the 'book header' section of the dictionary is incredibly rare and indispensable for someone like me who is passionate about Chinese calligraphy and seal-carving. Interestingly, during my ten years as a *tu chadui* in the countryside during the 1960s, I was fortunate to find a Kangxi dictionary in a remote mountainous area. Under the dim light of a kerosene lamp, I painstakingly transcribed the seal-script versions of most commonly used characters. This provided me with comprehensive and precise references when I began self-studying seal-carving. It's as if fate had determined this fortunate encounter. Everything is a matter of fate.

⁷³ Seal-carving is called *Zhuan Ke* in Chinese. *Zhuan* refers to the style of characters used for the script since ancient times. It forms an exclusive form in China and is a distinctive calligraphy style that is not commonly comprehensible by contemporary ordinary people. Yang learned *Zhuan* by himself through studying the Kangxi dictionary.

Unexpectedly, my years as a *yang chadui* once again granted me the invaluable opportunity to possess an original Qing edition of the *Kangxi Dictionary*”.⁷⁴



Figure 2.18: The 1885 *Kangxi Dictionary* was previously owned by L. Huc Kam (刘锦元), an older-generation Chinese immigrant who was close to Yiyuan Yang. Liu obtained the dictionary from an older member of his family.

The terms “*Yang chadui*” and “*tu chadui*” pertain to cohorts of urban youth, including individuals like Yiyuan Yang, who were dispatched to rural locales for re-education during the Cultural Revolution. Within the framework of communist communes, “*dui*” served as a production unit. When these individuals were subsequently relocated (“*cha*”) to disparate rural production units, they were called “*tu chadui*.” The prefix “*yang*”, denoting international or foreign origins, was later appended to “*chadui*” to encapsulate the transnational migration phenomenon of these overseas resettled youths from the 1980s onward. Upon reintegration into urban settings, many of the youth evolved into displaced entities, perpetuating a narrative of continual border-crossings from China to various overseas destinations – a theme extensively explored within contemporary Chinese literature (Conceison 2005; Yang 2016).

⁷⁴ Wanli Guhong Ying (2021) ‘An older Chinese immigrant gave me a Guangxu edition of the 'Kangxi Dictionary’, Liuyuan blog, 08 July. Available at: <https://club.6parkbbs.com/page/index.php?app=forum&act=threadview&tid=59955>. (Accessed 05 January 2024).

Yang's narrative surrounding the collection of the Kangxi dictionary encompasses a sense of continuity and interconnection across different temporal and spatial boundaries. His endeavours in transcribing scripts and honing carving techniques in subterranean dwellings intersect with new contexts of script acquisition, stone collection and carving in fresh border-crossing environments. The act of collecting serves as both an embodiment and manifestation of distinct borders, with Yang's chosen seal-carving methodologies strategically transforming these border-crossings into tangible practices.

These tangible practices include the acquisition of various stones from local antique markets. Through rigorous experimentation with an assortment of South African stones, Yang identified a specific bluestone variant akin to the bluestone utilised for carvings in northern China. Possessing superior hardness compared to Shoushan stone from Northern China and occasionally bearing metallic undertones, these stones presented formidable challenges for carving. With an ample supply of suitable materials at his disposal (figure 2.20), Yang proceeded to refine his "Single Character, Hundred Seals" seal style in South Africa. Each character underwent meticulous transformation, being crafted into a hundred distinct renditions, characterised by diverse fonts, styles and configurations. The compositions ranged from ornamental antiquities and auspicious motifs to abstract architectural symbols (figure 2.19).



Figure 2.19: The tiles Yang used from the South African market and the seals of the character ‘归’ (meaning “return”). Photo provided by Yiyuan Yang.

Figure 2.20: One hundred different fonts, styles and shapes of the character ‘归’ (meaning “return”) form a large comma, resembling a vortex formed by a long river with powerful centripetal force. (Li 1999).

At the centre of the vortex is a poem written by Yang to commemorate the handover of Hong Kong to China, *Yi Jiangnan* (忆江南, Recalling the Southland), a metaphoric China: ‘Time passes, yet it remains far away. Despite a century of joys and sorrows, the mainland and overseas are one family. My heart returns to China’.⁷⁵ Historically, Jiangnan has served as a symbolic homeland for poets in exile (Wang and Williams 2015). The metaphor of *Jiangnan*, or the Southland, consistently emerges as a thematic and poetic device employed by Yang, evoking his memories of composing verses by the banks of the Yellow River during his years as a displaced youth and a longing for China in a diasporic context.



⁷⁵ Li, X. (1999) ‘*Hundred Returns Seal Impressions* and Devoted Heart’, *People’s Daily*, 19 December, Edition 7. Available at: [<https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1999/12/19/7/#1140584>] (Accessed 03 January 2024). The *Hundred Returns Seal Impressions* was created on the eve of Hong Kong’s return. It was reported by Li Xinfeng, a People’s Daily journalist stationed in South Africa at the time, as an epitome of overseas Chinese longing for their homeland. Yang has lost the original image of the artwork; therefore, the author has cited the image from Xingfeng Li’s article.

Figure 2.21: An aerial view of traditional silo-cave villages Zhangbian Town, Shanzhou District (Zhang et al. 2021:3).

Through acts of material practice within the rigid yet constrained physical space, the borders and memories associated with life on the Loess Plateau manifest prominently in Yang's seal aesthetics. Within this context, an individual entity engenders an infinite potential for visual impact, culminating in a depiction of the unique topographical features of plateau cave dwellings (figure 2.21).

The cyclical process of mourning and recalling of *gui* (归, return), punctuated by a comma, culminates in a pause, emphasising that the notion of home at the borders transcends mere physicality – it embodies a verb, denoting an ongoing process of creation and practice. Within the realm of collecting, this manifests as iterative acts of acquisition and carving, representing a sustained commitment to craftsmanship.

Border Poetics: A *Minjian* Non-narrative Novel of Zheng He (1371–1435)

Since intellectual historian Sebastian Veg's (2019) salient work, "*Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals*," the term "*minjian*" – commonly translated into English as "folk", has gained significant traction in *academic* discussions (Liang 2020; Tan 2024). Veg (2019: 26) clarifies that "*minjian*" literally means "among the people", with its core concept originating from the historical interplay between "*min*" (people) and "*guan*" (officials).

In the Chinese context, *minjian* typically denotes entities or activities that exist "outside the system", (official administrative units), specifically outside established bureaucratic structure (Veg 2019: 26). Within arts and literature, *minjian* emphasises grassroots or community-based cultural practices that *may* not necessarily be officially recognised. It values the *organic* development and transmission of traditions and values within these communities. After decades of high socialism appropriation by elites and officials in all cultural practices in *minjian* during the Cultural Revolution, contemporary scholars call for a restoration of its "authentic values". Slogans such as "Return *Minjian* back to *Minjian*" (Tan 2016; Shu 2000) and "Let *Minjian* artisanship return to *Minjian*" (Pan 2008) encapsulate this sentiment.

Recent developments in art history indicate a growing acknowledgment of *minjian* influences and use *minjian* as an analytical framework. Chang Tan's book (2024) highlights experimental artists in China having been transformed by *minjian* in the 'volatile and diverse public of the post-Mao era'. However, in the realm of art collecting, especially concerning Chinese antiquities

and classic art, *minjian* collectors frequently face criticism. They are often depicted as indiscriminate collectors of fakes,⁷⁶ disrupting established market systems. This tension has created a dichotomy between official entities – such as state museums, auction houses and state-affiliated art experts and *minjian* collectors. Nevertheless, the rise of private museums in China suggests a growing resistance, both formal and informal, from *minjian* collectors challenging prevailing narratives and structures.

Over the past three decades, Yiyan Yang has collected over 500 pieces of export brassware with a consistent style and carving techniques in South Africa. No official records or notable scholarly writings specifically address these pieces. Their widespread presence in South Africa, as well as countries like the UK, America and Japan, calls for a comprehensive empirical study to provide systematic insights into these artefacts. Due to their perceived low value and crude craftsmanship, these objects have largely escaped the attention of art experts and dealers. Yang associates some of them to the mythology of Zheng He (1368–1644 AD), the renowned navigator of China’s Ming Dynasty, who, under the orders of Emperor Yongle (1403–1424 AD), led seven marine expeditions between 1405 and 1433.

Inspired by the way Chinese *minjian* collectors’ creatively leverage Chinese folk literary allusions and the effects of mainstream cultural figures, among other tactics, to vie for discursive power in public spaces and construct narratives around their own collections. I decide to conceptualise each object within a collector’s assemblage as a “non-narrative vocabulary”. By examining these objects in relation to the collector’s rationale, a form of “collecting literature” emerges. I first critically scrutinise the dominant official Zheng He myth within Sino–African discourse. Subsequently, I explore how Yang strategically employs his “object vocabulary” to craft a narrative interwoven with the mythos surrounding Zheng He. I contend that the artefacts curated by Yang exert a *minjian* coercive influence through their replication and emulation of classical artefacts from Zheng He’s era in different historical times. Furthermore, they introduce novel dimensions to the prevailing Zheng He narratives in mainstream Sino–African discourse.

⁷⁶ Although in the Chinese context, *minjian* collectors are often associated with indiscriminate collectors, termed as “National Treasure Gang”, I emphasise the nuances. The term “National Treasure Gang” refers to groups of individuals who engage in art speculation and seek wealth accumulation through extensive collecting, particularly those hoping to acquire priceless treasures at low prices. This phenomenon indeed exists within the grassroots collecting ecosystem.

Zheng He in China–Africa Discourse

Prior to Vasco da Gama’s explorations, as Patrick Federl (2018: 59) has summarised, Zheng He’s fleets visited the east coast of Africa on his fourth (1412/14–1415), fifth (1417–1419), sixth (1421–1422) and probably the seventh expedition (1431–1433). These expeditions are believed to be ‘the first large-scale *direct* (my italics) contact’ between Africa and China (Federl 2018: 60) which is regarded as one of the most important periods of Sino–African contact in history (Gao 1984: 245). Therefore, around this officially recorded historical event in the Sino–Africa context, the construction of Zheng He’s myth has always been a constant phenomenon in the context of modern and contemporary Sino–Africa discourses. Recent perceptions of this phenomenon have gradually shifted from an earlier focus on the political and commercial history of maritime Asia in the aspects of anthropology, archaeology and religion (Schottenhammer 2006) to official and semi-official rhetoric and literary reflections that attempt to reveal the burgeoning multifaceted, increasing influx of Sino–Africa geopolitical entanglements.

From Zhou Enlai’s Africa tours between 1963 and 1965 to Xi Jinping’s 2014 speech on the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Zheng He serves as historical proof of long-established non-aggressive relations with foreign countries from Southeast Asia, along the Silk Road to Africa. Zheng He is positioned as a ‘rhetoric analogical reasoning’ to refute the prevailing criticism of China as a “neo-colonialist” in Africa (Federl 2018: 71). The use of Zheng He by modern and contemporary Chinese politicians highlights the state-nation narratives of ‘Afro–Asian solidarity in anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism’ since the 1955 Bandung Conference (Yuan 2020: 14).

In addition to the official rhetoric mentioned above, it is worth noting that a new literary reflection on how Zheng He’s myth was constructed by different contemporary individual narratives of border-crossing, and then interwoven and interacted with Chinese official narratives. This section also examines how the myth of Zheng He is constantly enriched and presented in individual narratives. What enlightenment does it have for the study of the Chinese diaspora in Africa? In the pursuit of Zheng He’s footsteps and the construction and dissemination of Zheng He’s myth, Eastern and Western journalists seem to pioneer the public’s construction and imagination of Zheng He due to their own professional conditions and thus contribute to a new Zheng He phenomenon. In 1999, the New York Times journalist Nicholas D. Kristof published an article titled ‘1492: Prequel’ which was based on his trip to the Pate Island of

Kenya. Referencing American author Louise Levathe's research, Kristof reported that a group of people with distinctive Asian features compared to the other locals claim to be related to the descendants of Zheng He. The article was translated into Chinese in the same year in South Africa's Chinese newspaper, the *Overseas Chinese Daily*. The story intrigued Xingfeng Li, a former Chinese journalist from *People's Daily* in South Africa at that time. He embarked on different trips deep into East African coastal villages for years to trace and attempt to prove Zheng He's remains, and his descendants could be found in Africa. Li reported his personal intervention experiences in the mainland Chinese media. It sparked broad interest in China in the story of Zheng He's descendants and attracted official attention and involvement in the further investigation of the biological entanglement between China and Africa (Li 2017). As a result, the destiny of a girl named Lali Mwamaka Sharif from Pate Island, believed to be one of Zheng He's descendants, changed, as she was sponsored by the Chinese embassy to study in China. Inspired by the story of Sharif, the Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, contributes to the mythmaking of Zheng He through 'a fictional recounting of a protagonist who is similar to Shifaru' (Yuan 2020: 18). This phenomenon marks the new contemporary characteristics and meanings of Zheng He's mythical construction, that is, prioritising the presentation of discourses that radiate Sino–Africa geopolitics, where individuals build their own connections around the grand narratives. The fictional image of the mythmaking of Zheng He presented in a local narrative demonstrates the participation of African individuals as active subjects in the construction of Zheng He's myth. Although Zheng He's image, as an outstanding historical episode, has been constructed with varying details, the political function of Zheng He's story has always been the main tone of these modern and contemporary mythological constructions. Besides that, Mingqing Yuan (2020: 24) questions the 'intersecting and integrating' representations between grand official, semi-official narratives and personal narratives as limiting the possibility of Simbao's proposition on 'pushing back' the louder voices of China–Africa contact with small stories (2019: 228).

I propose to focus on more diversified means of 'intersecting and integrating' representations, particularly based on what I have raised in the introduction; that is, how the various logics of small narratives or in the case of Yang, a "collecting literature", deeply rooted in culturally and community-constituted signifiers and traditions, either separate or communally/together unite us in the creation of the myth of Zheng He in the South. In his recent work of fiction, South African

historian Kwesi Dzapon Lwazi Prah (2021) employs African mythological narratives to reshape the myth of Zheng He. He introduces two closely connected spirits that guide Zheng He, setting him on an unforeseen journey to reinterpret history. His approach resonates with Chinese ancestral worship. It informs us that when we focus on deeply ingrained signifiers interwoven into the myth by individuals and communities on the margins, can new possibilities for pushback be opened up? Individuals' capacity to manage history can be "a rare and inimitable resource" (Suddaby and Quinn 2010: 147).

In the context of Chinese diaspora studies, Zheng He has been a recurring motif in diasporic historical narratives, deification folklore, and heritage sites (Lim 2017 and 2022) due to his iconic continental mobility and representing the earliest direct Chinese contact with large-scale overseas local communities. Temples (Figure. 2.22) and cultural museums erected along coastal settlements in Southeast Asia are dedicated to worshipping him as a folklore deity of their cities (Widodo 2005: 95; Hsu 2005: 104).



Figure 2.22: The sculpture of Zheng He located at the Tay Kak Sie (Da Jue Shi) Temple in Semarang, (Suryadinata 2005: 89).

Lysa Hong and Huang Jianli (2009: 287) observe that overseas Chinese communities resonate more profoundly with Zheng He than mainland China. This connection defines a sense of historical rootlessness, compromising the identity of sojourners and frequent tales of departure

and arrival. Amidst the contemporary Chinese community's emphasis on heritage-making around Zheng He, disputes arise between scholars such as Geoff Wade, adhering to the purist Rankian tradition, and Tan Ta Sen, aligned with the Nanyang scholars' heritage tradition. Their debates revolve around contrasting interpretations of Zheng He as either 'the paternalistic versus the predatory Zheng He' or as emblematic of 'maritime proto-colonialism' versus 'a missionary of peace' (Lysa Hong and Huang Jianli 2009: 300). The contentious battle over the myth of Zheng He between Geoff Wade and Tan Ta Sen highlights the profound divide between their respective scholarly cultures.

Returning to the context of Chinese communities in Africa, given their relatively small size and the cultural and geographical distance from China, the myth of Zheng He primarily takes root in rhetorical narratives amidst the emerging China–Africa interactions. Localised imaginings from writers like Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and Kwesi Dzapong Lwazi Prah offer meaningful nativist reflections. Yet research on the engagement of South African Chinese communities with Zheng He remains scarce, except for Xinfeng Li's (2017) efforts in tracing Zheng He's presence around southern Africa while working in South Africa. This involves understanding how artefacts, *minjian* practices, and the built environment are appropriated according to contemporary Chinese interpretations of Zheng He. Pursuing an evidence-based "true history", while acknowledging the folklore deeply rooted in *minjian* communities, remains crucial. As Leo Suryadinata argues, 'it is not only the history but also the legend that has made Zheng He memorable' (2005: 91).

Enigmatic Connections as Signifiers, Repeated Imitation Tradition

In 1992, Yang stumbled upon a brass bowl adorned with intricate dragon carvings in an antique shop located near his Taiqi teaching studio in Parkhurst, Johannesburg. Prior to this discovery, his studio walls bore inscriptions of the "jing, qi and shen" (精, 气, 神), the three treasures or virtues revered in Chinese Taoism and Buddhism. Chinese philosopher and poet and Taoist master Chongyang Wang (1113-1170 AD) integrated Buddhist and Daoist teachings, viewing essence (jing), energy (qi), and spirit (shen) as the internal three treasures, while regarding the ears, eyes, and mouth as the external three treasures (Xiao 2020). In practice, Chongyang Wang advocated for entering a state of deep meditation to eliminate distracting thoughts: the eyes do not see but the spirit resides in the heart, the ears do not hear but the essence rests in the kidneys, and the mouth does not speak but the energy is concentrated in the

dantian (丹田) (Xiao 2020: 4).⁷⁷ Central to this practice is the concept of inner balance, through which the internal and external three treasures are harmonised (Pregadio 2008). Yang (2023b), who has practiced dantian breathing for three decades, combines Chongyang Wang’s methods of cultivating essence, energy, and spirit with the Buddhist concept of reincarnation. He applies these principles to guide his spiritual practice and daily life in South Africa. This focus on internal cultivation links him to Lianke Yan’s mythorealism, where the pursuit of inner truths in spiritual and collecting practices takes precedence over whether external appearances conform to conventional logic. In the realm of collecting, Yang creates enigmatic connections as signifiers, interweaving his belief in reincarnation, where artifacts and symbols possess the agency to choose him within this life cycle.

Intriguingly, Zheng He’s epithet is “San Bao”, the three treasures. Over the ensuing three decades, Yang has interpreted these serendipitous, enigmatic connections as meaningful signifiers linking him to Zheng He. This perspective has spurred him to amass a collection of over 500 pieces of brassware in a cohesive aesthetic style within South Africa. Yang’s mythorealist approach to collecting resonates with the literary style of Lianke Yan, in crafting a “collecting literature” that elevates these fortuitous yet genuine encounters and oddities, be they objects or individuals. This method draws from Chinese *minjian* mythical traditions, enabling the reconstruction of a resistant past in the Chinese diaspora.

Reaching to Zheng He Through Marks by Minjian Imitations

‘The kind of logic which is used by mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and that the difference lies not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied’ – (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 444).

Yang’s observation centres on the distinct characteristics of brassware, which appear to have been meticulously hand-engraved with a coherent aesthetic design featuring various auspicious patterns catered for foreign markets. Notably, the majority of these pieces bear marks associated with the Xuande reign (1426–1435), including inscriptions such as “Made in Da Ming Xuande”

⁷⁷ The dantian, most associated with the lower abdominal region, plays a pivotal role in the flow of inner energy in Taiqi. Unlike Western anatomical or biological frameworks, the concept of the dantian is unique to Chinese thought. Paul Bowman (2024: 1) suggests that these distinctions can be insightfully interpreted through the lens of the specific sensory maps and bodily fields cultivated by particular exercises, disciplines, or training regimes.



Figure 2.23 (left): a censer's outer base is adorned with the Xuande reign mark in regular script, bearing the inscription: "Made during the Xuande reign of the Great Ming Dynasty". Collection of Yiyuan Yang. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

Figure 2.24 (right): The outer base of a tripod censer in the Palace Museum Collection is adorned with a similar inscription. Yang Boda authenticated this specific censer in 1977 as a Chongzhen-era replica (1627 to 1644), corresponding to the reign of the last emperor of the Ming Dynasty.

The inscriptions on some of these exported coarse brassware items link them to the scholarly yet disputed category of "Xuande censers". Similar to the challenges in defining blue-and-white ceramics discussed in chapter one, identifying Xuande censers poses an even more profound challenge due to the lack of precise origins from reliable physical sources and historical evidence. Contemporary scientific scrutiny of brass material sources and manufacturing methods inevitably sparks controversy (Li 2012).

In the realms of art history and collecting, the authoritative work defining Xuande censers is believed to be the *Illustrated Catalogue of Xuande Ritual Vessels* (宣德彝器图谱) by Lu Zhen, a Ming dynasty scholar. However, it has been scrutinised as a later forgery, turning Xuande censers into an enigma. Despite this, the replication of brass censers bearing Xuande marks has persisted from the mid-Ming dynasty to the modern era. The historical records documented in the *Illustrated Catalogue of Xuande Ritual Vessels* have become a widely circulated basis for the *minjian* collection of Xuande censers. This historical record indicates that in the third year of Xuande's reign, the emperor received a substantial amount of brass as tribute from the King of Thailand. Based on the models of bronze vessels used for palace ceremonies and various ceramic shapes from famous kilns, around 50 000 to 180 000 brass items were crafted. These items served not only for ceremonial purposes in the palace but were also distributed to the royal residences, consorts, civil and military officials, suburban temples and shrines, as well as famous mountain temples and palaces throughout the country.

Xuande censer expert Mijia Li (2012: 5-9) from the Palace Museum in Beijing points out that due to widespread dispersion, continuous replication by subsequent court and *minjian* artists, and the loss of genuinely transmitted artefacts, it has become nearly impossible to trace the true origins of these items. Most of the items collected in the Qing Palace are replicas made in later periods, with the added difficulty of authentication due to challenges like wartime artefact transfers. In his groundbreaking work, Li uses the year 1949 as a dividing point, categorising Qing Palace collections into “new” and “old” collections, replacing the narrow and unattainable labels of “absolute authenticity” to define Xuande censers.

Through chemical analysis of the only available source that can be confirmed – a double-eared gilded bronze vase bestowed by Emperor Xuande to the Qutan Temple – Li determines that this bronze item dates back to the second year of Xuande but is made of brass rather than bronze. He argues that the Xuande era indeed marked a crucial turning point in the use of brass for casting vessels. The global study of Xuande censers in museums faces a similar paradox of reliable source materials. Li (2021: 16) questions the conclusion drawn by Rose Kerr, head of the East Asian department at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK, regarding the zinc content in the Xuande censers in their collection. Kerr’s analysis indicates a zinc content far higher than that found in orderly documented Xuande censers in China, prompting further scrutiny into the sourcing of products from Xuande furnaces in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s collection. The specimens used in these studies within the conventional art museum framework are selectively chosen from the “classic” collections circulating within renowned museums, auction houses and celebrity collector circles.

Currently, circulating more widely in South Africa and antique shops around the world are not these exquisite classic museum items, but the Chinese-style coarse brassware collected by Yiyuan Yang. Through organising his own collection, Yang confirms that among these brass items, some imitate the style of Xuande censers (Figure 2.25), while others are daily-use items made of brass, guided by Western aesthetics and lifestyle preferences (Figure 2.26).

Additionally, there is a portion that may be imitations produced in Japan or brassware made for the Japanese market with a Japanese-Chinese style (Figure 2.27). Due to the lack of systematic research on these brass items, their styles and chronological determinations currently cannot be accurately confirmed.



Figure 2.25: A brass censer in Xuande style with engraved dragons, twin loop handles on tripod squat feet, 13cm diameter. Collection of Yiyuan Yang. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.



Figure 2.26: A brass plate crafted for export purposes, adorned with engraved dragons in the Xuande style, measures 54cm in diameter, circa 1930s. Collection of Yiyuan Yang. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.



Figure 2.27: A brass flower vase with a Xuande mark and engraved paintings by skilled craftsmen. The artistic style deviates from the typical Chinese style, featuring modern and exquisite designs. Some *minjian* collectors believe it was made for export during the Taisho era to Japan, while others think it dates back to the Republic of China period (Yang 2021c).

In the South African context, unlike the extensive research on blue-and-white porcelain, there is scarce published research specifically tracing the origins of Chinese-style brassware items.

Existing records about brassware can be found in Cape households' inventories (Malan 1993) and occasionally surface in auction catalogues, typically featuring Western-style brassware made by coppersmiths at the Cape of Good Hope from 1662 onwards (Le Roux 1982). Despite my attempts to contact renowned antique dealers in South Africa, no response was received. Further in-depth market research is needed to understand how these brass items circulated to South Africa.

These brassware items intentionally remain overlooked and excluded from mainstream academic and auction art market discussions. This is attributed to their vast quantity, coarse style and low value, which does not align with the pursuit of exquisite pieces by museums and auction houses. Recent studies on the early twentieth-century art market in Beijing and Xuande censors indicate a belief that most coarse Xuande imitations circulating globally were produced at the end of the Qing Dynasty and during the Republic of China period, criticised as being 'the batch with the worst quality and the most chaotic forms of imitated Xuande censors, mostly from this period' (Ma 2023). Contrary to such evaluations, there is a continuous emergence of overseas Chinese collectors purchasing these brass items, even selling them within China, classifying them as part of the "retrograde copper" (回流铜) category. The public's attitude towards similar collections in China is influenced by the exclusive nation-state framework. Some believe that items with Chinese ornamentation and aesthetics are worth collecting, while others argue for a critical examination of the concept of "retrograde". They suggest that "retrograde" should be applied specifically to cultural relics "stolen or deceived by foreigners" during the semi-colonial period (Lanse Xincheng 2021), rather than broadly to artefacts manufactured or imitated in a Chinese style by foreign countries, especially Japan. In this contemporary discourse of private collecting, Chinese export brassware has entered a liminal space, questioning what truly constitutes Chinese cultural relics and what kind of Chinese aesthetic is worth collecting – raising challenges for private collectors in China facing items produced domestically for China and those produced for foreign markets in a Chinese style.

As an overseas Chinese living in South Africa, for Yang, these brass items possess unquestionable Chinese identity and cultural value, even though viewing his collection of extensively replicated and imitated coarse brassware from a market-driven perspective seem to be illogical. Since encountering the first brass item in 1992, Yang has continuously sought to understand the significance of these brass items in the South African context. Given their vast

quantity and coherent aesthetic style, and following his spiritual belief mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Yang initially believed that these brass items actively chose him. In the absence of historical records in South Africa, Yang speculated that they might have arrived in South Africa as part of a large shipment of brassware accompanying Zheng He's voyages. He felt an obligation, being a Chinese individual, to collect and protect these artefacts associated with Zheng He that had ended up in South Africa and encountered him. Over the course of thirty years of accumulating his collection, he gradually discovered that these brass items exhibit styles from different eras and various *minjian* workshops. They even bear the marks of individual craftsmen (Figure 2.28), representing a collective homage, response and enduring re-creation by *minjian* artists to the classical Xuande censers. Despite the Xuande reign lasting only a decade, Xuande style has become an eternal paradigm and myth.

Considering the multi-generational aspirations and imagination of *minjian* artists towards the myth of Xuande censers, preserved in these coarse objects as signifiers, Yang (2020) envisions Zheng He possibly holding a Xuande censer gifted by Xuande emperor on one of his fleets. Zheng He, dispatched not only by Emperor Yongle but also by Emperor Xuande, embarked on maritime expeditions to the South Seas and beyond. Collecting these imitations serves as a means to connect with the mythical deification of Zheng He.

Yang examines these objects, attributing their origins to the official *yang* of the Ming dynasty imperial court, evident in the Xuande reign marks, dragon patterns, and overall craftsmanship. However, with the involvement of *minjian* artisans, these artefacts exhibit a distinctive coarse style, distinguishing them from the refined official *yang* artifacts. Xuande reign marks, dragon patterns, and folklore tropes appear to be the “root words” in his object vocabulary. Yang unpacks how these *minjian* artisans emerged in his humanistic approach to collecting different traces of imitations, aiming to diversify and capture the undocumented imprints left by unknown *minjian* artists throughout history. This approach avoids categorising them simply as modern-day, inexpensive replicas. The Xuande reign marks offer various paradigms for study, and the *minjian* imitations further showcase a broad spectrum of diversity.



Figure 2.28: This hand-engraved ‘Made in the Xuande Reign of the Great Ming Dynasty’ artefact exhibits a casual and natural aesthetic. Collection of Yiyuan Yang. Courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.



Figure 2.29: This piece features two different marks on the base. The predominant design of the main mark is based on the traditional motif of two dragons playing with a pearl, with the inscription “Made in the Xuande Reign of the Great Ming Dynasty” positioned between the two dragons. Such base designs are frequently used, with variations in the central text. The second mark, “Made in China”, indicates that this object was produced after 1919. According to U.S. federal law, all imported goods were required to bear a mark indicating their country of origin. The use of the term “China” for this purpose began after 1891, and the phrase “Made in China” started appearing after 1919 (Bade 1997).



Figure 2.30: In the central blank space of the sea-water river-cliff pattern, the base is adorned with a simple incised carving of the characters "宣德" (Xuande), a further simplified version based on the common official base design. Collection of Yiyuan Yang. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.



Figure 2.31; Common Xuande censer marks from the Ming and Qing dynasties featured the characters "宣德年制" in a font resembling ancient Chinese bronze inscriptions. However, starting from the late 19th century, these marks started showing a pitted background, suggesting a departure from handcrafted techniques (Tapsell 2023).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Chris Tapsell is a London-based Oriental antiques dealer who has sold many pieces of Chinese brassware with Xuande marks. In our email conversation, Tapsell unfolded his lived experience with the brassware as a dealer.



Figure 2.32: This unique mark, "德发制造" (De fa zhizao, made by Defa), has been engraved inside this brassware piece, making it the only one discovered among all the brassware collected by Yang. He speculates that it represents the name of a brassware workshop responsible for crafting this particular piece.



Figure 2.33: a detail view of the dragon carved on various brassware reminiscent of Xuande dragon patterns. Collection of Yiyuan Yang. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

In addition to the illustrated Xuande mark, Yang associates the dragon patterns in these objects with a distinctive style reminiscent of the Xuande era.



Figure 2.34: Blue-and-White Sea-Water Dragon Pattern Bowl, Serial Number: NEW00083415, Ming Xuande, Dimension: Height 12 cm, Diameter 26.5cm, Base Diameter 12cm. Collection of Palace Museum (Xu n.d.).

Remarkably, the exported coarse brassware often showcased engravings of folklore, a feature that is often absent in the official Xuande censer corpus intended for the Chinese market. Among Yang's collection, Chinese opera images like *Dao Ma Dan* (Knife-Horse-Warrior, 刀马旦) frequently appeared. He would sometimes acquire one of a pair and, after several years, luckily encounter its counterpart in a different market (Yang 2022b):

These were collected many years ago. The first one acquired was missing its twin dragon-shaped handles. At the time, it looked round and chubby, but there was a sense that something was amiss, especially since the lid was also lost. A long time later, unexpectedly encountered one with well-welded twin dragon-shaped handles (without visible signs of re-soldering). Unfortunately, the lid is still missing. The painted scene on

this piece depicts a *daomadan*, featuring a young general wielding a long spear on one side and dual hammers on the other. The style remains artlessly charming.

Yang considers the enigmatic process as a signifier to connect to Zheng He.



Figure 2.35: a spherical tripod Xuande-marked bronze censer with well-welded twin dragon-shaped handles, depicting a scene of Daomadan 刀马旦, a role model in Chinese opera (literally. “blade-and-horse dan”) play the part of a female commander. Yiyuan Yang’s collection. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.



Figure 2.36: A spherical tripod Xuande-marked bronze censer. Yang (2022) interprets it as depicting typical occupations in traditional Chinese agrarian society: fishermen, woodcutters, farmers and scholars engrossed in reading. It could also be related to the folklore of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The original twin dragon-shaped handles are missing. From Yiyuan Yang's collection. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

These *minjian* artworks emulate the tastes and perspectives of the traditional Chinese elite scholars, portraying a romanticised construction of nature and “the others”. It is noteworthy that, despite having themes from literati painting, these two pieces created by *minjian* artists employ different patterns to construct a compact yet full visual space, a departure from the literati aesthetic that emphasises atmosphere, emptiness, and distance.

By taking these two objects as signifiers, Yang articulates the tension between the elite-scholar class and those of common birth, especially concerning individuals with special identities, for example, the systematic repression of individuals with unique status, such as the suppression orchestrated through the identity of Zheng He's eunuchs. In folk legends, *minjian* artists have become the primary means through which these marginalised groups, erased by orthodox Confucian history, can be commemorated. Throughout history, Chinese opera has been a discursive space of tension between the lower levels of society and the court and the local elites

(Goldman 2013: 14; Guo 2019: 1). The mid-Ming dynasty witnessed the emerging role of the male dan, a cross-dressing boy performing a female role. Andrea S. Goldman (2013: 13) points out that the theatre had the power to disrupt social hierarchies by rendering ‘men of means and privilege susceptible to the allure of humble cross-dressing boy actresses.’ When these brassware were produced at the turn of the twentieth century, specifically when the motif of *daomadan* (figure 2.35) became popular in all mediums of exported arts and crafts, behind the artistic portrayal, lies the less reality of significant number of male dan actors during the Ming and Qing dynasties forced to act as social companions and, at times, as intimate partners for scholarly elite and affluent sponsors (Guo 2019: 2). Similarly, in the emerging official rhetorical narratives of China and Africa, Zheng He’s victimisation due to his background as a eunuch, erased by orthodox Confucian scholars and officials, is seldom discussed.

Through the seemingly random mythical signifier of the two brass censers, Yang (2020; 2023b) articulates how he identifies himself with Zheng He on a personal level, as Zheng He was largely dismissed by official history for centuries. Chinese literati of later times rarely undertook serious study of him and hardly regarded his expeditions as glorious achievements (Feder 2018). Instead, records of him were burned or maliciously destroyed, contributing to the vulnerability and the possibility of different constructions of the myth of Zheng He globally. The deliberate erasure of historical records at official and individual levels is arguably caused by the ideological and power conflicts between Confucian civil servants and eunuchs (Feder 2018).

For nearly thirty years, the scarce historical references to Zheng He’s myth problematise the possibility of a definite confirmation or rejection of the connections of these brass objects to Zheng He. Only in recent years, with the emergence of online *minjian* immigrant collectors’ discourse and recent publications on the export crafts market in Beijing (Xiang 2021) and Qing dynasty copper mining research in Xinjiang (Liu 2022), do the origins of these objects seem possibly linked to the large *minjian* crafts workshops since the late Qing dynasty. However, Yang considers this process of learning as the aftermath of a systematic archival erasure, compelling him to further sympathise with Zheng He and the family of brassware in his collecting and interpreting process. Both the myth of Zheng He and the family of brass objects are incorporated into his self-legitimation process in South Africa. Yang (2021)⁷⁹ describes

⁷⁹ Yang, Y.Y. (2020). 21 Feb. Johannesburg, interview with Binjun Hu.

these pieces as ‘lonely drifters,’ metaphorically reflecting his immigration trajectory from China to South Africa. They echo each other in the sense that they are not recognised and are forgotten by the secular world of China and South Africa. His years of endeavours in searching for more evidence connecting these brassware to Zheng He were part of a process in constructing his identity in South Africa, deeply impacted by his experiences in the village in China during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Yang’s self-taught artistic skills during the decade of his youth on the farm differ from formal art education in colleges. He has received little recognition in the mainstream art world in China and South Africa. Therefore, by collecting and researching these overlooked brassware in relation to the myth of Zheng He, whose image was deliberately erased in the past yet is increasingly recognised in the present, a trinity system of the brassware, Yang, and Zheng He has gradually emerged. Yang’s continuous collecting and learning practices exhibit an analogical reasoning process of self-legitimisation in celebrating, contesting and domesticating the past to serve his present needs as a Chinese immigrant in South Africa (Lowenthal 1985). He shows how focusing on collecting less-valued objects embraces a humanistic individual approach from which empathy, re-enactment, and personal commemoration challenge and diversify the predominant market–museum orientated practices of collecting.

Critical Analysis

Yang’s collecting practices of these brass objects also prompt us to examine the history of China–Africa relations through the lens of subject-object duality. This perspective emphasises how the myth of Zheng He is constructed by incorporating ordinary objects and individuals, highlighting the role of these elements in shaping his narrative through ordinary objects and individuals. In Yang’s comprehensive collecting practice, the significance of being object-oriented and showing respect to the objects outweighs conforming to the nationalistic sentiments conveyed by Zheng He’s myth in official texts.

Following Pierre Bourdieu’s treatment of objects as social forms constituted through the social space in relation to social agents (1977), Daniel Miller (2010) proposes a conceptual framework of ‘the humility of objects.’ He argues that, in their humility, common objects seem invisible around us yet organise our perception of reality. Individuals incorporate into society not only through formal education but also through the pre-structured objects that can be found around them.

In the triangular relationship of the brassware, Yang, and the context of South Africa, materialises and becomes tangible through the brass pieces. This complexity is further influenced by geopolitics between China and Africa, contributing to the construction of a rhetorical myth of Zheng He and the persistent value of high-priced objects in the tradition of collecting culture. Yang's compelling focus on these overlooked brassware in South Africa liberates the roles of anonymous artisans and their agency, diversifying the dominant official narrative of Xuande censors through generations of continuous imitation by *minjian* artists.

Yang (2022) regards the brassware he collected in South Africa as vessels embodying the virtue of China–Africa connections, contributing to continental historical exchanges maintained by individuals on the ground like him. While there is a growing scholarly discourse addressing the philosophical aspects of the Chinese presence in Africa (Chan 2013) through rhetorical and literary reflections, few pieces have explored the duality of objects and common subjects in the construction of moral-ethical ideals like Zheng He. This coarse brassware, constructed by Yang as small ritual vessels in the contemporary, serve to commemorate the mythmaking of Zheng He beyond the one-dimensional interpretation of these objects as affordable artefacts against the backdrop of contemporary consumer culture.

Despite the criticism of the misconception that 'Africa's prime importance to China' in China's overall overseas diplomacy is a 'Western construction' (Chan 2013: 36), Yang's narrative, in relation to the myth of Zheng He, underscores the profound influence of Sino–Africa geopolitics on individuals based in Africa. This influence extends from the realm of daily life with material engagements to the domain of spiritual imaginations. Yang's case reveals a virtue of humility in contemporary Sino-Africa relations beyond rhetorical discourses, specifically, the ability of ordinary objects and grassroots to represent a particular form of knowledge production and social force in shaping the tone of Sino-Africa relations from the position of ordinary Chinese immigrants in Africa.

In conclusion, Yang's case offers a unique insight into the tension and complexity between grand and small narratives in Sino-Africa discourses. The interaction between ordinary cultural relics and Chinese subjects in the cross-context of China and Africa provides a new and flexible narrative attempt against the mainstream approach of Zheng He's mythical texts with national narrative and political purposes. The process of nearly three decades of collecting these copper wares differentiates Yang from other individuals in Africa who follow the grand narratives of

Zheng He. He has consistently demonstrated his own personal initiative and is at the forefront of constructing the relationship with Zheng He's legend in Africa.

The emergence of Zheng He's texts in Yang's narratives is related to the continuous appearance of new brassware and his ongoing study and interaction with these objects. To restore the historical background of these brassware, Zheng He's texts finally entered Yang's world. While most people like Xingfeng Li and others follow Zheng He's footsteps in Africa primarily due to the influence of legendary stories, in their approaches, the narrative in Zheng He's official texts has become the coordinate of reference and constant pursuit. The legend of Zheng He forms a Sino-Africa narrative primarily with a political function in the protagonist's position. The political function of Zheng He's myth motivated and fundamentally framed their actions, both within and outside rhetorical discourses.

Yang's narrative is not completely independent from the official narrative. However, the official and semi-official narratives are subjected to his style of reformation and commemoration: looking with humility through the humility of objects. The virtue of humility of objects in the construction of Zheng He's myth outweighs the often-dominant pride of state-nation narratives. Yang's case exhibits a level of freedom, revealing and instructive in expanding the dimension of the myth of Zheng He beyond the dominant official narrative in contemporary Sino-Africa discourse. Repeating or referencing the past is inevitable, which does not mean the grand narrative will always be present as the core, whereas, in Yang's case, the grand narratives are subjected to the individual narratives' reformation and commemoration.

Yan Lianke (2022) offers his view of realism through his theorisation of "mythorealism". The term is used to capture the world's underlying truth by relying on the allegories, myths, legends, and dreamscapes that emerge from daily life. The real myth that emerged from Yang's daily life is not Zheng He but these brassware made by *minjian* artisans whose presence warrants further investigation and imagination.

Drawing on his extensive experience in Oriental art and his exploration of coarse brassware in London, Chris Tapsell (2023) reflects on numerous pieces he acquired directly from the descendants of individuals who served in or were stationed in the British colonies. His observation reveals a pattern where the British would acquire various items in one country during their colonial assignments and, upon relocating to another colonial post, initiate a new

round of acquisitions. Some collections expanded across three or four countries, with China, India and Arabia prominently featured.

The question arises: How did these coarse brassware items find their way to South Africa? Since the late nineteenth century, individual connections between South Africa and China are noteworthy. While Yang purchased most of his brassware in flea markets, he also acquired many Chinese postcards, including those from individual South Africans who had visited China and sent letters (figure 2.37) back to South Africa.



Figure 2.37: A postcard mailed from Peking to “Miss Florence Hewitt, Westhill, Grahamstown, South Africa,” reads: “This is part of the wall of the city of Peking. Every day I see a troupe of camels like this going through the street, carrying loads. They look very funny now in summer because they have no wool. Tonight is the only day. N. Pindau.” 14 x 9 cm, Postal mark: Shanghai, 22 July 1918.

Figure: 2.38: “No. 8 Camel Caravan, Blockhouse, Tartar City Peking”, The front view of the photo postcard. Photography by John David Zumbun (1875-1949), issued by the Camera Craft Co., circa 1910s. Collection of Yiyuan Yang. Photo by Binjun Hu.

Could these individuals have acquired some of the brassware, mirroring the tradition observed by the British in other colonies? These questions remain unanswered. However, as Tapsell argues, the connection between ordinary South Africans and China in the early 20th century is evident in these overlooked objects, whether coarse brass or postcards. They collectively offer a vivid snapshot of mobility during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Furthermore, the material culture formed through this mobility now represents the contemporary material

conditions of Chinese immigrants in South Africa, enabling the navigation and reordering of new knowledge-making nexuses.

These Quiet Things: the Politics of Chinese Aesthetics Embodied in a Photo Postcard on the Rand

The modern history of over 63 000 Chinese labourers who were imported to South Africa as an experiment to work in the gold mines at the beginning of the twentieth century has caused the most interest in the history of Chinese migration in South Africa (Harris 1998). Despite significant studies in both South Africa and China, restricted to the perspective of sources predominately available in official records and other non-Chinese accounts, our understanding of the experiment from the perspective of Chinese labourers remains trivial. Attempts have been made to expand research on alternative sources, such as the Chinese travel diary in South Africa by Xie Zixiu (Ngai 2017), visual analysis of postcards and photographs, and archival film intervention (2008) to contextualise the Chinese experiences on the Rand. In the same vein, arising from these limitations, this subsection presents a critical examination of a photo postcard made in 1906, titled “*Chinese Coolies on the Rand: The Famous ‘Repatriation’ Poster*,” (figure 2.33) intended to show the event of the Chinese indentured labourers in South Africa, collected by the Yiyuan Yang. Yang’s photo postcard is positioned as an *affective* tool and anchoring force unfolding the embodied, quiet forms and silent resistance among the Chinese indentured labourers on the Rand. These quiet expressions of resistance are arguably concealed within the colonial archive of posters and seals, characterised by distinctive Chinese aesthetics. Through a detailed intertextual visual analysis of these quiet things, coupled with Yang’s sensitive accounts that re-imagine the feelings and perceptions of these Chinese labourers in a diasporic context, the subsection demonstrates a co-constituted process between the indentured labourers and the British colonial authorities in South Africa. By appropriating Chinese aesthetics into the British Colonial proclamation system, the colonial authorities achieved a semblance of visual authenticity in policing the Chinese labourers. Simultaneously, the use of seal impressions⁸⁰ and the format of Qing proclamations possibly provided the Chinese indentured labourers with a genuine sense of cultural competence in an alien hostile country. It aims to explore the possibilities of decolonising Chinese colonial artefacts by unveiling the power dynamics

⁸⁰ Seal impression refers to printed seal marks that are created from one simultaneous stamping action.

embedded within visual representations and shedding light on the various agents connecting China and South Africa during the dawn of twentieth century.

Encountering the Photo Postcard

On 7 April 1905, after nearly two decades of service for the British government in China, James William Jamieson departed Shanghai for South Africa. He took up the position as Superintendent of Foreign Labour in the Transvaal⁸¹ which was critical in managing Chinese indentured labourers in the gold mines. On the 5 May 1906, two years after the arrival of the first group of Chinese workers in 1904, Jamieson ordered the gold mines to post a Repatriation Notice in Chinese (figure 2.39) signed by him with a seal impression in Chinese script.

Ninety years later, a photo postcard with a photograph of the Chinese poster appeared in a flea market in Johannesburg. Impressed by the beauty of the calligraphy presented on the postcard, Yiyuan Yang, the most well-known Chinese seal-carving and calligraphy artist in Johannesburg immediately purchased it. Yang was not aware that in the past decade, the South African philately circle has witnessed an emerging craze with Chinese stamps, letters and postcards⁸² in the context of increasing contemporary China–Africa contact. In addition to museum and library collections of postcards of Chinese on the Rand, individual collectors in South Africa have played a competitive role in assembling and preserving widely dispersed Chinese on the Rand postcards and letters. Their motivations are primarily driven by their interpretation of the significance of Chinese indentured labourers in ‘resuscitating Africa’s ailing gold mining industry in the aftermath of the South African War (also known as Anglo Boer War)’ (du Plessis 2019: 219). At the same time, the collectors⁸³ express empathy through uncovering visual analysis of exploitative practices in the mines, which reiterates scholarly accounts of the objectification of the Chinese body in the construction of a self-anointed whiteness (Huynh 2008).

⁸¹ Departure of Mr. Jamieson from China to Take up Appointment of Superintendent of Foreign Labour in the TVL, National Archives of South Africa (NASA), GOV 95 CON 118.

⁸² Individual Collectors, e.g., André du Plessis from Pretoria Philatelic Society has been collecting and publishing about Chinese labourers on the mine for years in the journal of the philatelic Federation of South Africa. (*Correspondence of the Chinese indentured mineworkers on the Rand–1940 to 1910*. Volume 97:6, 969, December 2021; *Chinese Indentured Mineworkers on the Rand – 1904 to 1910*. Volume 95:6.957, December 2019)

⁸³ *Chinese Indentured Mineworkers on the Rand – 1904 to 1910*. Volume 95:6.957, December 2019

Examining the perspective of a Chinese immigrant collector operating outside the South African philately circle, this section illuminates the distinctive manner in which the postcard serves as a pivotal artefact in understanding the transnational aesthetics of the Chinese diaspora. It establishes a connection between the appropriation of Chinese aesthetics in the colonial history of Chinese labour importation and the contemporary experiences of new Chinese immigrants in South Africa.

A Visual Examination of the Postcard

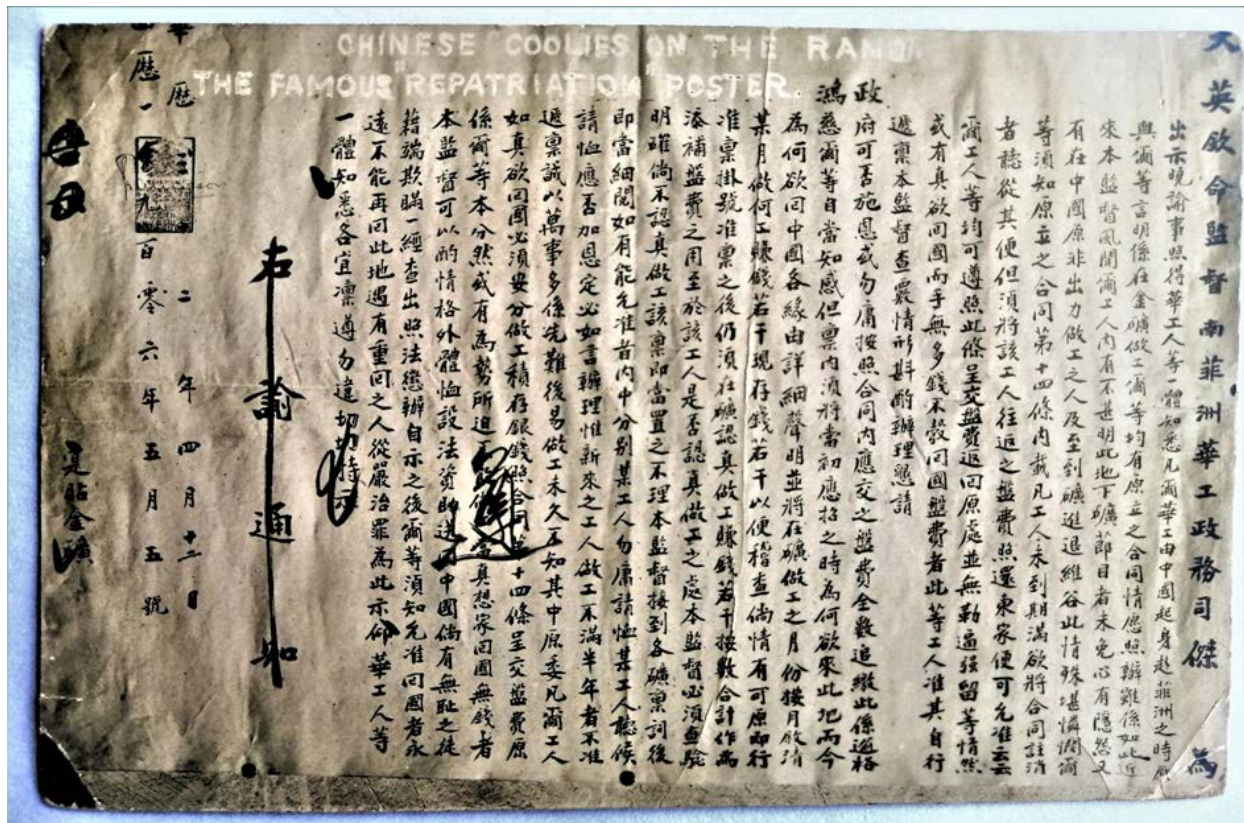


Figure 2.39: Front view of the postcard. 1906. Dimensions: 13.80 x 90cm. Yiyuan Yang's collection. Photo courtesy of Yiyuan Yang.

The front of the photo postcard is in black-and-white, featuring a notice written in *guangeti* calligraphy, commonly used in Qing official documents and inscriptions. The uneven textured notice paper is seen posted against a rough wall, with two nails showing the bottom of the photograph. It restores a cropped view of one of the Chinese Repatriation Notices posted on a gold mine on 5 May 1906. The densely distributed black Chinese words occupy most of the space.

These seemingly deeply “engraved” Chinese characters in black contrast with two white lines of English title in capital letters floating at the top of the photo: ‘CHINESE COOLIES ON THE RAND’: ‘THE FAMOUS “REPATRIATION” POSTER’. Upon careful zooming into the English title, a few black dots are noticeable on the words “poster” and “the,” indicating that initially, the English title was written in black on the photograph when it was developed and later highlighted in white for the purpose of postcard production.

However, unlike most of the postcards concerning the Chinese indentured labourers on the Rand with the publisher names on the photo (Huynh 2023:231), this postcard does not provide any information regarding a producer in the photo. The visual examination of the image informs us that the repatriation notices for the Chinese indentured labourers posted on the mine were written in Chinese. The title and content flow from the right to the left in the format of a Chinese official proclamation in the Qing Dynasty.

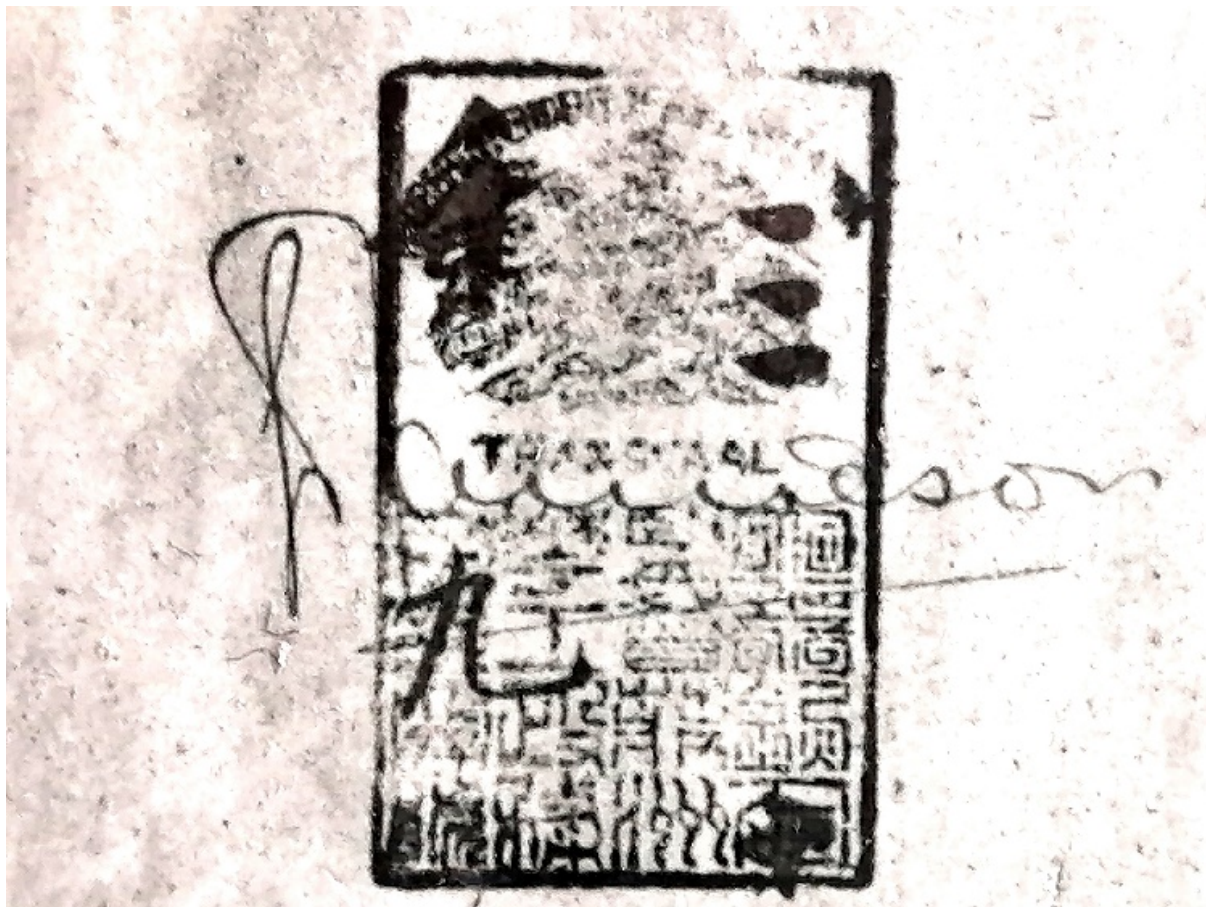


Figure 2.40: The official seal on the repatriation notice. Photo by Binjun Hu.

On the left top of the photo where the notice ends, Superintendent of Foreigner Labour James William Jamieson's signature ran across the middle line of a rectangular-shaped seal (figure 2.40) as if waves separate the seal in half with Chinese and English scripts on each side.



Figure 2.41: The reverse side of the postcard. The red seal is in the style of British colonial seals commonly used by South African British colonial officers and dependencies. Photo by Binjun Hu

The reverse side of the postcard (Figure 2.41) displays a red postcard seal impression, resembling the style of British colonial seals commonly used by South African British colonial officers and dependencies. This implies that the postcard served as a prevalent medium for circulating news on the Rand, facilitated by the British colonial government's connections with photographers and photography studios. Posted from Johannesburg to England at 3 pm on May 14, 1906, the postcard reached its destination a mere nine days after the actual Chinese posters were written. The recipient, Charles G. Rosenstein Esq., resided in Nottingham, a prosperous coal mining town in England during that period. In my communications with collectors in the philatelic society of South Africa and scholars extensively studying Rand postcards, it has been confirmed that Yang's postcard remains unique in its rarity, suggesting its association with a manufacturer closely tied to the British colonial government. Notably, it effectively conveyed news of the Chinese repatriation notice posted on the mines to England.

Yang's photo postcard captures a moment in South African history, enabling viewers to precisely anchor themselves in the events surrounding Chinese indentured labourers: to reflect on the experiences of indentured labourers and to contemporaneously engage with a Chinese immigrant collector in South Africa.

Looking Back with the Chinese Indentured Labourers: Silent Resistance in the Archives

How was the so-called famous Repatriation Poster created and posted and viewed by the Chinese indentured labourers? Why was it written in the format of the Chinese official notice in the Qing Dynasty? What entails the need for a distinctive seal impression with both Chinese and English scripts? The photo on the postcard opens a pathway into the overlooked archives regarding the ways colonial government administration has been shaped by the culture of Chinese indentured labourers.

Almost a year after the experiment of importing Chinese indentured labourers to South Africa, based on his contact with the Chinese labourers in the mines, the acting Superintendent George Wolfe Murray came to a conclusion of demanding a new Superintendent seal that was supposed to be specially designed according to the Chinese tradition. In a request letter addressed to the Lieutenant Governor in Pretoria on 10th May 1905, he wrote:

I beg to inform you that I have formed the opinion, during the period in which I have been acting as Superintendent to this Department, that all Chinese notices issued and posted by this Department should bear a red seal as well as the Superintendent's signature... I learn that coolies are accustomed in their own country to expect several seals on Government notices and that they are liable to dispute the authenticity of Government Notices in this Country if they do not see a Seal on them.⁸⁴

Alongside the more overt and noticeable forms of resistance, there exist quieter, less conspicuous forms of resistance. These quieter forms include subtle aesthetic acts of defiance. The Chinese labourers were neither ignorant nor docile, they knew the terms of the contract, they were capable of nearly total solidarity, and they were tactically sophisticated in both negotiation and combat (Ngai2017: 62; Huynh 2012:137). Wolfe Murray's account uncovers a critical message buried in the official archives. The authenticity of the colonial government was

⁸⁴ FLD 15 LG 147/67 superintendent seal, National Archives of South Africa.

challenged by the Chinese indentured labourers during the process of translating different forms of official notifications. It compelled the colonial government to consider appropriating the Chinese official proclamation method to assert its legitimacy and authority over the Chinese labourers in the gold mines. Wolfe Murray's request was not only taken into serious consideration by the colonial government but also implemented precisely in terms of how to design an official notification system in an authentic Chinese way in South Africa. The colonial government in Pretoria ordered Wolfe Murray to wait for James Jamieson, the well-known Chinese expert in the British Far East colony to design and implement a new superintendent seal once he arrived in South Africa from China.⁸⁵

Bringing the expert from China: Sinification of Government Notices in South Africa

George Wolfe Murray's request, originating from his direct interactions with indentured labourers on the Rand, inadvertently steered South Africa toward appropriating Chinese seal aesthetics and incorporating Sinified elements into the official seals and documents of British colonial notices on the Rand. This trajectory draws on the experiences of British diplomatic missions in China that evolved since the late nineteenth century.

Chinese scholar Shilin Guan (2017:124) conducted a systematic study of the seals and documents of British diplomatic representations in China. He noted that the term “Sinification” refers to the British adoption of Chinese customs and institutional practices in the exchange of documents with the Qing government. This phenomenon encompasses the use of seals, the selection of document formats, and adherence to Chinese conventions and systems, both in the external document structure and the internal discourse system. Guan (2017:124) argues that the presence of this Sinification phenomenon reflects ‘pragmatic, strategic choices’ made by British diplomats challenging the ‘Celestial Empire’s system’. Diplomatic necessities compelled them to rapidly adapt to Chinese culture and institutions. By mastering and, in some cases, deciphering the Chinese document discourse system, they sought to establish their own discourse and authority.

This intricate process highlights the nuanced negotiation between external diplomatic requirements and the imperative to assimilate and adapt to the cultural and bureaucratic nuances of China. Wolfe Murray's initiative, rooted in the local dynamics of indentured labourers,

⁸⁵ FLD 15 LG 147/67 superintendent seal, National Archives of South Africa.

inadvertently became part of a broader pattern in which British colonial authorities in South Africa engaged with and incorporated Chinese cultural elements into their administrative practices.

How did the British colonial government transnationally appropriate the accumulated experience from diplomatic documents in Qing Dynasty China to communicate, manage and establish official authority over the contract labourers in South Africa? Can we transcend the framework of Orientalism to critically examine the role of Chinese contract labourers in such a power dynamic? Inspired by Yang's diasporic trajectory from China to Africa, I have chosen to concentrate on James William Jamieson and the diasporic experience of Chinese indentured labourers from China to South Africa as a means of pursuing a nuanced and affective approach.

James William Jamieson, born in 1867, commenced his service for the British government in China as a student interpreter in 1886. Before his assignment to South Africa, he served as the acting Consul-General at Shanghai in 1903 (*China Mail* 1906: 165–166). During his tenure as the Shanghai consul, Jamieson received orders to accompany General Gaselee as a political adviser to address the deaths resulting from the Boxer riots in the city of Paoting-Fu. Reports leading up to the trial suggest that Commissioner Jamieson maintained impartiality, refraining from endorsing Western revenge and remaining open to the possibility of acquittal for the accused (Brockman-Hawe 2016: 696). Sir E. Satow described Jamieson as 'a very competent Chinese scholar' who was 'not popular with the men of his own service, [and who] in fact appears to be the object of universal dislike among his equals' (Brockman-Hawe 201: 641).

Whether James William Jamieson demonstrated more empathy than his colonial peers towards the indentured labourers on the mine requires further examination through archival studies of correspondence with the colonies and Crown Agents. His trajectories and the actual superintendent seals he produced are likely stored in the National Archives of Britain. Through the South African archives, he evidently leveraged the expertise gained in China over the past two decades as a foundation of authority on behalf of the British Empire. In his inaugural notice (figure 2.35), titled 'Her Britannic Majesty's Superintendent of Chinese Labour in South Africa' (大英欽命監督南非華工京都太贊政務司築), posted on the gold mines a few months after his arrival in South Africa, Jamieson asserted:

By the imperial decree of the British Empire, I, as the appointed Superintendent of Chinese Labour in South Africa, hold the authority to dispatch officials to oversee various

He further stated that he not only supervised the Chinese labourers but also provided protection for them. The basic principles the Chinese labourers needed to follow included diligently working according to the signed contracts. Additionally, they were instructed to report any instances of harsh treatment to the established “petition box” (稟箱) on the mines.



Figure 2.42 A Chinese poster signed by Jamieson on 25 August 1905, National Archive of South Africa



Figure 2.43: A notice posted at a mine. It gives a glimpse into the historical time when proclamations were given on the mines (Yap and Man 1996:130).

The Chinese poster signed by Jamieson on the 25th of August 1905 (figure 2.42) offered a glimpse into the red superintendent's seal proposed in the official archives. It also offers a visual insight into how the repatriation poster on the postcard was initially perceived by Chinese labourers. Both posters indicate that the Foreign Labour Department of Transvaal meticulously adhered to the format of the official notice of the Qing Court. The calligraphy in both posters followed the *guangeti* style. The content structure strictly flows from right to left, featuring highlighted titles at the beginning, instructions in the middle, and warnings at the end, employing an intimidating tone of command. Jamieson entirely appropriated the proclamation style used by

British embassy officials in China in dealing with the Chinese populace, demonstrating a clear hierarchical order of superiority and inferiority (Guan 2017: 130).

When Chinese labourers voiced their grievances, they were required to submit a “稟” (petition) or use the “稟箱” (petition box). In contrast, when the colonial government issued announcements, it was described as “晓谕事” (to announce and inform matters), as evident in both posters. Additionally, Yang points out that the prominent red pen markings in the announcements serve a warning purpose, aligning with Guan’s (2017) discussion. These announcements not only employ authoritative language but also visually emphasise the superior authority through the use of red markings to highlight crucial information.

In order to convey instructions effectively in an authoritative manner from the colonial government to the Chinese labourers on the Rand, Jamieson endeavoured to adopt the exact Chinese phraseology used by the Qing court, aiming to solidify colonial authenticity and authority. However, this translation approach caused ironic confusion within the colonial government communication. A telegram marked⁸⁶ as “Matter Most Urgent” from the secretary of state in London expressed the confusion in Parliament regarding different versions of the repatriation notices to the governor in South Africa:

“Please ask Superintendent of Foreign Labour to furnish [an] explanation as to the translation into Chinese of Repatriation notice..., is it a fact that the words at the end requiring the labourer to *tremble and obey* (my italic) are a usual addendum to others which have already been issued in accordance with Chinese custom? These words were not in the official version communicated by you and read in the House of Commons but appear in Press translation. [The] Question in Parliament on Monday (22nd June 1906).

Jamieson engaged in a tedious translation process, drafting the notice in English as per the governor’s amendment, then translating it into Chinese, and subsequently re-translating the Chinese notice into English. This intricate translation process highlights the challenges in communicating and controlling Chinese labourers on the Rand. Yang’s (2022d) literally matching of the Chinese phrase “*lin zun*(稟遵)” at the end of the Chinese notice on his postcard to ‘tremble and obey’ mirrors the colonial government’s efforts to conform to Chinese customs,

⁸⁶ Ltd 167 TEL 1505 Subject: Repatriation of Chinese -translation of notice

depicting the translation process as black humour. The dynamics of this process suggest a transitional space of “being and becoming” (Baltrusch 2010:116), wherein the traditionally constructed other is simultaneously involved in co-defining or shaping the imposing colonial power system.

Examining the red seal in the inauguration poster (figure 2.38), featuring Chinese engraved seal script translated as ‘Her Britannic Majesty’s Superintendent of Chinese Labour in South Africa Guangfang’ (大英钦命监督南非洲华工政务司关防), Yang highlights that the seal was created in the rectangular ‘Guanfang’ seal form of Qing government officials. Initially presented as an independent seal under the blue stamp of the Foreign Labour Department in the inauguration poster, it underwent modification on the repatriation poster in 1906 to incorporate the coat of arms of Britain in Transvaal. The blue foreign labour department seal and the red Chinese seal in the inauguration poster evolved into a unified seal with both Chinese and English scripts in Yang’s poster. Upon close comparison of the two seal impressions, Yang describes the design of the seal on his postcard as more artistically elaborate. The engraved Chinese inscription expanded to include the African continent as ‘Her Britannic Majesty’s Superintendent of Chinese Labour in Africa Guanfang’ (大英钦命监督非洲华工政务司关防). James William Jamieson played a crucial role in appropriating and converging Chinese aesthetics of official seals, concurrently pushing Chinese seal-making into a translational invention that incorporated the latest material developments in Britain. After leaving South Africa, he returned to China and became the Consul at the British Consulate in Sanshui in 1909 (The First Historical Archives of China). A Guanfang seal he crafted for the British consul stationed in Sanshui County (figure 2.42), eastern Guangdong, shares the same style as the Guangfang seal in Yang’s poster. According to Guan (2017: 129), who saw the actual seal in the National Archive of Britain, it was carved on a plastic-like material known as celluloid, which emerged in the 1860s and was prevalent in Europe at the time.



Figure 2.44: Her Britannic Majesty's of Consul in Sanshui County of China Guanfang (大英钦命驻扎粤东三水县领事官关防), National Archive of Britain (Guan 2017: 129)

The gradual process of modifying and appropriating the Chinese official proclamation system represents a deliberate organisational effort. It overtly asserts that the colonial government has supplanted the authority of the Qing Government and is the sole legitimate controller of the lives of Chinese labourers in South Africa. This reflects significant efforts in strategically countering the underlying silent resistance of the Chinese labourers (Yang 2022c). In addition to addressing concerns about the authenticity of notices posted by the Foreign Labour Department on the mines, Jamieson had to adapt the Chinese method of disseminating government instructions at a broader administrative level.

He observed that in China, 'every official on duty appears in uniform, which is immediately recognized and at once commands instinctive respect' (FLD 15 LG 147/72 uniforms for inspectors, NASA). Consequently, he directed the mine inspectors to wear distinctive uniforms, akin to the practice in China. Jamieson further emphasized in his request that this was a practice 'Chinese are accustomed to look for in constituted authority.'

In the history of Chinese immigrants in South Africa, this marks the first instance where the South African colonial government wholly adopted the official document format of the Qing

government to address Chinese labour issues within its own borders. Despite the scarcity of historical accounts directly from the Chinese labourers, their collective resilience is preserved in the forms of Chinese aesthetics embedded in the construction of the colonial government's identity.

Reflecting on Yiyuan Yang's Perspective: Chinese-style Official Seals as Art Objects

Despite the widespread use of seals in various cultures, it was in China that seal carving became intricately intertwined with art, evolving into a significant artistic pursuit (Marshall 1994). The seals and Chinese proclamations, beyond being colonial artifacts, are also artifacts of Chinese aesthetic values crafted exclusively for South Africa. Yang astutely observes that, judging by the calligraphy style, both Chinese proclamations were authored by the same individual. He dismisses the possibility of their being written by Jamieson, as the script exhibits a profound foundation and a self-contained running script style that would be challenging for a non-native Chinese intellectual to master. In comparison to calligraphy, seal carving demands an even deeper understanding of Chinese calligraphy fundamentals.

Further exploration of historical records from both Britain and China may eventually unveil the identity of the person responsible for writing the proclamations—a figure whose presence has remained elusive in this historical narrative. Nevertheless, Yang's perspective has cast a light on both the absence and presence of this individual in the annals of history.

Besides his appreciation for the artistry, Yang also observed that the Chinese name for Africa has been translated differently by various Chinese communities over time. Yang sensitively noted that Jamieson used “京都” (figure 2.41), which, in the Chinese context, means "Beijing," to analogize Pretoria as the administrative centre of authority. In the Chinese notices, Africa is described as “菲,” with “艹” resembling a gentleman with a hat atop the contemporary version of “非.” Yang correlates Pretoria with Beijing, suggesting that “菲” was a tradition of respect used by older Chinese communities in South Africa. These older generations would refer to Pretoria, the political capital of South Africa, as “菲京,” the African Beijing (Yang 2022c). While this assertion awaits verification and is Yang's attempt to establish a connection between Beijing and South Africa using existing collections, his affective approach to these embedded messages within Chinese aesthetics of seals and calligraphy prompts us to understand and imagine the experiences of the Chinese labourers at that time. Every experience they faced was a translation

process. Questions arise: How did they translate what happened to them? How did they find alternative ways of voicing themselves?



Figure 2.45: A page on Yang's seal registers which records the seals he has created for different people, organizations and business in South Africa. Photo by Binjun Hu.

Yang's artistic skills (figure 2.43) enable him to transcend language barriers and experience a form of Chinese aesthetic proximity between himself and the Chinese labourers on the Rand. He astutely observes that as a group of Chinese labourers working in a foreign and unfamiliar industry, direct cross-cultural contact with local oppressive authorities compelled them to consciously retrieve customs from their own country, such as expecting several seals on a government notice. The seal and format of Chinese notices fostered a sense of 'authentically felt cultural competence' among the Chinese indentured labourers in an alien and hostile country (Werbner and Fumanti 2013:150). Yang (2022c) discerns that when the content of a text is largely incomprehensible due to language and cultural barriers, clinging to the familiar format of

Chinese aesthetics becomes a form of resistance and self-empowerment. He decodes the distinctive Chinese and English red seal on his postcard as a representation of neglected aesthetic resistance engendered by the Chinese labourers on the Rand. Yang's perception challenges the common perception grounded in Orientalism that the Chinese body has been actively constructed from the viewpoint of whiteness. His perspective opens up a new way of viewing the Chinese labourers as a collective, salient, yet suppressed diasporic group who have partially reclaimed ownership of their customs in the context of British colonial South Africa.

Burghard Baltrusch contends that 'paratranslation' creates a 'third space' forged with constant negotiations between 'hybrid cultural contexts and discursive constraints' (2010: 113). Paratranslation is defined as 'an allostatic phenomenon of cultural dynamics,' capturing the notion of maintaining stability through change (Baltrusch 2010: 115). This concept, inherent in cultural transformations, unearths the practice of aesthetic resistance embed within the transnational translation process (Baltrusch 2010: 115).

Yang's postcard and his perception of the Chinese mine workers in the early twentieth century prompt us to reconsider the role of paratranslation in the historical process of establishing colonial administration, where the dominant discourse is subtly shaped by the oppressed groups. Paratranslation allows us to observe how the stability of the broader colonial social structure was achieved through changes that embody inherent aesthetic resistance. Yang's experiences offer us a multi-tentacled field of view into a critical history of South Africa. He transforms Chinese aesthetics into an instrument of intervention. Especially when voices are silenced, visual articulations exhibited in the colonial objects like the seals and proclamations in Chinese format emerge as forms of silent aesthetic resistance.

Conclusion

The chapter traces Yiyuan Yang's life by intertwining his personal narrative with the objects he has collected over the past three decades in South Africa. It reveals how his collecting practices in South Africa are profoundly influenced by his experiences in China. Collecting objects made in "New China" becomes a way of homecoming through Chinese craftsmanship, serving as a 'homepage to Beijing'. The "Chinese" objects he encountered are imbued with 'diasporic souls' (Yang 2021) that furnish and accompany his soul in South Africa. The chapter conducts two case studies: one on his extensive brassware collection and another on a photo postcard made in South Africa, both related to significant historical events and diasporic Chinese groups, which serve to

bridge China and South Africa. By focusing on the existence of these often-forgotten ordinary objects, Yang actively contemplates and resists the way the present is being constructed through deliberate forgetting, emphasising the significance of both ordinary objects and people in shaping our histories.

The chapter explores how art collecting, and the Chinese diaspora are framed through the concept of ordinariness in Yang's case study. First, ordinariness is exemplified as a low political and economic status characterised by vulnerability and exposure to political violence. Yang's experiences, from being labelled as part of the "compromised" youth during the Cultural Revolution to grappling with a sense of displacement within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa, underscore this aspect. His case offers a new perspective on studies of recent Chinese immigrants in South Africa, illustrating how significant pre-migration events and experiences continue to shape their lives post-border crossing. Secondly, ordinariness is reflected in Yang's approach to art collecting, which focuses on mass-produced export objects in a coarse style, created by unknown minjian artists with limited market value. These objects exist outside the dominant narratives of art collecting, which are typically centred on the global art market and elitist gatekeeping. Thirdly, ordinariness is framed through Yang's agency, as he embraces it as a means of mythorealistic self-definition and as a way to justify the value of viewing objects with humility. Ordinariness is linked to the agency of commonplace artifacts and the embedded messages from minjian artists, representing an alternative epistemology of art collecting from below.

Notably, Yang's case also demonstrates how Chinese diasporic nationalism in South Africa is facilitated by the global circulation of commonplace artifacts that symbolise both the new China and Chinese colonial artifacts of "othering," similar to Shengkai Wu's case. This creates a material foundation for "home bias," allowing Yang to maintain a Sino-centric focus in his collecting practices while limiting his interest in African art. However, Yang's form of diasporic nationalism diverges slightly from Wu's. Yang de-emphasises social characteristics within real-life nation-state frameworks, instead finding a sense of belonging through intimate bonds within digital diasporic networks that connect him to members of the Chinese diaspora in other regions. In contrast, Shengkai Wu, who engages less with digital networking, sustains his diasporic identity through mundane and implicit interactions with his collections, always mindful of potential connections with actors in China. Their differing approaches highlight how they

gravitate towards and conceptualise different borders of the Chinese diaspora. In Chapter Three, I introduce a distinct case study focusing on Shudi Li, who navigates a more fluid diasporic identity as he lives between China and South Africa. Li carefully maintains a balance between his two homes through the act of collecting, which serves as a bridge that connects and sustains his multifaceted sense of belonging.

CHAPTER THREE: SHUDI LI – VISUAL CONNECTION IN THE POLITICS AND AESTHETIC OF PRINTMAKING

‘I often say that collecting is not my ultimate goal, but rather a supplementary investment to improve my artistic skills’ – (Li 2019).

Shudi Li primarily identifies as an artist and art educator, with a multifaceted career spanning multiple locations across both China and South Africa. His journey into art collecting began in China in the early 1980s, when farmers in Henan, while building grave houses or working in the fields, would often stumble upon ordinary ancient burial artifacts. In their search for valuable ancient coins or bronze mirrors, they frequently broke these artifacts (Li 2023). Li, recognising the cultural and historical value of these objects, encouraged his students to visit villages renowned for their kilns in Henan, where they would collect, study, and teach from the ancient pottery they encountered.

Li’s professional journey in South Africa commenced in 1992, when he took up a position as a textile designer in a Taiwanese-run factory in KwaZulu-Natal. This was soon followed by a role as a ceramic designer in a German immigrant-operated ceramic factory in Newcastle for two years. During the early years of his immigrant life, Li and his wife operated a clothing shop in Durban for a decade, before briefly relocating their business to Johannesburg. Eventually, they settled in Cape Town, where their daughter was raised. Unlike Shengkai Wu and Yiyuan Yang, who have spent three decades in Johannesburg living alone without partners or family, Li has enjoyed a full family life while residing in major South African cities. Simultaneously, he maintained his position as an art lecturer at Zhejiang Normal University in China until his retirement in 2024.

For Li, art collecting in South Africa has served as a means of engaging with and bridging the two cultural contexts, while also contributing to his ongoing development as an artist and educator. His broader focus in collecting includes not only Chinese export wares but also Japanese prints and African prints. Despite his differing approach to collecting compared to Shengkai Wu and Yiyuan Yang—whose collections predominantly focus on Chinese artifacts—Li’s tendency to gravitate towards less valued, community-based art allows his work to be studied within a similar theoretical framework of ordinariness alongside the other two collectors.

Combing through Shudi Li's life trajectory in relation to his collections, a compelling observation emerges that, unlike collectors such as Shengkai Wu and Yiyuan Yang, Li's engagement lacks the prolonged and focused immersion with specific objects or series of objects. While Yang employs collecting practices and objects to transcend the confines of border-crossing experiences on the Loess Plateau, Shudi Li's approach seems inversely oriented. Through his collecting practices, Li captures the vestiges, nuances and creative gestures encapsulated within materiality, effectively reconstructing the constraints of his earlier years' trajectory era through a distinct aesthetic lens.

In essence, Li's conceptualisation of collecting gravitates towards intangible aesthetic elements. Drawing upon Tanselle's (1998: 4) discourse on collecting intangibles, this chapter embarks on an exploration of the artistic forms, contours and embedded narratives within Li's biography, elucidating the intangible aesthetic constituents of his collecting practices. Central to this investigation is an understanding of how Li navigates the divide between an 'internal repertoire of ideas' (Tanselle 1998: 4) and external tangibles manifestations. Within the context of objects and graphics spanning China and South Africa, Li enriches the inherent materiality of lines, infusing them with a metaphorical rhythm of rawness, simplicity, disruption and entanglement, as well as shades of alienation. My interpretation of the lines in Li's biography aligns with the anthropologist Tim Ingold's concept of 'the anthropological archaeology of the lines' (2016:1), where he envisions a world where everyone and everything is composed of 'interwoven or interconnected lines'. My interpretation encompasses not only the materiality inherent in lines manifested in objects and graphics but also the processes involved in their formation or along their trajectories. This conceptualisation is informed by Li's narrative of his early years in China, during which he engaged with various forms of lines. This includes his reflection on the lines within comic books, as well as his physical acts of creating lines by walking on walls, crafting posters, and carving portraits of Mao. These lines are endowed with a performative enactment of variations, distractions, displacement and triumph that resonate with political undertones and translational configurations; lines and traces emerge as inherently political entities, actively shaping processes and perceptions.

The subsequent section of this chapter explores the subtle connections between Li and the printmaking of South African artist Nompumelelo Bukani, evoking Li's nostalgic reminiscences of printmaking in China. In this analysis, Li and Bukani are conceptualised as 'fibrous,

connective, and folding entities’ (Nordstrom, 2013: 237) bound together by the medium of printmaking. This perspective elucidates the underlying rationale behind visual concepts as intangible collections, unfolding the “folds” of their respective ordinary lives shaped by visuality in distinct contexts.

The connection established between Li and Bukani is envisaged as a form of strategic visual solidarity, serving to position the South both physically and metaphorically, drawing inspiration from the lived experiences and spontaneous encounters of everyday individuals on the ground (Simbao et al. 2017: 1). I consider the act of “knotting” the two lives together in the Global South as a temporary strategy aimed at encapsulating their fleeting encounter, while also advocating for more in-depth investigations into such exchanges that are more personal and less narrated in the mainstream discourse of China–Africa discourse. By situating printmaking within these dual contexts, representing the two folds of lives embodied by Shudi Li and Nompumelelo Bukani, this chapter sheds light on the intricate and multifaceted nature of such encounters. These encounters are characterised as ‘embedded and simultaneously contingent, constitutive’ processes (Simbao et al. 2017: 1), encapsulating the dynamic interplay of factors shaping artistic expression and cultural exchange in the Global South.

A Line of Vicissitude in China Childhood Contact with Baimiao Lines: Changes in Trajectory Without Shading

Shudi Li was born in 1954 into an art educator’s family in Kaifeng, Henan Province, China. He was exposed to various forms of graphic art from a young age. His home contained graphic art books and periodicals from Russia and Japan, Chinese cartoon magazines and *huabao* (画报 pictorial newspapers). As a child, Li began collecting objects with images that appealed to him, such as candy wrappers, stamps and picture books known as *lianhuanhua*. One particular comic strip called *Great Changes in the Mountains and Villages* (*Shan Xiang Ju Bian* 山乡巨变), gifted to him by his father left a lasting impression on Li. The illustrated picture book, adapted from a novel by Libo Zhou, portrayed the new appearance of Chinese village life in Hunan province during the socialist transformation in 1955. Li was especially drawn to the artist Youzhi He’s texture, movement and contours depicted in simple yet striking variations of black ink lines in a traditional Chinese drawing style known as *baimiao* (白描 plain line drawings).

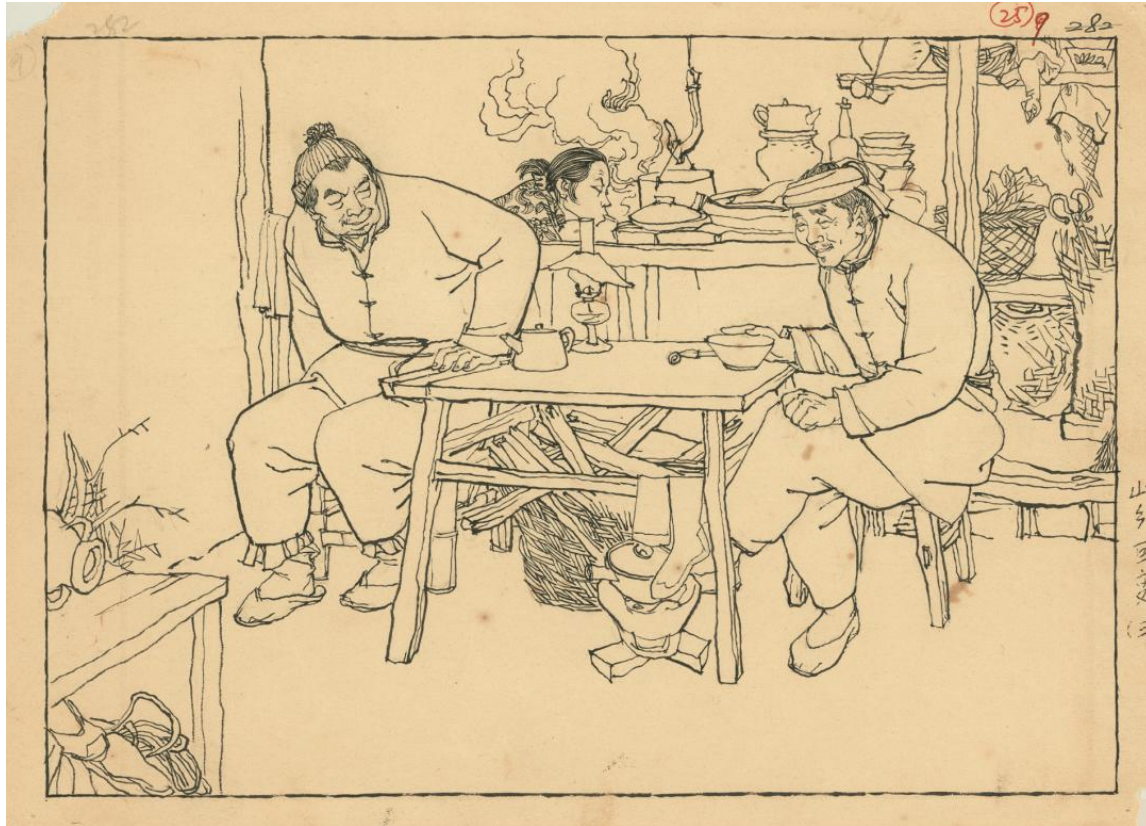


Figure 3.1: An illustration in *Shan Xiang Ju Bian* by Youzhi He, Pengpai 2022.⁸⁷

Baimiao denotes images through changes in lines' length, thickness, pressure and changes in trajectory, without shading. It became a preferred artistic style used in *lianhuanhua*⁸⁸ after Youzhi He's landmark masterpiece, *Great Changes in the Mountains and Villages*. The drawings used *baimiao* line to present a fresh, natural, delicate and bright view of the Hunan countryside. Li and many artists of his generation have recalled that their interest in art originated from *lianhuanhua*, particularly from He's influential work.

⁸⁷ Fig 3.1 is included in an article, 'Playing on Paper, Depicting Life in Line: He Youzhi's Lifelong Exploration of the Question "What is Art"', written by Zhu Guorong and published on 21 November 2022, commemorating the 100th anniversary of He Youzhi's birth. (Zhu 2022).

⁸⁸ During the 1950s, *lianhuanhua* became a prevalent art form and a means of mass entertainment in socialist China.

Moments of “Graphic Acts” in Cultural Revolution: Painting and Carving the Lines of Proletarian art

In May 1956, Mao initiated the Hundred Flower Campaign to encourage intellectuals and artists to criticise the Communist Party. Li’s (2019a)⁸⁹ father published a cartoon in the local newspaper, criticising the government’s bureaucratic practices. Unfortunately, the campaign’s consequence turned out to be political victimisation, with critics of Mao and the party identified and punished. Mao described this effect as ‘enticing the snakes out of their caves’ (Lent and Ying 2017: 86). In 1957 to 1958, Mao began the Anti-Rightist Campaign to purge those who had expressed criticism during the Hundred Flower Campaign. Li’s father was victimised as a rightist due to his anti-bureaucracy cartoon art. Living as a politically compromised artist, he eventually lost his life after years of humiliation during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).⁹⁰ Li (2019a), wearing clothes left by his father, has since observed people of different backgrounds and pondered the meaning of revolution, the fate of individuals and the nation. He witnessed books and temples being destroyed by the Red Guards. Precious antiques either fell victim to his family’s secret disposal or were seized by the Red Guards. Eager to explore, he ventured closer to the areas in Kaifeng where various factions of the Red Guards battled, and he bore witness to bullets flying and piercing the thick walls around him. Amidst the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, he scoured the abandoned Workers Club Library for books, sifting through heaps of discarded tomes, collecting books of significance to his understanding (Li 2019a). As a primary school student, reading *Crime and Punishment* by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky was a challenging feat for him, inducing feelings of depression (Li 2019a). In spite of the difficulty and emotional turmoil that he experienced from reading such perplexing novels, he utilised all available resources to make sense of the tumultuous circumstances surrounding his life.

Through his father’s spirit for art, Li discovered ways to use it to empower himself against continuous political victimisation, having come from the compromised background of the “Five

⁸⁹ Li, S. (2019a). 13 Sep. Johannesburg, interview with Shudi Li.

⁹⁰ Li, S. (2019a). 13 Sep. Johannesburg, interview with Shudi Li.

Black Categories”.⁹¹ Li’s (2019b)⁹² artistic talent led him to become an important member of the Mao Zedong Thought Literature and Art Propaganda Team at Kaifeng Number Ten Middle School in 1969 (figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 A group photo of the Mao Zedong Thought Literature and Art Propaganda Team at Kaifeng Number Ten Middle School on 8 September 1969. Shudi Li was the fifth (from left) in the front row, photo courtesy of Shudi Li.

When Li (2019c)⁹³ was tasked with drawing revolutionary posters on Mao’s thoughts for his school, he found solace in the quiet presence it provided him in the face of alienation from his peers. Painting slogans with characters as big as five to six square metres was a demanding job that required not only art design skills but also an immense physical effort to transfer the designs onto a large surface with the correct proportion (Li 2019c). Li (2019c) vividly remembered

⁹¹ During the Cultural Revolution, this was a political term that referred to landlords, rich farmers, counterrevolutionaries, bad influencers and rightists. Conversely, the term “Five Red Categories” is used to differentiate the poor farmers, low-class workers and communist party members from the Five Black Categories who were targeted as the revolutionary enemies (Jian, Song, and Zhou, 2015).

⁹² Li, S. (2019b). 30 June, Makhanda, interview with Shudi Li.

⁹³ Li, S. (2019c). 14 September. Johannesburg, interview with Shudi Li.

immersing himself in the process of propaganda art creation, using only a brush and walking on walls with a rope tied to his body. Li (2019) utilised his ‘body as a ruler’, relying on his ‘inner body senses to find the right scale for each stroke and determine the appropriate place’ to write it before coordinating it with his body.



Figure 3.3: A postcard of big-character posters (*Dazibao*) in Beijing, posted on Flickr by China Postcard. It reflects the prevalence of massive *Dazibao* across buildings in the context of that time.

Li (2019c) was deeply affected by the subversive political propaganda power of *Dazibao* (big character) posters, particularly the way people took part in various levels of *Dazibao* creation and dissemination. The power of ‘the ever-present *Dazibao*’ for political propaganda was a significant influence on his awareness of ‘the relationship between politics and art’ (Li 2019c). In particular, art media such as murals, big-character posters and printmaking are being promoted as political tools by the dominant actors within a society in shaping versions of grand narratives for the grassroots. This interest has persisted throughout his career as an artist and art collector.

Besides creating *Dazibao*, Li also began using a carving knife to ‘create portraits of Mao’s ubiquitous profile on woodblocks’ during the same period (Li 2019c). Through every knife cut and every large character of *Dazibao*, he expressed himself as an ordinary individual through

proletarian art – the only remaining visual art language during the early and peak time of the Culture Revolution in China (Mittler 2014). The experiences of carving and painting allowed him a safe space by fulfilling the requirement of representing the political ideology of the time and also permitted him to discern the nuanced complexity of individuals from a compromised background within the unifying language of propaganda art. The diverse trace-marks generated through the physical manipulation of a brush or knife in response to various textural surfaces intrigued him (2019c). Disenchanted with the confines of propaganda art, he redirected his focus towards the examination of line traces formed through different media and their reaction to different materiality within the artistic process (2019c).

Philosopher and Musicologist Theodor Adorno (1939: 413–429) suggests that the formal structures of music can create a space for critical reflection and resistance, even if the content of the music is conformist or commercial. Painting and carving different lines of big characters and woodcuts of proletarian art, Li constructed a self-contained space of critical distance for the purposes of observation and reflection, and thereby intervention and resistance. Li's physical mobility in between different scales of posters and art materials set in motion a cognitive process of reading proletarian art posters and prints. The acts of climbing, walking, writing and carving, of bodily repetition are also a reflection of his positionality as a “symbolic ruler”. A measurement encompasses moments of graphic acts which revolve performatively around execution of brushes and knives, the limitations of conforming to propaganda and the alternative traces of material resistance. For Li (2019c), the vulnerability of individuals amidst the ebbs and flows of history cannot shade the resilience and significance of the movements recorded in the traces of lines and curves preserved in objects and graphics. This perspective has informed his way of seeing, touching and collecting historical objects, as he seeks to capture the essence of human experience through the discovery of these traces. His collecting practices are a testament to the enduring importance of historical memory and the materiality of artistic expression. The traces and lines are endowed with a material agency in mobilising objects and graphics against dominant narratives by offering an alternative space of critical distance.

Immigrating to South Africa

In 1992, Li (2019b)⁹⁴ left China with his wife and arrived in South Africa, despite the fact that the two countries had not yet established diplomatic relations. At that time, the Chinese general public's knowledge of Africa was limited to state media news of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority (TAZARA) constructed in the early 1970s with assistance from China during the Cultural Revolution era (Li 2019b). Conversely, Taiwan had established diplomatic ties with South Africa in 1967 and had a steady influx of immigrants into the country in the 1980s (Yap and Man 1996). By the end of 1994, over 285 factories had been opened by Taiwanese entrepreneurs despite a drastic reduction in investment in South Africa (Yap and Man 1996). Li (2019b) was employed as a graphic designer by a Taiwanese carpet factory in Nelspruit for two months located in the Limpopo province. However, Li (2019b) soon resigned from the heavily fenced factory, due to a hostile environment of discrimination against Chinese from the mainland. In addition to the intra-community tension between mainland Chinese people and Taiwanese, he often had disagreements with the employer in terms of colour matching for the carpet designs (2019b). As an artist, his vision of good design differed from the factory owner's idea of 'simply following the colour trend of the time' (2019b). Li could not 'compromise' his artistic taste and frequently 'argued' with his employer, who 'had a very narrow understanding of the concept of popular colours and beauty' (Li 2019b). Besides working as an art designer, he had to supervise Black workers in the factory. He (2019b) witnessed how they were body searched every day before they entered and left the factory. The experiences of working in 'a concentration camp-like environment' (Li 2019b) and working closely with Black African workers for the first time left a deep impression on Li, despite his short tenure at the factory. He was directly exposed to the harsh working conditions forged with systemic racial, economic and cultural discrimination in apartheid South Africa, which were very 'foreign and depressing' to him as a newcomer from China (Li 2019b). In order to alleviate his homesickness and provide protection, he carved a knife cover with Chinese ethnic patterns. During the depressing time in the carpet factory, Li began to wander around nearby rural villages on his own (2019b). Being in the open space and witnessing different cultural practices (Li 2019b) allowed him to develop an attachment to the soil of rural South Africa and gain a better understanding of Black people beyond the oppressive confines of the factory. His feelings of longing and non-belonging,

⁹⁴ Li, S. (2019b). 30 Jun. Makhanda, interview with Shudi Li.

vulnerability and self-empowerment in South Africa are mediated through a nostalgic reconstruction of an imagined home composed of the acts of carving and Chinese ethnic patterns on the knife cover. The use of a knife becomes a metaphor for a diasporic path and nostalgic return to a past with different carving lines and locations. After leaving the carpet factory, Li joined a ceramic factory operated by a German immigrant couple in Newcastle. He was well respected and has formed a lifelong bond with the couple, and his industrial designs, such as ceramic garden figures, including frogs in a smiling Buddha posture, achieved significant market success. These designs continue to be replicated and sold in shops across South Africa to this day. Through his work as a designer, Li managed to accumulate capital, which enabled him to open a clothing shop in Durban, where he also began his collecting practices in South Africa.

Metaphors are formulated as ‘mappings across conceptual domains’ (Lakoff 1993: 245), which enable us to comprehend fairly abstract and unstructured subject matter according to a more concrete and structured subject matter through image-schemata (Hiraga 1998). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1987: 79) define metaphors as ‘those recurring structures of, or in, our perceptual interactions, bodily experiences and cognitive operations’. The metaphorical conceptual structure of a knife is based on the individual level of fully contextualised integrated expressions of bodily experience of art creation, perceptual and cognitive interactions with images. Carving is a process of penetration with a knife that breaks through a surface, scraping away parts of the material, opening up lines of figures. It entails the movement of the knife walking against a hard surface as it opens up a new road. The movement of the knife is metaphorically linked to separation and mobility away from the past in the prints collected by Li (figure 3.4 and 3.5) and his own master’s graduation exhibition artworks (figures 3.6 and 3.7).

The prints in figures 3.4 and 3.5 were bought at an auction house in the seaside city of Durban at the beginning of Li’s migration to South Africa (Li 2019c).⁹⁵ They are taken from the series *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido*, carved by the Japanese traditional woodcut master Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) and depict the movements of different travellers at two stations of Tokaido. The insignificance of the travellers who were navigating their ways through water or road with heavy bags becomes decoration that embellishes the landscape.

⁹⁵Li, S. (2019b).30 Jun. Makhanda, interview with Shudi Li.



Fig 3.4: *Fukuroi*, from the series *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido*, Utagawa Hiroshige, Colour woodblock print, 1832–1847. Shudi Li's collection. Photo courtesy of Li Shudi.



Fig 3.5: Fujieda, from the series Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido, Utagawa Hiroshige. c. 1837–1842, Colour woodblock print. Shudi Li's collection. Photo courtesy of Li Shudi.

These images display visual similarities to the *baimiao* drawings in Li's collection of Youzhi He, which was inspired by Japanese prints as well as Chinese traditional line drawings. Furthermore, the small travellers in the images demonstrate a sense of vulnerability and resilience in human figures shaped by the social and natural context of Japan.



Figure 3.6: Part of *Traces* (1), oil painting by Shudi Li. Photo courtesy of Shudi Li



Figure 3.7: part of *Traces* (2), oil painting by Shudi Li Photo courtesy of Shudi Li

In the process of creating his graduate exhibition, Li experiments with a grey tone presents a process self-archaeology that mirrors his self-historical journey to the past. Grey has been Li's

(2019d)⁹⁶ favourite colour as it balances all noisy colours, creating a sense of distance and a cold, heavy force. Within the different shades of grey, Li applied the brush as if an archaeologist unearthing deeply entangled silenced past against the hard background of dramatic shades of grey. These textured traces, marks and patterns anchored to the rocky surface create a dramatic and bold undertone of ‘coldness, heaviness, rawness and resilience’ that closely resembles traces of his life (Li 2019d).

The Unfinished Story of Nompumelelo Bukani

In 2019, during the National Arts Festival, I accompanied Li on a field trip to various exhibitions. While exploring the event, Li came across Nompumelelo Bukani’s stand showcasing her prints for sale. He displayed a keen interest in her work, dedicating considerable time to engaging with her instead of gravitating towards more established artists present in the hall. Eventually, he purchased several of Bukani’s artworks. This spontaneous encounter and Li’s collecting rationale intrigued me greatly. As I explored deeper into Li’s narrative and Bukani’s artworks through connective questions, his rationale for collecting became intertwined with his personal experiences. I aim to knot Shudi Li and Nompumelelo Bukani’s biographical narratives together to uncover the political intervention embodied in the development of printmaking in both China and South Africa. By situating printmaking within these dual contexts, thus comparative study of their lives not only captures their fleeting encounter but also reveals fine-grained connections that are often overlooked in the mainstream discourse of Global South. Through the case of Shudi Li and Nompumelelo Bukani, it illustrates the lifelong complex effect of state-channelled visual rhetoric on the lives of ordinary people in the global South contexts. Specifically, it critically reflects the particular ways of printmaking as a visual rhetoric of art have been constituted for and about the masses from disadvantaged groups in both China and South Africa.

On the one hand, the visual rhetoric of printmaking as an art for the masses is mediated through various actors who proactively or forcibly appropriated popular “traditional” elements in both contexts to advance an atmosphere of a revolutionary bold, raw and simplistic aesthetic style in printmaking. This is evident in Li’s encounter with his leftist art activist teacher, Tiehua Liu (1917–1997), at Henan University, as well as in his collecting practices of Chinese New

⁹⁶ Li. (2019d). 10 Jun, Makhanda, interview with Shudi Li.

Year prints and Nompumelelo Bukani's works. In the case of Bukani, it manifested in Bukani's biographical accumulation of printmaking experiences at the Dakawa Centre since 1993. It promoted an idealised image of an empowered African woman from the "township"⁹⁷ (Baillie 1999: 16) under the guidance of Swiss tutors and ANC propaganda. On the other hand, this section highlights how the visual rhetoric of printmaking as an art for the masses has shaped Li's tastes in China, and how he has nostalgically translated his experiences in China to constitute a visual connection in Bukani's art. It argues that Li's ways of seeing and collecting Bukani's prints inspires a concept of fullness in appreciating and writing about prints made for or by everyday people.

I explore the concept of fullness by drawing upon the insights of media scholar Brigitte Biehl-Missal (2013: 356) regarding atmosphere as a tool for visual analysis. Biehl-Missal's theory, derived from aesthetic artefacts and architectural contexts, posits that viewing 'a visual encounter' as 'an aesthetic situation' allows for the understanding of "atmosphere" as a mechanism through which images evoke 'aesthetic, emotional, and corporeal effects,' shaping 'mood and cognitive responses' (Biehl-Missal 2013: 356). Through visual artefacts, such as images, sensory and aesthetic experiences are crafted, collectively referred to as an 'atmosphere,' subtly influencing individuals at an emotional level (Biehl-Missal 2013: 356).

Firstly, I argue that fullness can be conceptualised as an aesthetic atmosphere in Li's synaesthetic characteristic of seeing Bukani's prints. Secondly, I contemplate fullness as a counter-narrative against the limitation of sweeping narratives invented and instituted by the dominant actors in the art world of elites. Bukani remains merely a footnote without opportunities to voice herself. Li's collecting practices inspire a possibility of re-orienting and

⁹⁷ In South Africa, the term "township" refers to racially segregated urban areas historically designated to serve as a link to big cities while ensuring the socially distant presence of cheap labour forces (Philip 2014: 31). This system was rooted in 'the political and economic subordination of Black people', a complex exercise with origins tracing back to the earliest days of colonialism (Philip 2014: 31). Subsequently formalised as "apartheid" after the 1948 election of the Nationalist government led by Afrikaners, townships represented a stark manifestation of institutionalised racism and oppression. The term "township art" is a problematic term evolved from the 1950 to early 1970s as referring 'indiscriminately to urban black artists' work'. But increasingly in 1980s, the term fell out of favour and was either abandoned entirely or selectively applied to a specific group of artists (Van Robbroeck 1998: 3). Township art is a category that is still arguably problematic. Art historian Lize Van Robbroeck (1998: 3-4) critically analyses the problematic use of the term, highlighting 'sweeping descriptions that typify and stereotype' the work of urban Black artists into a 'homogeneous and faceless category'. Individual artists' urban experiences, especially their 'urban/rural interface', (Van Robbroeck 1998: 4) remain unexplored despite their discernible impact on their lives.

placing at centre-stage community artists like Nompumelelo Bukani, who were integral part of the grand transitional “rainbow nation” narratives in South Africa. In particular, as art historians, our responsibility is to speak out against the problematic politics of representation that may continue to affect artists on the margins of South Africa.

Both Shudi Li and Nompumelelo Bukani were born in 1954, a year before the Bandung Conference, which aimed to foster Afro–Asia solidarity. It was also not long after a sudden split occurred between South Africa and China, with little official contact since the introduction of apartheid in South Africa in 1948 and communist rule in China in 1949 (Harrison, P., Yang, Y. and Moyo, K., 2017: 32). Li and Bukani grew up in two completely different cultural and ideological contexts during the Cold War era. Despite these differences, both were carried into top-down, state-channelled constructions of visual rhetoric via printmaking as a form of art for social change in their respective countries. In summary, this section highlights the importance of recognising the diverse experiences of artists and collectors on the ground and the need to challenge the sweeping narratives that limit their representation and agency.

Collecting Prints in China: a Construction of Visual Rhetoric of People’s Art

In the context of China, Shudi Li’s initial exposure to modern prints was through the graphic art books scattered around his home when he was very young. These prints in the imported periodicals and art books were part of the aftermath of the New Modern Woodcut Movement that emerged in China during the 1930s and 1940s. Foreign graphic books were highly appreciated among artists and intellectuals, such as Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of the leading figures in modern Chinese literature and education in the twentieth century. Lu Xun is often credited as the driving force of this movement due to his novel approach to transforming the ‘timid and compromised’ Chinese traditional woodcut into a new form of art closely linked to social changes (Guo 1947: 2). For centuries, woodcuts had been an art form underpinned by the public. Lu Xun believed that they can be utilised to promote social change in an age of revolution (Lu 1989: 345). Although the art of modern Chinese woodcuts was largely inspired by modern Western woodcuts, Lu Xun’s visual rhetorical construction was based on a critical study of Chinese traditional woodcuts rather than simply dismissing the tradition. He highlighted the intrinsic value of unorthodox art forms in his time, such as woodcuts, due to their profound popularity among the masses (Hung 1997: 49). Compared to Chinese traditional woodcuts created through a joint effort in a series of collective procedures carried out by different

craftsmen, Lu Xun introduced Western woodcuts as ‘creative woodcuts’ (*chuangzuo muke* 创作木刻) made by a single artist (Hung 1997: 37). Aesthetically, he also praised the use of sharp black and white contrast in Western prints as emotionally compelling in conveying revolutionary messages. This differs from the Chinese traditional woodcuts in favour of vibrant colours. Despite Lu Xun’s admiration for the exquisite style of Western woodcut prints, he believed that the reason Western prints could become a “people’s art” was because of their political function, which was closely related to social issues. This function could educate and change people’s thinking and become a powerful weapon to inspire people to resist feudalism and imperialism.

Nevertheless, to Shudi Li, Lu Xun remains a distant historical figure in texts. His dominant role has overshadowed other narratives, for example those of artists, whose critical agency also shaped the Chinese modern print movement and continued to influence the younger generation of intellectuals like Shudi Li. These artists and scholars mainly favoured a rugged and powerful rough style with a black-and-white contrast in their translation, interpretation and creative process. Ai Shu (2019) argues that they further created a binary which essentialised the exquisite and realistic carving skills in Western woodcuts as “wood-engraving”, and the rough and naive style in Chinese traditional woodcuts as the Chinese traditional visual genre. This is a visual rhetorical construction process that is fraught with nationalist sentiment. Ai She argues that in the construction of the binary opposition, these artists admire and inherit the woodcut practice that shows the Chinese taste, and she simultaneously believes that the exquisite and delicate style limits the self-expression of revolutionary messages (2019: 45). For instance, Li Hua (cited in Ai Shu 2019) pointed out that wood engraving creates a sense of technical constraints in creative works, which is often too mechanised or focuses too much on realistic depiction, resulting in the loss of the essence of the naive and simple nature that wood engraving materials can embody. The new modern woodcut movement defines the materiality of traditional woodcuts that presents a simple and rough style in artistic creation as the visual genre of woodcuts originating from China, which is constructed with nationalist sentiment. Since the beginning of the new woodcut movement, many discussions have further theorised this concept of the Chinese visual genre and combined it with local revolution to further politicise it, becoming an official guide to the aesthetic and creative art of the new era.

Daowei and Muwei in Contributing to a Construction of Visual Rhetoric of People's Art



Figure 3.8: Liu Tiehua. Photo courtesy of Shudi Li.

Taking Li's tutor, Tiehua Liu (1917–1997) as an example, (Figure 3.8), Li's impression of Liu primarily rests on his theorisation of *daowei* (刀味) and *muwei* (木味) and his agency and efforts in promoting Kaifeng New Year prints since the 1970s.

Daowei refers to the visual traces of the use of a knife in carving as if strokes in painting. Liu aesthetically theorised the use of a knife as having *daowei* that captures the artists' emotions during their art creation through various distinctive lines, points and dimensions compared to drawing figures with a pen. *Muwei*, directs to the artistic effect of the material reaction of the wood when it is being carved. Liu says that 'the wood has its own characteristics [when it is being carved], the use of this exaggerated feature, namely (literally) 'wood flavour' (Liu 1947: 85). The two terms integrate Liu Tiehua's understanding of Chinese traditional woodcut language with German expressionist woodcut language. Liu encourages artists to transform the traditional understanding of woodcuts as a collectively reproduced "*minjian* art" to a means of individual artists creatively expressing contingent social concerns and emotional needs.

Tiehua Liu's *Sichuan Peasants in the Anti-Japanese War Era* (figure 3.9) was inspired by German artist Mayfield's woodcut technique (Liang 2011: 24). It has a Western style of conception with bold black-and-white contrast.



Figure 3.9 Tiehua Liu's Sichuan Peasants in the Anti-Japanese War Era (Liang 2011: 24).

One can see the construction of visual rhetoric in the academic and official discourses developed in response to Mao's 1942 directives (figure 3.9). Peasants become a political subject of communist ethnography, being crafted in socialist realism and newly redefined in an essentialised iconography of rural settings, for example, crops, a pig and farm work rather than the 'peasant constructs seen in residual iconography' (Flath 2004: 143) of established peasantry *minjian* art forms and folklore narratives.

Tiehua Liu preferred the bold black-and-white contrast in a rough and powerful carving style that casts a thick and heavy effect. Liu used the knife unrestrainedly, vigorously and boldly in

making woodcuts that reflect his observation of learning from the peasants. He elaborated on the characteristics of woodcuts as:

Violent, straightforward and simplistic. Because carving uses a knife to sculpt artistic objects, the lines represented are particularly strong and powerful, and the light and dark are particularly tough and distinct. The themes are mostly based on the tragic situations in ordinary people's lives (Liu 1947: 9).

In addition to drawing from the West, Tiehua Liu's absorption of Chinese traditional aesthetics is also one of the characteristics of his woodcuts. He flexibly inherits the techniques of Chinese *minjian* art, combines the two and forms his own artistic style that mingles Chinese and Western influences (Liang 2011: 24).



Figure 3.10: *Northwest scenery* (西北风光), Liu Tiehua.

For example, Liu suggested that young print artists should pay attention to Chinese stone carvings in order to communicate better with the Western new woodcut. He incorporated the

unique aesthetic of Chinese stone carvings and bricks into his woodcut artworks. According to Liang Pei (2011), Liu Tiehua's work represents this integration in two ways: the black-and-white contrast in stone carvings and bricks and the heavy and simple forms. In his work *Northwestern Scenery* (figure 3.11), the large black-and-white contrast effectively highlights the main subject of the camel and the outline of the sky. The distant marching camel team is also separated by black and white, creating a narrative space. The overall image is rhythmical and sincere. This expression is similar to the effect of Han stone rubbings.

Liang Pei (2011) believes that this work not only absorbed the characteristics of Han stone rubbings in black and white contrast, but also pursued the aesthetic of profound and broad stone carvings in the Han Dynasty. Liu's individual style demonstrates how the construction of visual rhetoric of woodcuts and stone rubbings (figure 3.11) appropriates Chinese traditional techniques. However, the construction of visual rhetoric separates the form and content of *minjian* art to some extent. For instance, the socialist appropriation essentialises peasant *minjian* art techniques as the essence of tradition (Flath 2011). Shudi Li regards the political content of woodcuts in this period as constructing a people's art of proletarian ideology. It only partially appropriates the technical expressions of Chinese *minjian* art while disconnecting from the narrative structure of *minjian* tradition.

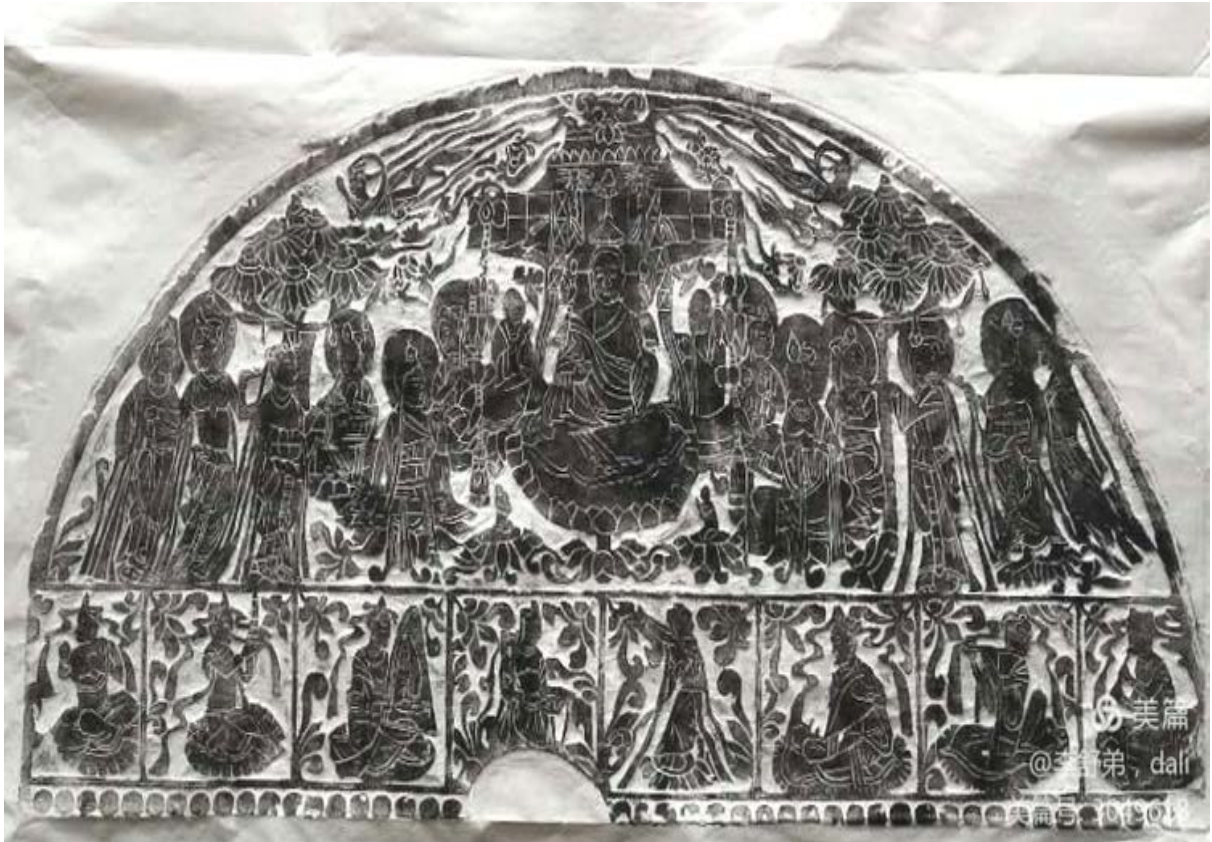


Figure 3.11: Tang Dynasty stone carvings of Guanyin. Shudi Li's collection. Photo courtesy of Shudi Li.

Nevertheless, Li also tends to appreciate and collect woodcuts with the visual rhetoric aesthetics of *daowei* and *muwei*. Similar to Tiehua Liu, his love for rubbings and woodcuts, integrates the aesthetic qualities of rawness and simplicity of *daowei* and *muwei*. He connects the sense of *daowei* with the bodily experience of carving and holding a knife. 'Through materials, knives, different shapes of knife blades, angles, cutting speed, and strength, one can be directly connected to the inner world' (Li 2021b). Besides that, he extends Tiehua Liu's cross-sensory theorisation of *daowei* and *muwei* to a broader scale of materiality partially derived from his earlier bodily encounters and artistic practices with different materials.

Li recalls:

It started with me manually engraving the chairman's portrait on the plywood during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Then rub ink onto the engraved block to create a complete printed product..., people wanted a lot, so I made [a lot of] rubbings, one by one. The whole process based on woodcutting and printing was an interesting experience. —(Li 2021c)

He also contextualises his bodily experience of creating prints in a village:

I remember that it has been nearly thirty-six years since I first made a rubbing on a piece of *hanli* (汉隶) and a rose finch relief pattern in an abandoned grotto. My first discovery of Han Li was when [I witnessed that] farmers [had] encountered a rock wall when they were digging a grotto. At that time, there were no conditions for executing rubbings; not to mention the lack of tools, the key issue was that I had not mastered the technology. When I visited the grotto temple next to the grotto, I found the flying apsaras rubbing lintel in the grotto temple. It was actually a rubbing made on a template that was copied. ... I didn't forget the *hanli* and the rose finch in the abandoned grotto. I went back there and made rubbings before the grotto collapsed.— (Li 2022a)

By synchronising these experiences, Li considers that *wei* not only incorporates the visual expression of the wood when it is being carved but also includes all the materials used in woodcuts and rubbings. For instance, *wei* exhibited variations across different papers. Li explains: 'Paper, the printing effects of different paper qualities are completely different. The softness of the paper, the degree of ink absorption, and the thickness of the paper fibres generate different visual effects.'—(Li 2022a).

The synthetic characteristic of Li's taste and experiences of encountering *hanli* with the peasants and making rubbings in the grotto transgresses the positionality of constructing a people's art that centres on communist political propaganda. His approach to Chinese *minjian* art has drifted away from Tiehua Liu's generation's role of political appropriation for social change to simply appreciating the raw expression of *minjian* art forms and saving traces of disappearing *minjian* art against China's fast urbanisation and modernisation. The impact of a construction of visual rhetoric led by Liu's generation remains an integral part of Li's personal aesthetics, yet it only serves as one of the means to retrieve art based on Chinese folk tradition.

Collecting Zhuxianzhen New Year Prints

Zhuxianzhen is a small town located fifty kilometres from Kaifeng where Li was born, the capital city of Henan province, in central China. It has been one of the Chinese New Year

prints⁹⁸ production centres since the Tang dynasty, with over three hundred workshops of New Year prints at its peak.

During the new woodcut movement, woodcut – the once underrated form of art – attained a sense of legitimacy and reached considerable recognition in the mainstream art scene attributed to its use in spreading communist ideology since the 1930s (Corban 2017; McConaghy 2017). However, as Myron Cohen (1993: 154–155) contends, the propaganda was about forming a new social order by dismantling the ‘perfectly obnoxious model of rural society’ for the purpose of liberating the ‘newly defined peasants’. He contends that intellectuals and reformers perceived the peasants as a culturally “invented” other, characterised by a binary framework of either denigration or adoration. The value of the woodcuts primarily lies in their political plasticity, which is visually signified by revolutionary politics and the art organisation established by the Chinese communist party. This had little to do with sustaining an “authentic” traditional woodcut culture that was created by the mass rather than the communist artists. According to Liu (1980), the traditional New Year prints made by artisans collectively in Zhuxianzhen declined significantly after the 1930s. The decay was exacerbated during the Sino–Japanese War (1937–1945), with only three or four workshops left, partially due to the popularity of foreign lithography among intellectuals and economic constraints in wartime. Traditional artisans had to change their careers. Tiehua Liu’s sincerity towards the disappearing Chinese traditional woodcut techniques led him to visit the artisans in the surrounding villages in Zhuxianzhen since the 1970s. Shudi Li remarks on Tiehua Liu’s research on Zhuxianzhen New Year prints as contributing to the contemporary state construction of these prints as a valuable national heritage. Tiehua Liu’s earlier years’ focus on using traditional woodcut techniques for revolutionary realism was intrinsically connected to his later work in protecting the drastically disappearing New Year prints tradition. During the 1980s, Liu visited the last generation of artisans and recorded their way of preserving and producing these prints.

When he [Tiehua Liu] taught us [about] Zhuxianzhen New Year prints, I visited his home, which made the most impression on me. Underneath a table, there were about 300

⁹⁸ New Year Prints (*nianhua*) are ‘a simple and inexpensive Chinese folk medium’ used to decorate homes in celebration of the New Year (Hung 1997a: 770). They are printed by folk workshops from carved woodblocks, making them one of the most traditional *minjian* art forms for centuries.

original old woodcut blocks collected by him. Later they were donated by Liu and became part of Henan University's collection (Li 2020) (Hung, 1997a).

Li reiterates that when Tiehua Liu did this research in the early days, his behaviour surpassed the cognition of that time, and many people did not care about Zhuxianzhen's New Year prints at that point. 'His research, collecting and preservation of Zhuxianzhen New Year prints were beyond that era in terms of significance and value' (Li 2020). Without him, these precious woodcut blocks were likely to be destroyed during the Cultural Revolution when at least fifty thousand ancient woodcut blocks were burned in the streets, as recalled by the local artisans (Chen 2019). After the Cultural Revolution until the 1980s, woodcuts were seen being used to level uneven table legs or as firewood to cook food in the villages. Li was in awe of Liu's drastic shift from an art activist who led the New Modern Woodcut Movement, in a sense departed from the traditional woodcut genre to later years' devotion to retrieving the traditional woodcuts, even during the time when it was largely dismissed by the community where it was born. Li remarks on Tiehua Liu's collecting style, not simply in the spirit of someone who believes that the original ancient blocks were precious and must be retained at all costs, but with an increasing awareness of political tension. The tension stretches between appropriating "*minjian* art" tradition in the construction of the people's art and revitalising "authentic" and "non-politicised" "*minjian* art" when different values dominate the country as a result of social-political shifts.

Collecting "Nianwei" in Zhuxianzhen New Year Prints

One should not only perceive people's art as a constituted visual rhetoric of a political concept in the revolutionary era; its connection with the dominant raw style in the woodcut movement is also related to the limitations of material conditions in a specific revolutionary period. Then, how to define the concept of prints as an art for the people in the contemporary context in which disappearing "*minjian* art" traditions are appropriated as an "authentic" tradition and part of the Chinese national heritage? Departing from Li's memories of collecting Zhuxianzhen New Year Prints, this section proposes to conceptualise "*nianwei*" [年味, the *wei*/senses of the new year] as a means to unpack Li's interpretation of the fullness of traditional New Year prints as a form of art for the people in contemporary China. Based on the analysis of Li's narratives and his Zhuxianzhen New Year prints, *nianwei* is briefly envisaged from the New Year prints' external social structure and internal visual structure.

Shudi Li started collecting Zhuxianzhen New Year prints in 1977 when he was sent to the countryside for re-education before becoming an art teacher at Kaifeng No.1 High School (Li 2021). At that time, young teachers had to go to the farms run by their assigned schools to receive rural education for half a year before they could embark on the teaching career of ‘cultivating the next generation of revolution’ (Li 2021b). The farm Li went to was in Zhuxianzhen, outside Kaifeng in central China, which was famous for its centuries of New Year prints production.

Li recalls that at that time,

The rural marketplaces could be said to be full of smoke, hustle-and-bustle with dust everywhere. The ashes from burning incense at the temple fair float in the air and mingle with the shouts of street vendors who were selling all kinds of commodities and food. Buying Zhuxianzhen New Year prints at the market could be seen as part of my early collecting history. At that time, the most expensive prints were only sold for 2 to 5 cents. Some artisans singled out their families’ ancient woodblocks to make New Year prints on the street. They worked till late at night during the Chinese New Year since too many people wanted their prints’ (Li 2021c).

Li’s sensory recollection of his bodily presence in Zhuxianzhen’s temple fair and village marketplace, smelling the burning incense and dust, and witnessing old artisans run off New Year prints on the street, contributes to a critical perspective on a new synaesthetic character of Zhuxianzhen New Year prints, which is its *nianwei*. *Nianwei* refers to the senses of the New Year. I propose to perceive Zhuxianzhen New Year prints in relation to *nianwei* as an atmosphere of the New Year. The atmosphere has emerged as an important term in aesthetic theory (Bohme 1993 and Biehl-Missal 2013) as aesthetic experiences are immersive bodily and sensual perceptions of people in relation to an environment. Belova (2006: 37) emphasises aesthetic situations in transforming one’s interpretation of seeing from a ‘mental and rational activity’ to an active, multidirectional, lived experience in an environment. Biehl-Missal (2013) builds on Belova’s accounts of expanding our understanding of seeing and defines the concept of atmosphere as ‘aesthetic work’ that constitutes a wide range of ‘visual, spatial and performative practices in consumption contexts’. In the context of collecting Zhuxianzhen New Year prints in the local temple fairs and markets, the atmosphere of *nianwei* is charged with the appearance of New Year market goods, dust, burning incense and food, people and performative practices of

printmaking. As ephemeral objects mass produced for the celebration of the Chinese New Year, New Year prints were scarcely given attention by elite connoisseurs and collectors throughout history. They were not meant to be collected but to be consumed, mostly as decorative auspicious New Year items for grassroots households. Nevertheless, collecting New Year prints in the post-revolutionary era arguably becomes a vested contemporary appropriation of the ancient “folk” tradition. Shudi Li's personal experience of absorbing the emotional impact of encountering New Year prints in the rural community during the 1970s reflects a sense of nostalgia among intellectuals for an authentic “*minjian* art” primarily produced for and by local peasants. In this rural setting, *nianwei* embodies a dynamic community spirit, empowering peasants who still partially uphold traditional values and maintain a sense of individual agency. They become part of the aura-making of New Year prints in an externally constituted social and physical structure. They are the subjects that contribute to a conventionalised historical landscape, rather than merely the objectified collective body of passively educated communist propaganda.

Besides the external social structure of community fairs, *nianwei* is also detected from recovering the internal visual structure of New Year prints pre-socialist transformation as a benchmark of tradition and connoisseurship in Li's collecting rationale.



Figure 3.12: *The Stove God and His wife*, Li's collection. Photo courtesy of Shudi Li.

In Li's blog *Thoughts on Zhuxianzhen New Year prints*⁹⁹ (Li 2021b), *nianwei* is sensed as an orderly multimodal fullness of the New Year atmosphere in terms of the visual composition, as exemplified by figure 3.12, which depicts a calendar of the Stove God and his wife, one of the most widely worshipped deities in the Chinese folk pantheon. The image is 'full, compact and rigorous, leaving almost no blank space' (Li 2021b). The hierarchy of primary and secondary

⁹⁹ An article Li Shudi wrote on 9 July 2021 in his blog. He archives his collections and thoughts of collecting and other life stories of living in-between South Africa and China (Li 2021b).

subjects in the image is clearly delineated to serve the primary subjects. A scattered perspective is adopted from Chinese paintings to highlight the main body, showcasing the decorative taste of uniform and symmetrical patterns (Li 2021).

The yellow couplets on the edges of the Stove God and his wife, stating ‘Speak well up in heaven; bring good fortune back home’ visually contextualise *nianwei* with a folkloric auspicious practice. *Nianwei* is in the smell of burning the Stove God’s last year’s New Year prints and the sweet food offered to him as he returns to heaven to report to the Jade Emperor about the family in the past year. When he returns to earth on New Year’s Eve, a new print of him is put up in the kitchen. Below the Stove God and his wife are the common people on earth, who surround a treasure pot for the couple while they are praying for good fortune and career advancement for the new year. This design was condemned by revolutionary artists as a ‘poisonous’ old-style that reflects people’s ‘feudal thoughts’ in serving the landlord class (Hung 2000: 773). Nevertheless, in the contemporary era, the once poisonous somewhat outrageous design is revised as a reflection on the life of the common people, as Li contends: ‘It [the New Year print] was born with life, it is life’ (Li 2021c). Popular deities like the Stove God, are intrinsic to rural lifecycle rituals and festivals. The visual composition of the Stove God New Year prints ties to a visually structured *nianwei* that sustains a sense of community in the village through the cult of happiness of New Year celebrations.

Another critical element of *nianwei* in New Year prints’ internal visual structure, as observed by intellectuals like Li, lies in its use of colour. Zhuxianzhen New Year prints feature warm colours, such as peach red and pagoda tree yellow. The combination of yellow and purple in the New Year prints in Zhuxianzhen is thick and contrasting, which casts a sense of homely and unrestrained *nianwei* (figure 3.13).



Figure 3.13: *Zhong Kui*, a god safeguarding homes, from Shudi Li's collection.

The colours of the characters' costumes in Zhuxianzhen New Year prints are mainly wood red, copper green and sunflower purple, which integrate the colours of secular life into the religious colour pattern of god worship (Li 2021). For example, Zhongkui (figure 3.13), a god safeguarding homes, wears a red crown and green robe; while Stove God (fig 3.12) is depicted in a red robe. The bright colour contrast is essential for creating a *nianwei* of happiness in Zhuxianzhen New Year prints. Raw materials of minerals and plants were used to grind pigments that ensure the brightness of the colours will not fade for a long time (Li 2021). However, bright colours in the old New Year prints appeared inappropriate, 'offensive (*cimu* 刺目)' to the academically trained eyes (Hung 2000: 785). As discussed previously, the academic and official constructions of visual rhetorical during the New Woodcut Movement favoured a bold contrast of black and white, as indicated in Tiehua Liu's art. Therefore, the

nianwei expressed through old New Year prints' sparkling colours that radiate on the dull walls of village homes and bring flamboyant spirit and prosperity for the new year, was occluded. However, many peasants expressed their discomfort with the colours of the socialist New Year prints as 'aesthetically unappealing and visually problematic' (Hung 2000: 785). In the contemporary construction of Zhuxianzhen New Year prints and woodcut blocks as collectable items of national cultural heritage,¹⁰⁰ appreciation of the peasants' rustic taste in New Year prints is re-envisioned as an authentic folk tradition that respects 'the appreciation habits of Chinese nation' (Li 2021b). Specifically, Li argues that the internal visual structure of New Year prints should entail a sense of 'propriety (*he qingli* 合情理) felt by the "people"' (Li 2021b).

What constitutes a proper contemporary Zhuxianzhen New Year print, and what kind of *nianwei* conforms to the contemporary nationalist construction of cultural heritage? Scholarly and public discourses resort to the functions and characteristics of old New Year prints as standards of propriety (Ye 1978). New Year prints become an enchanted symbolic attachment to rural China (*xiangtu*, 乡土) and memories of traditional rural celebrations of the New Year resonate among generations of Chinese ordinary urban and rural populations. As a result, despite official narratives of detaching the concept of *nianwei* from rural customs of the New Year celebration to an urbanised context of a sense of "social responsibility" (责任的味道)¹⁰¹ (*Xinhua News*. n.d.), *nianwei* is felt to be disappearing or weakening by a lot of Chinese people (Wang 2021)¹⁰².

In Li's *Thoughts on Zhuxianzhen New Year prints* (Li 2021b), Zhuxianzhen New Year prints are perceived to embody the senses of "*xiangtu*", the land of his hometown, and represent the 'simple, thick, strong and neat artistic style of the northern people'. As an intellectual who experienced revolutionary art making in rural Chinese communities, Shudi Li considers "people's art" to be an evolving a construction of visual rhetoric determined by the contingent political connotation (Li 2021c). Collecting Zhuxianzhen New Year prints, therefore, unfolds a

¹⁰⁰ Zhuxianzhen New Year prints is listed on the 国家级非物质文化遗产代表性项目名录 in 2006 https://www.ihchina.cn/project_details/13906/.

¹⁰¹ *Xinhua News* [新华社] n.s. 什么是你心中的年味儿? http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-01/24/c_1128294702.htm.

¹⁰² Wang Jiasheng[王佳声].2021.“年味儿”是什么? 为什么有很多人感觉越来越淡了? 大众日报;2021-02-09, http://124.133.228.83/articleContent/2239_839079.html.

study of history from below, as Li had spent years of his youth in the villages. Through his accounts of the New Woodcut Movement and the contemporary national heritage construction, Shudi Li demonstrates how individuals sought to make sense of the state's construction of visual rhetoric during different times of political shifts. Furthermore, Li's observation of the persistence of propriety by the peasants in expressing their dissatisfaction with the colours of the socialist New Year prints permits access to the experiences of peasants in China. It is insightful in the process of configuring and making use of the post-revolutionary nationalist construction of authentic "*minjian* art". His observation of the Chinese woodcuts and his experiences of living both in the urban and rural areas of China also initiate his interest in collecting works of Nompumelelo Bukani, a South African visual artist who expressed the urban/rural interface in her printmaking.

Printmaking: A Construction of Visual Rhetoric of an Art Form for Social Changes in South Africa

This section first provides a broad historical overview of printmaking in South Africa as a construction of visual rhetoric of an art for social changes in South Africa from the 1950s to the 1990s. Notably, it sketches the roles of influential institutions and individuals in forming a meta-narrative of printmaking as a political tool for social changes and transformation, introspection and reconciliation in art history (Thorburn 1999: 8). Following the method of Azaria Mbatha's autobiography (2005), then, it builds on Nompumelelo Bukani's biography, fleshing out how the construction of visual rhetoric is constituted for and about from the experience of a Black artist in the Dakawa art and craft centre. Comparing different versions/labels of "Bukani" made in art history to Shudi Li's personal framing of Bukani, I raise a question: what is the meaning of printmaking to Bukani as opposed to her value to the history of printmaking in South Africa?

This section does not aim to emphasise the existing abundant scholarly reflections on the Western-centric elite channelled aesthetic of mythic or 'legitimate Africanness'¹⁰³ (Winters 2009: 5) during the transitional stage (Nettleton 1988; Hobbs and Rankin 1998 and Rosen 1993) or the vogue for labelling Bukani as an empowered female artist in the New South Africa (Arnold 1996; Conidaris 2002; Cooney 2011: 8 and Norval Foundation 2022). Instead, it

¹⁰³ 'Legitimate Africanness' is referred to by Yvonne Winters (2009: 5) as a term to depict the African style created by Black artists under Western patronage prior to 1994. These artworks were made to best express qualities in a preferred form favoured by the white market.

attempts to flesh out Bukani's own narrative as a counter-narrative in forms of intimate reflection and revision on the notion of printmaking from her perspective. Despite the shifting political circumstances from years of struggle for democracy to a democratic post-apartheid South Africa, printmaking, to Bukani, remains a carefully plotted top-down endeavour that is fundamentally distant and problematic. A lack of cultural knowledge could result in a misreading or overlooking of some of the artist's deeper messages (Winters 2009: 13). It ultimately creates a version of "compromised" art for the people from the top that failed on the ground at community level. The aesthetic of the linocuts made by community artists like Nompumelelo Bukani do not appeal to the people in her own township and subsequently they face extreme challenges against the weakening tourist market and a lack of real interest from the elite art world. It leads us to ask how we perceive Li's collecting narrative in juxtaposing peripheral Chinese "*minjian* art" New Year prints and Bukani's artworks in a contemporary transnational context. For instance, discourses of differences¹⁰⁴ from the 1980s to 1990s (Nettleton 2020) and discourses of mid-1990s pluralism (Marschall 2001) both included Black community artists in the mainstream art scene in problematic ways. Anitra Nettleton (2020) defines and ramifies the 'the discourses of difference' by demonstrating that Samuel Makoanyane (1909–1944), Julius Mfete (1956–2008)) and Zolani Mapente (b. 1972) enjoyed about ten years of recognition (1984–1994) and were subsequently forgotten by the urban gallery art scene. She argues that their rise and fall from view was, ironically, tied to the development of the particular 'discourses of difference' that build on their cultural, racial and geographical differences from the artists of the urban art world in those ten years.

Brief Overview of Printmaking in South Africa Since the 1950s

In South Africa, printmaking was an imported art form initially developed exclusively in the circles of academic institutions and by formally trained white artists in the first half of the twentieth century (Cooney et al. 2011: 7). The externally imposed, racially defined social structures of apartheid segregated African people into "homelands", which prevented the majority population from accessing this foreign art form. However, a gradual change occurred in the 1950s. As apartheid (1948–1994)'s systematic restriction on opportunities for people who

were not classified by the apartheid laws as white became severe, a wave of resistance in art circles broke out by the joint efforts of pioneering Black artists¹⁰⁵ and ‘sympathetic members of the white art fraternity’ (Koloane 1989: 60) and missionary-related organisations. David Koloane (1989: 60) mentions the role of a group of the pioneering Black artists who worked in isolation in different parts of the country in forming a Black artists’ community. Despite their highly patronised connection with the white art circles, their presence and works were regarded as a novelty in expanding the dominant white art industry. The development of informal art centres and workshops, as well as publications, cultivated equal access to arts education for the Black African majority. Since the 1950s, a few Black artists who practised printmaking gradually emerged in art centres, workshops and informal community outreach training programmes. A few of these Black artists have grown to be leading figures in the field of contemporary art.¹⁰⁶ These small art centres particularly, the Arts and Craft Centre at Rorke’s Drift (Hobbs and Rankin 2003), pioneered a visual rhetoric of printmaking as art form for social justice during the years of struggle against apartheid. This was achieved by developing a narrative of printmaking as a medium for social change and collaboration between white and Black artists. It was also partly due to printmaking’s relative affordability. Lynne Cooney (2011: 8) points out that printmaking stood out among other art forms possibly also attributed to the ‘preconception of its kinship to skills used in traditional woodcarving or crafts-based forms’. This preconception of collaboration based on commonalities was arguably a response to the elitist hierarchy of the fine arts and could be seen as a mediated experiment. Well-known Black artists, Sekoto, Kekana and Mancoba, were reluctant to make prints because of the prevailing perception of its association with “craft” in missionary schools of that period. Instead, they were confined to the orthodox hierarchy of fine arts that committed to painting and sculpture (Hobbs and Rankin 1997: 13). Nevertheless, in the eyes of the missionary activists, such as Peter and Ulla Gowenius, print is an art form that could promote egalitarianism and accessibility whilst partially meeting the canonical demands ‘without abandoning its “fine art” status’ (Hobbs and Rankin 2003: 161).

¹⁰⁵ These artists included, for example, Gerard Bhengu, George Pemba, John Koena, Keefe Mohl, Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto (Koloane 1989: 60). Koloane also pointed out that Gerard Sekoto was one of the first artists depict conditions in the slum settlements and townships in the 1930s.

¹⁰⁶ These leading artists include Azaria Mbatha, David Koloane and Sam Nhlengethwa.

Similar to the context of China, printmaking was consolidated as a medium of fine art in South Africa, partly attributed to its political and collaborative nature for social change. It flourished in many art centres, institutions, community workshops and individual studios across South Africa from the 1950s.¹⁰⁷ Take Azaria Mbatha, the ‘quintessential’ (Dolby 2006) Black South African artist as an example. Azaria has been credited with an important position in the history of printmaking in South Africa, in part due to his impact on a number of Black artists who focused on printmaking in their artistic oeuvre.¹⁰⁸ Azaria’s success was closely linked to Peter and Ulla Gowenius, the managers of the Craft Centre at Rorke’s Drift. Gowenius explained that the decision to introduce linocuts to Azaria Mbatha was based on their observation of his woodcraft skills. They presumed that introducing relief linocut blocks and making prints could successfully enable Black artists to translate pre-existing carving skills into an imported art form that seemed not entirely unfamiliar to Black African culture (Hobbs and Rankin 2003: 32). Azaria exhibited little interest at the beginning when he was introduced to linocuts. Nevertheless, he recalled the excitement and surprise he felt upon seeing the paper removed from a block for the first time (Hobbs and Rankin 2003: 40). In the process of working with Azaria Mbatha, Gowenius became aware that printmaking could play a role as a visual language of self-awareness against apartheid (Hobbs and Rankin 2003: 162). Art activists and art centres consciously advocated printmaking as a political agency for expressing people’s resistance against apartheid, particularly after the Soweto uprising in 1976. This resonates with the context of China’s New Woodcut Movement. In both contexts, printmaking evolved into a localised version of art form for social justice. They resorted to the construction of traditions for the masses that brought light to the neglected life and traditions of the majority of people from more disadvantaged sectors of society.

¹⁰⁷ Besides the well-reputed Rorke’s Drift, there were other lesser-known channels for Black people who practised and learned printmaking, e.g. the Badisha Arts and Cultural Association, an artists’ collective in the 1960s in Pretoria, the Mofolo Art Centre and Ntokozweni Community Centre in Soweto in 1970s, the Federated Union of Black Artists in Newtown, Johannesburg in 1978, the Community Art Project in Cape Town in 1977 and the African Institute of Art at Funda in Soweto in 1980s (Hobbs and Rankin 2003:17–19).

¹⁰⁸ Joe Dolby (2006) points out that Azaria Mbatha, as an elder artist at Rorke’s Drift, taught John Muafangejo. He directly influenced other Black artists as well. Many Black artists followed Mbatha’s preferred use of linocut as the primary printmaking medium, even though the technical and cost reasons may also be considered as the cause of many Black artists primarily using linocuts.

How did the pioneering Black artists translate printmaking into the visual rhetoric of an art form for the neglected traditions and life? Scholarly accounts contend that the pioneering Black printmakers from the 1950s till the end of apartheid created a romanticised and problematic vision of supposedly primitive African life of the past, which was largely dependent on the gaze of the white art market. Similar to the ongoing Sinification of printmaking in China, the Africanisation of printmaking is also a process that takes generations' collective efforts while responding to the shifting social-political settings of times. In tune with the rise of Black theology in Southern Africa, Azaria Mbatha built a body of linocuts (figure 3.14) in an attempt to 'Africanise the whole bible' with myths and realities of his Zulu heritage (Dolby 2006).

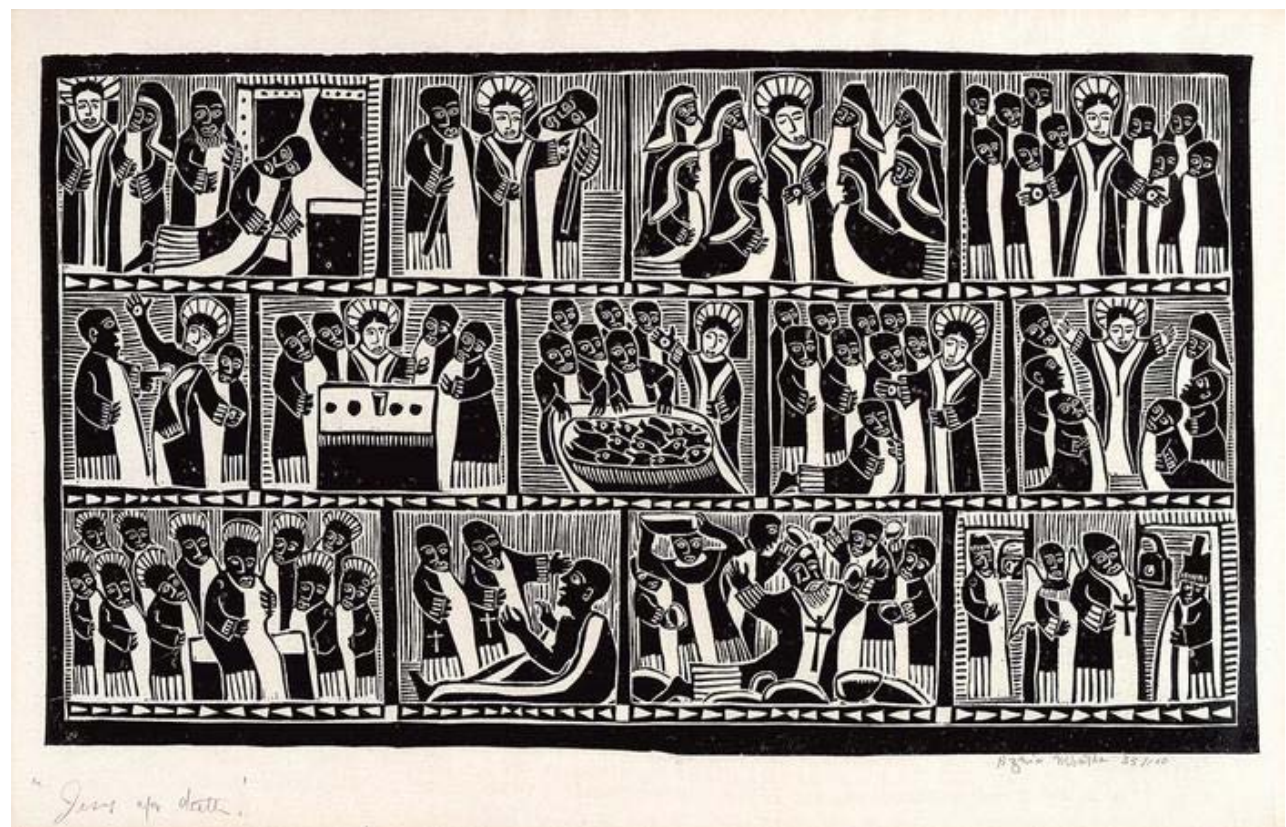


Fig 3.14: *Jesus after death*, Azaria Mbatha, photo published on Revisions¹⁰⁹

Mbatha's student, John Muafangejo, primarily used linocuts as means of a visual autobiography. Many of his prints refer to incidents in his life in a dramatic or humorous way as

¹¹³ The image is published on *Revisions*, website: http://revisions.co.za/gallery/zan-louw/louw_zan_03.jpg/zaria_01.jpg/.

if comic comments on the world around him. Zulu and Ovambo history provided indirect political commentary metaphorically to the repressive regime at the time (Dolby 2006).

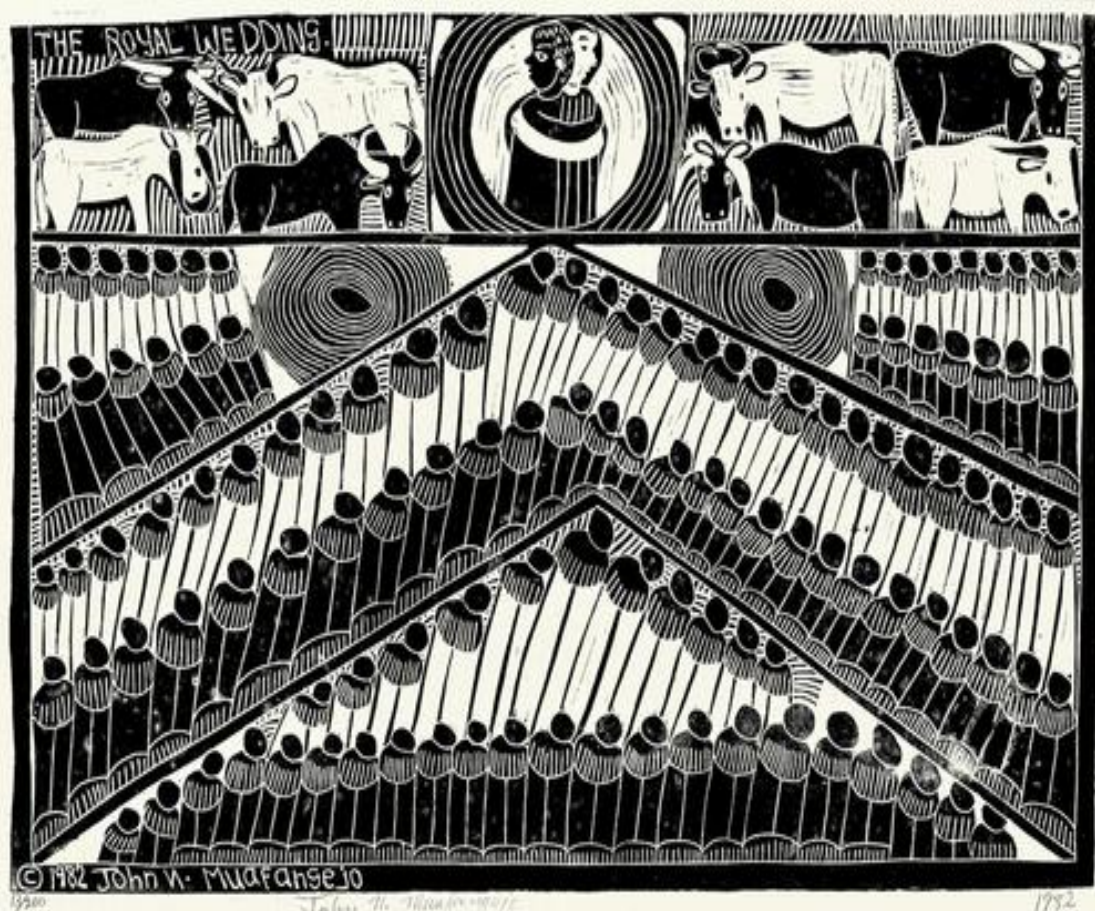


Figure 3.15: The royal wedding, John Muafangejo. 1982, photo published on Revisions¹¹⁰.

These works provided a glimpse into Black artists' perceptions of their lives in a shifting urban and rural environment, irrespective of critical reviews on the constructed visual rhetoric of mythical otherness of Africanness for the Western art market. Through printmaking, they visually documented a mediated version of art depicting the lives of Black people during apartheid. They directly reflected the ways Black artists embrace evolving forms of sociopolitical association in their daily lives to transgress segregation and racial boundaries.

Nompumelelo Bukani: 'Everything is Coming Right One Day'¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ The figure is published on *Revisions*, Available at: http://revisions.co.za/gallery/john-muafangejo/muafangejo_john_32.jpg/ [Accessed 20 Jan. 2024].

¹¹¹ Interview with Nompumelelo Bukani, on 13 March 2023.

As the impact of the pioneering individuals and institutions in advancing equal art education grew, by the end of the 1980s, a growing “people’s culture” linked to community-based artists became a significant art tendency of the time (Williamson 1989: 9). The progressive political effect of art on society gave rise to waves of visual artists like Nompumelelo Bukani who had little art background prior to their contact with different print institutions, independent print studios and affiliated community outreach projects. Azaria Mbatha’s (2005: ix) autobiography contextualises his life with images of his art works as an ‘expression of what life had meant in moments of actual living’ for him. Based on Bukani’s artworks and narratives, this section follows Azaria Mbatha’s autobiographical method, to uncover a story of a visual artist whose life was profoundly shaped by the history of printmaking in South Africa since the 1980s. I explore detailed visual biographical accounts of Bukani for two significant reasons. Firstly, it is crucial to provide her with the space to unveil her life stories through her own visual narratives considering her artworks have been used as illustrators for others’ narratives. Secondly, this exploration is integral to understanding why Shudi Li was drawn to Bukani’s printmaking, as it offers a grounded perspective.

The Early life of Nompumelelo Bukani

‘My life is looking from [the perspective of] printmaking. It depends on printmaking’– (Bukani 2021)¹¹².

Nompumelelo Bukani, better known as Edith Bukani, was born on 10 December 1954, to parents who were migrant farm workers in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. It is a region well known for resistance against white domination, from the Cape Frontier Wars (1779–1878) to the African National Congress (ANC)’s political movements in the townships from the 1960s to the 1990s. Growing up with parents drifting on different farms and mines was a shared experience among Xhosa people from the background of migrant workers in the 1950s (Manona 1989).

The name Edith is believed to derive from Old English for both ‘rich, happy’ and ‘war’. It was given by her father ‘in difficult times’ (Bukani 2023).¹¹³ ‘Before they didn’t want a Xhosa name for whites. ... My Xhosa name is Nompumelelo, it means everything is coming right one

¹¹² Bukani, E. (2021). 21 Jul. Makhanda, interview with Nompumelelo Bukani.

¹¹³ Bukani, E. (2023). 13 Mar. Makhanda, interview with Nompumelelo Bukani.

day’ (Bukani 2023). Her names reflect two or three generations of migrant farm workers who were uprooted from their ancestral lands, drifting and grappling with worsening farm employment conditions since the 1960s and drastic social and cultural changes against Xhosa tradition. As a result, Bukani’s parents (figure 3.16) strived to hang onto their traditional Xhosa values irrespective of the overwhelming changing of rural–urban transformations.



Figure 3.16: *Strict Parents*, Nompumelelo Bukani, colour screenprint, 1995, 20/45, at the Caversham Press¹¹⁴. Image source: Aspire art.

Strict Parents depicts a confused and helpless youth with one arm folded over her head, looking into a distance. Occupying the centre of the image is an aged couple, heavily wrapped in flattened poker-cards-like traditional clothes with stern and solemn expressions. Bukani’s ingenious and simple composition places the troubled youth in a natural tension between ‘the austere traditional parents’ (Bukani 2023) and the distant farmhouse environment. The viewer directly confronts the strict parents as if a door, gatekeeping their tradition and rejecting any

¹¹⁴ aspireart (n.d.). Lot 46 - Edith Bukani (South Africa). [online] Available at: <https://www.aspireart.net/auction/lot/46-edith-bukani-south-africa/?lot=3967&sd=1> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2024].

threats from the outside world. It presents subtle humour in the serious narrative as if telling the viewer with a sigh: ‘I cannot go out today, look at my parents’.

Nompumelelo struggles with the rural–urban interplays yet with a more critical mind towards traditional Xhosa values compared to her parents. From the time she was little, she observed her mother suffering as a traditional Xhosa woman who, from Bukani’s (2023) perspective, was not valued by her husband.

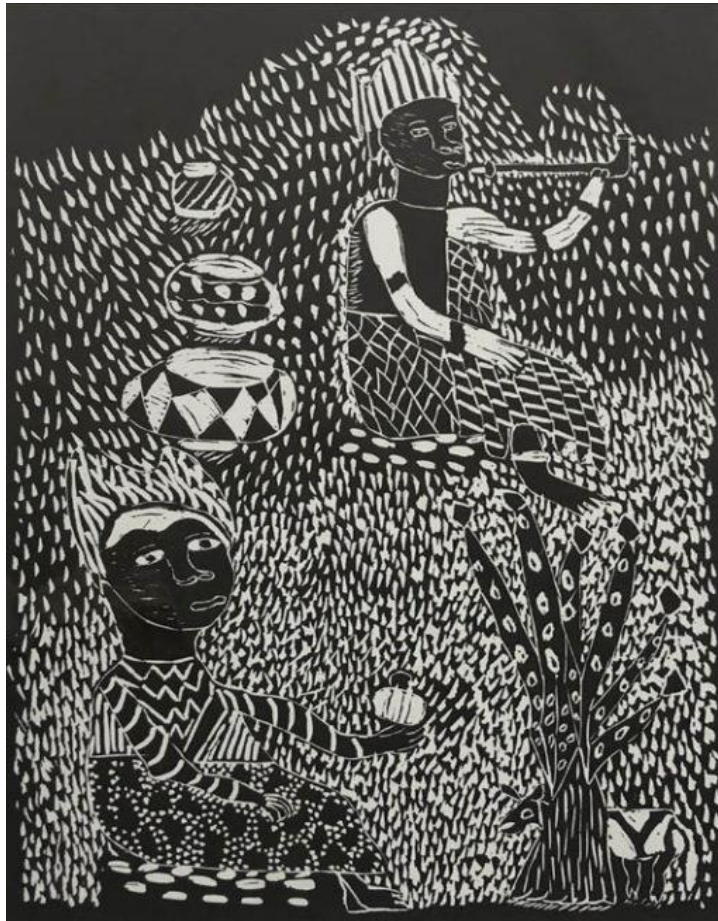


Figure 3.17: Nompumelelo Bukani, *Manguni's Women*, 1995, Linocut on paper, 31/45, at the Caversham Press. 37 x 25 cm (block) 64 x 38,5 cm (paper). Image source: Julia Meintjes Fine Art.¹¹⁵

Manguni's Women (figure 3.17) is Bukani's direct visual criticism of Xhosa's traditional polygamous social system centred on male power (Bukani 2023). The two women sit in silence facing the same direction, seemingly waiting forever and being forgotten at the same time. In this

¹¹⁵ Meintjes, J. (n.d.). Calendar July 7/100. [online] Julia Meintjes. Available at: <https://www.juliameintjes.co.za/product/mangunis-women-31-45/> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2024].

mirror of history, Bukani sees the fate of her mother and countless other traditional Xhosa women. She strives to have a different life, to be a nurse in town (Bukani 2021).



Figure 3.18: Nompumelelo Bukani. *Calendar July*, Linocut on paper. 34,5 x 34,5 cm (block) 42,5 x 42,5 cm (paper) 1978, 7/100¹¹⁶. Image courtesy of Julia Meintjes Fine Art.

Calendar July (figure 3.18) portrays a scene on a farm where two men meet. They do not look at each other but stare closely at the cattle and sheep in the lower left farm kraal. Cattle and sheep as the main focus are ironically opposed to the forgotten little girl playing alone in the corner, which alludes to the father in Bukani's childhood memories. 'Even when he met with

¹¹⁶ Meintjes, J. (n.d.). *Calendar July 7/100*. [online] Julia Meintjes. Available at: <https://www.juliameintjes.co.za/product/calendar-july-7-100/> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2024].

friends, only cows and sheep came to his mind’ (Bukani 2021). The artwork uncovers Bukani’s ambivalence towards her father by visualising herself as the same size as the cattle and sheep, satirising her father’s ignorance while longing for his attention. Nompumelelo Bukani battles with the rural–urban transformation process between assimilating urban values and being coerced to maintain traditional beliefs. Her dream of becoming a nurse was destroyed as she was forced to stop schooling in grade eight and married to a man arranged by her father (Bukani 2021). The unsuccessful marriage made her life extremely hard financially. For years she remained the only breadwinner of her family by working as an unskilled labour in Makanda (Bukani 2023)¹¹⁷.

Life in Town

The world may know the Johannesburg townships of Soweto and Alexandra, but little has been heard in other thousands of smaller townships, such as Joza Location, Extension 7, where Nompumelelo Bukani lives now in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown). Drifting from farms to townships, Nompumelelo appears to be an outsider as well as a silent observer in between white dominant culture and township culture.

‘I watched cricket on TV; when I was younger, I watched on the field’ (Bukani 2020).

¹¹⁷ Bukani, E. (2023). 3 March. Makhanda. Interview with Nompumelelo Bukani.

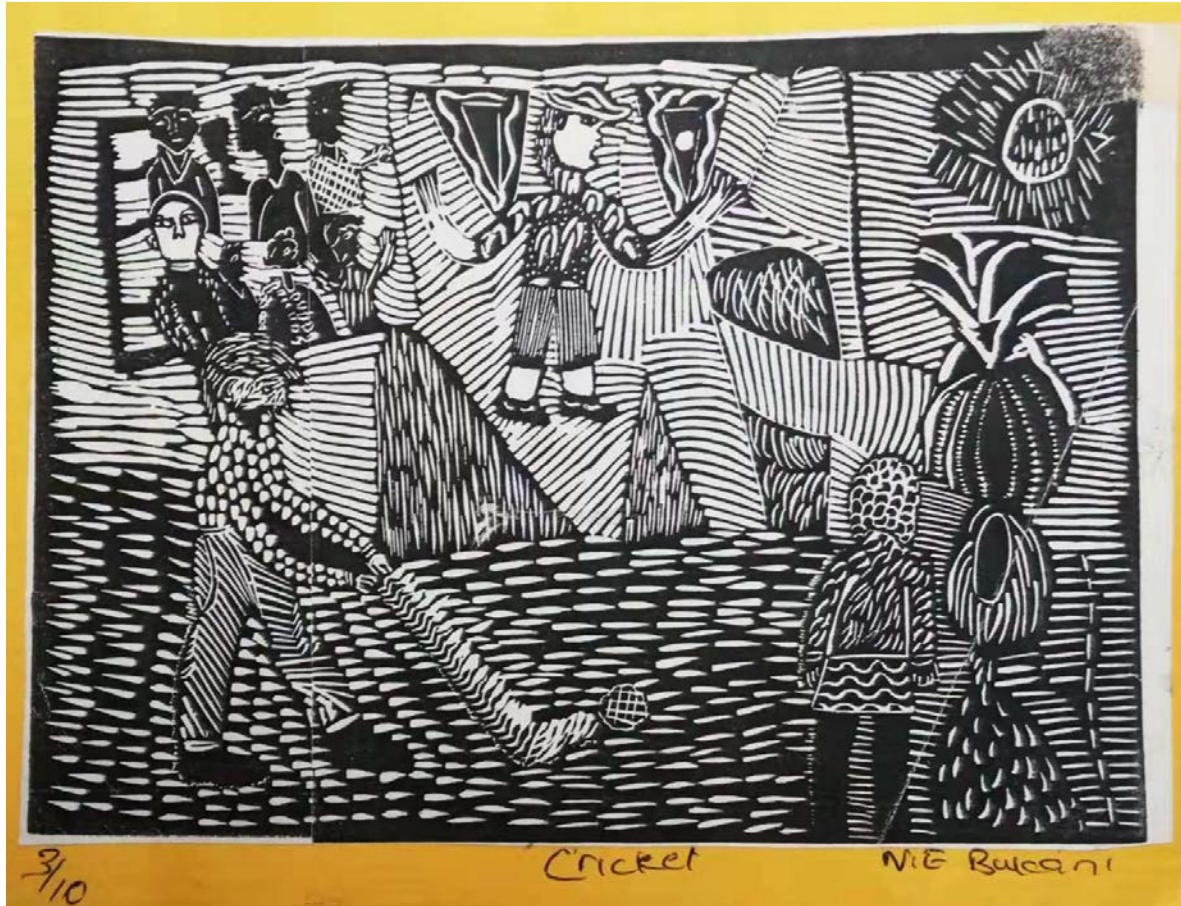


Figure 3.19: Nompumelelo Bukani, *Cricket*, linocut postcard. 3/10. n.d. Collection of Shudi Li. Photo provided by Shudi Li.

In *Cricket* (figure 3.19), Bukani uses two patterns of large-area lines to outline the environment in which the subject is located. It creates an effect of rhythmic black-and-white images in motion as if images with fluctuations in old-style TV screens. Bukani shapes the batsman into a bird-headed humanoid form and ‘gives him the ability to see far’ (Bukani 2021). She translates the experience and cognition of rural life on a farm into a visual language to engage with a ‘popular white sport’ in urban areas, meanwhile, she has always been a quiet observer in the corner as depicted in the image. These are the actual moments of living she records and also ‘enjoys watching the white life’ in town (Bukani 2021).

Bukani’s works do not intend to engage with overtly political issues but are based on long-term observations and subtle experiences of her own life. She captures the ways Black township labourers are positioned in the urban life of Makhanda. *Beads* (figure 3.20) portrays a common craft market in Makhanda during the 1990s. She cleverly shades two Black bead workers in different shapes and patterns of bold Black that intersect like a woven bag. The white stallholder

prominently stands out in the light in the heavy, tangled Black stripes. Bukani says it is an interesting thing because white agents sell more easily than the Black bead workers themselves (Bukani 2020).

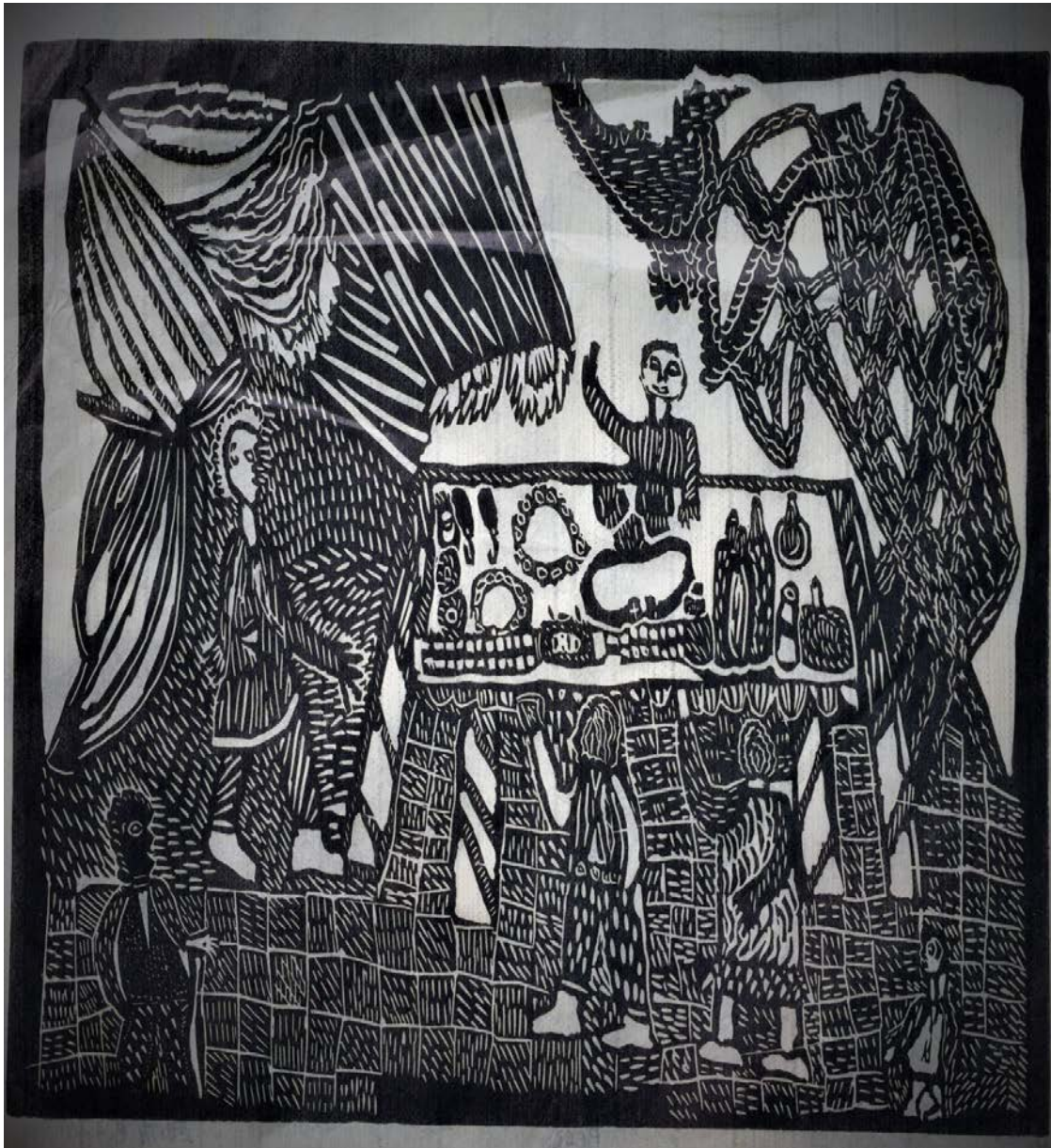


Figure 3.20: *Beads*, Nompumelelo Bukani, linocut on paper. 1993, made at the Dakawa Art and Craft Project. Collection of Shudi Li. Photo by Binjun Hu.

Bukani recalled in an interview:

I made it because I wanted to show the person who is selling the beads he makes. But you see the person who is selling the beads is not the man who makes them. He is there...at the bottom of the print looking and wondering if he can talk to the man at the table. [the

seller is white] ...You see sometimes for us it is the white person who sells our things to the other white people because they like it. Black people are funny. It is like my prints, only white people buy them, no Black people– (Bukani cited in Baillie 1999: 121).

Bukani is striving to maintain her position as an unskilled labourer from the township, while seizing every opportunity for training to uplift herself. In 1990 she went to the Port Elizabeth Technical College for sewing training hoping to make a living with traditional skills, but that did not work out in the end. She injured her arm when she worked at the Stone Crescent Motel as a cleaner (Baillie 1997: 76). ‘Out of desperation, she applied for a job at the Dakawa Art and Craft Community Centre, which was a precarious choice in 1992 in the township due to its association with the African National Congress (ANC)’ (Baillie 1997: 76).¹¹⁸

Similar to the context of China, the politicised nature of printmaking has been featured in the recent art history of South Africa since the 1960s (Conidaris 2002: 8). The opportunity that came to Nompumelelo Bukani was intimately linked to the broad social role of printmaking as an art form of resistance by both Black and white artists during the liberation struggle from the 1960s to the 1990s (Hobbs and Rankin 1997). Dakawa art and Craft Community Centre was formerly funded in Tanzania as part of the ANC camp for exiles during the time of apartheid in the 1980s. With the help of the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA), it relocated to Makhanda in 1992 as a strategic “pilot model” to advance cultural and economic empowerment in a country on the way to its first democratic elections (Baillie 1997: 8). Grappling with urban/rural interplay without any art education and with very little English language ability, Bukani (2023) says that she struggled for the first year as she walked into an unfamiliar space envisioned for cultural cohesion by the ANC and an African ideal image conceived by the Swedish Agency. Although her primary teacher, Kristina Anshelm, emphasised modernist concepts of “originality” in individual expressions with the knife. Bukani’s primary goal was to secure a permanent position in the project to support her family, rather than to express Anshelm’s idea of “originality”. Giselle Baillie (1999: 78–79) contends that the praised “originality” of Bukani’s work was therefore detected as her ability to naively carve out a Swedish view of “Africa”. Despite the dominant Swedish influence on Bukani’s art creation

¹¹⁸ This paragraph and the following paragraph are direct quotes from the author’s article ‘Metaphor, Embodiment, Connection: Carving Out a Space of Spontaneous Solidarity in the South’ in *Shades of Knowledge in Audacious Art Practices Situating the Contemporary Arts of Africa*. Edited by Ruth Simbao, Rachel Baasch, Stephen Fóláránmí.

process, her agency in the project should not be reduced to merely a passive reception as her own voice in her artistic incentives has not been adequately revealed in the canon of art history. Details of her accounts of artistic inspiration and visual language require a further nuanced approach. Bukani's (2023) training with Anshelm continued until the centre was closed in 1995. It was during this period most of her prints were made. Since then, her artistic production has dropped considerably, owing to the increasing constraints on the printmaking resources up to the present and a lack of a clear marketing development plan in place when the centre was functioning.

Thorburn (1999: 8–9) notices that the professional presses played a crucial role in education, outreach and partnership programmes. Since the 1960s printmaking has become available to Black artists through art training programs in alternative and informal channels. The image of Nompumelelo Bukani since her involvement in the Dakawa Centre conjures up a classic example of building a “new South African” art that includes multiple voices and narratives. In 1994, through a partnership between the Dakawa Centre and the Caversham Press Educational Trust, four of Bukani's artworks were exhibited in a project titled *The Spirit of Our Stories* to celebrate traditional African myths and narratives (Conidaris 2002: 28).¹¹⁹ The linocut *Manguni's Women* (figure 3.18) has received the most acknowledgement as it seems to reflect her image as “a rural woman”, commenting on gender inequality and coping with adversity through the empowerment of art in a transforming South Africa. *Manguni's Women* was included both in Marion Arnold's book *Women and Art in South Africa* in 1996 as well as in a retrospective exhibition at Boston University in 2011, which was dedicated to the history of the Caversham Press. In 2022, Bukani's work also appears in a group exhibition titled *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940–2000* among a list of 40 female artists.

¹¹⁹ *The Spirit of Our Stories* achieved great market success which inspired similar community-based art projects that encouraged storytelling with iconographic content of daily life in the townships, its people. It further cultivates an inclusive culture of collecting among corporates and individuals to include community artists' works. Nompumelelo Bukani's art works also entered big corporate collections, e.g., the MTN collection, during this period. The four artworks exhibited in the *Spirit of Our Stories*, were: *The Bakhethwas* 1994, screen printed lithograph; *Animal Trap* 1994, screenprint; *Strict Parents* 1994, screenprint; *Manguni's Women* 1994, linocut.

“Versions”¹²⁰ of Bukani: A Footnote is Made

‘In South African art history, there is no real Azaria Mbatha. The term ‘Mbatha’ has numerous different authors. It may well be argued that ‘Mbatha the artist’ was made, rather than born, by the Lutherans, by art historians and later, by his own autobiographical recollections.’ – Rhonda Rosen (1933: 11)

Rhonda Rosen’s claim about Azaria Mbatha many years ago resonates with the case of Bukani. Bukani’s case is, however, even more complicated, in the sense that she is still based in a township where poverty persists, isolated from art exhibitions about her and being represented by different actors domestically and internationally. She has little to do with different “versions” of “Bukani” made as a footnote in the sweeping narratives of printmaking as art for the previously neglected “people”, especially, as she told me, she was not aware of herself being included in some of the exhibitions (Bukani 2023). Her role as an empowered female community artist is fulfilled for the sake of the history of printmaking in South Africa. These sweeping statements of praise are somewhat patronising without contextual information as well as critical reflections. At the same time, Bukani’s life has been profoundly shaped by the elitist-led social transformation of printmaking. Her years of learning printmaking and her relationships with various teachers and art professionals from diverse cultures have set her apart from her peers, who lead more conventional lives with little exposure to printmaking as a form of expression. However, being far removed from art centres and mainstream “high art” circles and academia, she is disconnected from how her work is represented outside of her local context. She is not only an outsider to the “Bukani” in art history but also partially an “outsider” within her own community.

An Outsider In-Between

In an exhibition catalogue organised by the Culture House in Stockholm in 1989, as one of the participating artists, David Koloane (1989: 60) described the ambivalent relationship of the artist and his community in South Africa as ‘a bittersweet paradox’ from his experience. Professional recognition in the major cities contrasts with the minimal, if any, support from artists’ home communities who live outside major cities. As an artist from the background of township

¹²⁰ I use “version” as a concept, refer to different narratives have made about Nompumelelo Bukani.

community-based groups, Bukani also faces difficult challenges, if not more so, compared to the Black artists who live in better-known areas and have managed to enter more mainstream art history. As Bukani explained to me in an interview:

The villagers don't buy graphics..., they don't know about prints. Only whites buy. You noticed very few people in Grahamstown selling the prints. I am alone now. I am suffering too much (Bukani 2023).¹²¹ I am alone. Of arts and culture if it is called arts, they [her township neighbourhood] don't get about the graphics. I don't know why (Bukani 2023).

Bukani finds herself trapped and alienated in a constructed “people’s culture” and in a medium she has mastered over several decades, but which is not valued by the people who live in her immediate community. With the worsening economic situation after the Covid-19 pandemic, her primary buyers from the local art festivals and markets in town shrank significantly. Meanwhile her immediate community is in favour of traditional beadwork rather than prints. Once again, Bukani is facing financial challenges like many years ago before she started at the Dakawa Arts and Crafts Centre. She begins to make beadwork to compensate for her daily living (figure 3.21).

¹²¹ Interview with Nompumelelo Bukani on 30 January 2023.

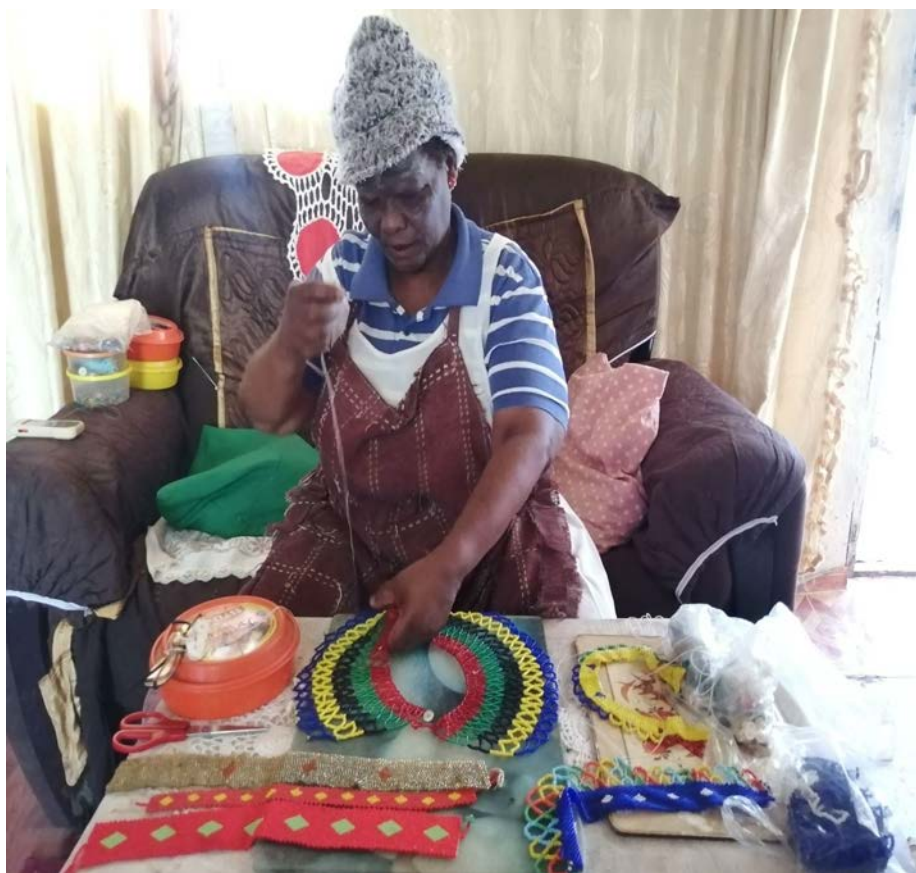


Figure 3.21: Nompumelelo Bukani making beadwork at home in preparation for an upcoming market, in 2022.

Nompumelelo Bukani's case questions the metanarrative of printmaking in democratic South Africa as building people's arts and culture, while instead, it is a carefully plotted top-down endeavour that is fundamentally distant and problematic to the people in most of the artists' communities. However, we cannot overlook community projects like Dakawa without objectively acknowledging the significant positive impact of individual teachers on Bukani. These teachers were deeply invested in the projects and their trainees, supporting Bukani through some of her most challenging times. For instance, Bukani maintained personal connections with her teacher Kristina Anshelm for many years after the project was closed, as well as with her other teacher Giselle Katherine Baillie from a printing workshop at the Egazini Outreach Project, founded in 2000 (Wells 2003). The project aimed to use art and history to construct post-colonial identity and promote healing in Makhanda. During my research on Nompumelelo Bukani, I had the invaluable opportunity to co-curate her first (auto)biographical exhibition alongside fellow SARCHI Chair participant, Viwe Madinda from Bukani's community. Bukani was invited to a two-month artist's residency within the Residencies for Artists and Writers (RAW) project,

hosted at the RAW Spot Gallery. This residency was part of the SARChI programme, aligning with its objectives to foster a “strategic Southernness” and address specific needs in writing art history from diverse perspectives.

On June 22, 2023, Bukani's family and some members of her immediate community were present as she shared her own story and spoke for herself directly for the first time in a gallery at the opening ceremony, a moment she claims as pivotal in her journey as a visual artist. Our question remains from the exhibition, how do we handle and write this part of history for the better future of these artists? How do we engage with them and their artworks in a meaningful and substantial way when some of their artworks are in different corporate collections that they are not even aware of? These questions also remind us of our responsibility as art historians in voicing the continued problematic politics of the representation of artists who remain isolated. Furthermore, it calls for community-embedded curatorial approach against South African printmaking art history as somewhat a top-down tradition. The different “versions” of Bukani, as Sabine Marschall (2001: 59) contends, have been invented and instituted by elite agents of the art world without adequate participation or consultation of those who are the subject of their field of interest.

Collecting the Atmosphere of Bukani through Forging a Visual Connection

This section explores in detail Shudi Li's rationale for collecting Bukani's art. His experiences with printmaking in China, such as *Daowei* and *Nianwei*, highlight how he builds a visual connection across borders. This visual connection is mainly manifested in the interpretation of visual content and printmaking processes. His translation process across borders provides transnational references to the metanarrative of South African printmaking art history as somewhat a top-down tradition.

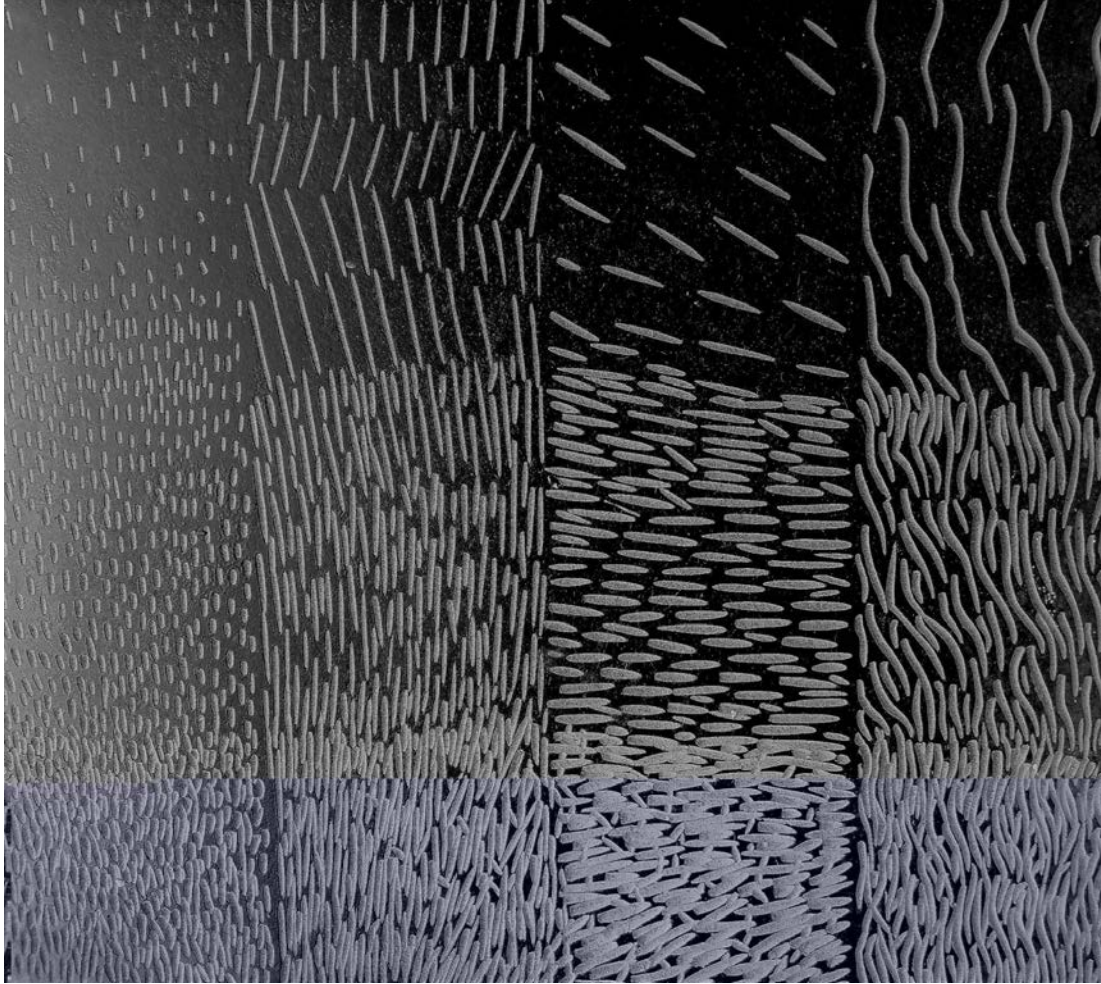


Figure 3.22: Test block by Nompumelelo Bukani at Dakawa Arts and Crafts Centre. 1992. Photo by Binjun Hu.

In an interview, Li describes his appreciation for Bukani's artist style:

Regarding Bukani's works, actually, my favourite part is her woodcutting, which has a very concise and sharp *daowei* and *muwei*. *Daowei* and *muwei* are professional terms in the language of her woodcutting tools. Woodcutting is a process of carving wood materials with a knife, leaving behind traces of control between the artist's mind and hands. ...How much effort one puts in their mind is carried through the feeling in their hands. But after it touches the material, it produces another kind of change between the material and the artist. All of this is accumulated through long-term artistic practice, so one can tell whether an artist is mainly copying or creating on their own when observing their works. Bukani, with her cultural background as a Black female trained in Western printmaking classes [for a few years], can be said to have not completely mastered the technique perfectly, but also not being too rigid in her approach. She is somewhere in

between. Finally, with her own cultural heritage and taste, as well as her natural and unrestrained personality, she carves stroke by stroke. Her picture processing is very relaxed and rhythmic, and her black-and-white treatment is very perfect' (Shudi Li 2021).

Shudi Li's account of Bukani suggests a visual connection, mediated through the process of printmaking with his learning experiences in China. He translates the Chinese printmaking terms *daowei* and *muwei* as a way of engaging with prints in a new context. *Daowei* and *muwei*, is the intangible "Chinese" collectables, that allows him to bridge 'what is (or seems) to external within one's personal orbit' (Tanselle 1998: 4). The Printmaking emphasises the feeling of working with a knife, the textural reaction of the wood being carved. Bukani's mood is recorded in her arm movement in the carving of the linocut (Fig 3.22). This is appreciated as *daowei* and *muwei* by Shudi Li, which he perceives in Bukani's art with an intense aesthetic. It is mediated through the agency of materiality in printmaking that forms an intimate space of understanding and appreciation. When Li saw how Bukani creatively carved on recycled Marley floor tiles to replace the expensive lino boards during the Covid pandemic, he was very impressed. These tiles provide a surface that can be cut into when heated, and Li was very interested in the different visual effects produced by the Marley tiles compared to wood (fig 3.23 and 3.24). In the eyes of Li, a new Chinese immigrant in South Africa, Bukani's image has little to do with the "Bukanis" being a footnote in the South African printmaking history but are an entry point for understanding the part of the South African art dynamic from its grassroots after apartheid. The spirit of resilience and profound emotional intensity of Bukani's life infuses the rich surface of the Marley tiles with bold lines and strength.

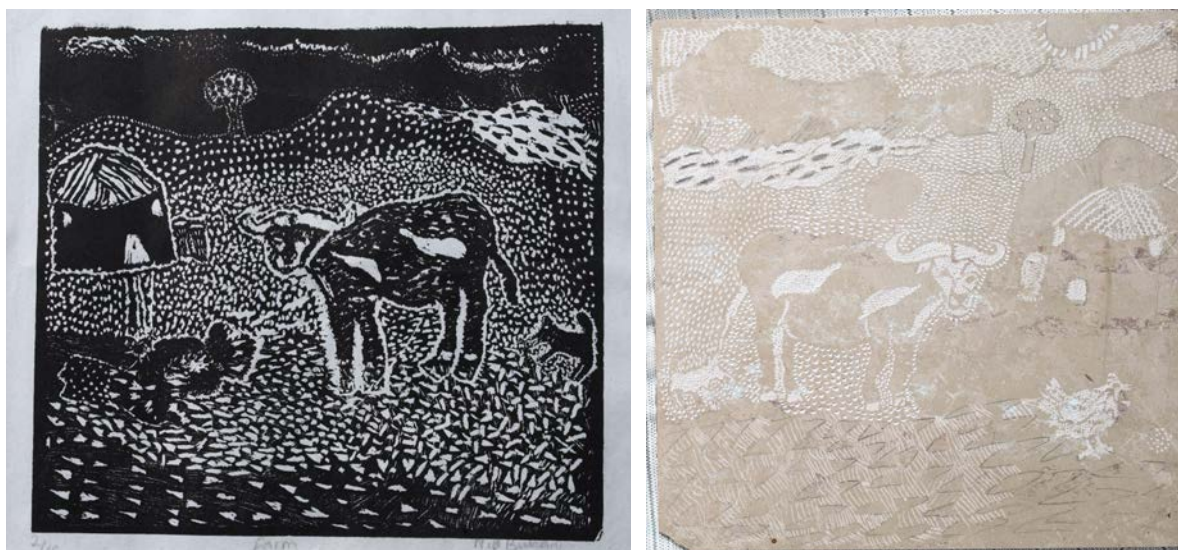


Fig 3.23 and 3.24: *Farm*. 2/11. A print made from Marley floor tile and the actual carved Marley floor tile. Photo by Binjun Hu

Li believes that beyond presenting the texture of lines on different material surfaces such as wood and tiles, *daowei* is more importantly manifested in Bukani's expression and recording of emotions. 'Her natural and unrestrained personality' (Li 2020)¹²² is fully reflected in her flexible composition and form. The dense, sparse, gathering, dispersing, simple and complex curves and straight lines are presented in a simple black and white image, constructing the emotional intensity in her storytelling. Shudi Li's experiences in China have cultivated his taste for the intense stylistic boldness that he finds in Bukani's artworks.

Shudi Li inherits Tiehua Liu's aesthetic discourse of *daowei* and *muwei* in woodcut, but he also appreciates Bukani's artworks beyond the perspective, anatomy, composition and colour theory typical of the academy. Instead, he emphasises the perfect combination of content expression and planarity.¹²³ Bukani's works emphasise her perception of objects in the planarity, with a simple and clear yet rich and diverse effect. Li's appreciation and collection of Bukani's works and Zhu Xianzhen's woodblock prints provide new insights into how to perceive planar artistic expressions in contemporary contexts. Additionally, Li sensitively captures Bukani's experiences of in-betweenness as a community artist being trained by different community outreach print workshops rather than in college art education programmes. But at the same time,

¹²² Li, S. (2020). 8 July. Online interview with Shudi Li.

¹²³ Planarity refers to the spatial arrangement in art.

he regards her experiences as having avoided the potential for formal rigidity and formulaic printmaking language that can arise in academic printmaking education, which has enabled her to create unique ‘relaxed and rhythmic’ (Li 2020) art that transgresses elitist and academic aesthetics and reflects her true value as a community artist in the printmaking history of South Africa.

An atmosphere of Bukani

According to Biehl-Missal’s (2013: 359) accounts the concept of atmosphere is ‘aesthetic work’ that expands our understanding of seeing to a broad range of ‘visual, spatial and performative practices’. Atmospheres are the ambiguous spatial qualities of emotional influence, perceived through physical presence in connection to individuals and objects or within a particular environment (Biehl-Missal 2013: 359). Utilising the concept of atmosphere, Biehl-Missal (2013: 359) argues that paintings portraying a melancholic scene do not merely symbolise this setting but actively create it. Bukani’s artworks are suffused with an atmospheric quality that activates Li’s lived experiences, facilitating a connection between printmaking in both contexts and engendering a space of nostalgic reverie towards the past. However, it is paramount to discern the disparities in Bukani’s and Li’s nostalgia, as they narrate distinctly different tales of longing and belonging rooted in disparate contexts. This differentiation ultimately leads to Li’s problematic and self-contradictory reasoning concerning Bukani’s art, as he endeavours to transpose his experiences in China onto the canvas of South Africa. According to Boym (2001:41), ‘nostalgia characterizes one’s relationship with the past, the imagined community, home, and one’s perception: restorative and reflective’. Li’s nostalgia leans towards “restorative nostalgia” in a sense to restore “the conservative” and “authentic” lived experience of Zhuxianzhen New Year printmaking and its immediate community life as the collective memory and “authentic” *minjian* art embodiment. Therefore, he romanticises Bukani’s art in this imagined space of “authentic” *minjian* art practices embodied in an imagined community, viewing Bukani as a transnational idealised example for his longing and belonging in “authentic” *minjian* art practices that have been lost in China. Bukani’s nostalgia is more oriented towards ‘reflective nostalgia’, towards ‘an individual narrative that savours details’ and ‘memorial signs’, ‘perpetually deferring homecoming itself’ (Boym 2001: 49). Different elements in her art are her means to connect the past to navigate the present challenges she faces (Bukani 2023). Li considers Bukani’s role as a “true” community artist to lie in her ability to maintain her own

unique creative vision despite the influence of political appropriation for a New South Africa. He argues that ‘art is primarily a personal expression of sincere and genuine joy and real pain driven by sincere and honest thinking. Artists must be honest and sincere people’ (Li 2020). In Bukani’s works, he senses her temperament and her most straightforward observation and struggles drifting from rural to urban spaces (Li 2020). Li resonates the New Year prints to his appreciation of Bukani’s art. He advocates breaking free from the constraints of academy-oriented art and uncovering the ‘propriety [*he qingli* 合情理] felt by the “people”’ (Li 2021). I endeavour to interweave the visual and textual narratives of Bukani and Li, thereby elucidating the complexity of visual proximity and distance discernible within the contexts of their respective works and narratives, within a discursive space that reflects on the collecting of Bukani’s art in the contemporary art market in a transnational context, exploring both its pitfalls and positives.

Connecting in Nostalgic Atmospheres

Bukani’s work is like a history book of mobility and immobility about an ordinary Black woman’s life since 1950s, taking the audience into her unique personal atmosphere. Her works resonate with a storytelling tension akin to the Zhuxianzhen New Year prints (Wan 2015: 193), grounded in the subtleties of ordinary existence, traditional customs, and imbued with a potent local essence. Despite the varied nostalgia, a shared rural–urban interplay experience between Bukani and Li has shaped a proximity in using seemingly similar visual symbols they experienced in their respective communities. The visual proximity is initially evidenced in the portrayal of the relationship between humans and animals. The depiction of animals in Bukani’s works resonates with Li’s experiences in rural life scenes, forming an echo but within completely different contexts (see figures 3.25, 3.26, and 3.27).



Figure 3.25: Bukani, *Mother Feed Chicken*. Figure 3.26: Zhuxianzhen New Year print, Shudi Li's collection



Figure 3.27: *Sketch in the village*, 1983. Shudi Li. Photo Courtesy of Shudi Li

In Bukani's works, animals occupy an important position. They are not just simply background settings presenting a rural farming environment in printmaking but are closely related to the traditional customs, economic sources, kinship relationships and personal emotions, such as recording her mother raising chickens (figure 3.27) to pay for her school fees. The contrast between the size of the character and the chicken, as well as the chicken being the centre of attention, form a perfect balance.



Figure 3.27: Nompumelelo Bukani, *Bird*. n.d. Linocut on paper. Collection of Shudi Li. Photo by Shudi Li.

In *Bird* (figure 3.27), Bukani (2023) depicts a scene from her life on the farm with her parents, where she sought solace under a tree and listened to birdsong when feeling anxious or upset, finding comfort in nature. The portrayal of animal imagery is also evident in Zhuxianzhen New Year prints (figure 3.26) and Li's rural sketches (figure 3.27). The rooster, homophonous with a symbol for good luck in Chinese culture, is depicted as an auspicious bird capable of warding off evil spirits and bringing blessings, often associated with housewarming rituals. Additionally, the crowing of the rooster heralds the dawn. In the picture, a small child rides on the back of a majestic rooster, emphasizing its potent auxiliary function, which brings joy and meaning to farmers' lives through prayers. In both Bukani's works and Zhuxianzhen New Year prints, the relationship between animals and humans carries significant symbolic importance in a rural setting.

Collecting an Atmosphere of Aesthetic Fullness

The atmosphere of aesthetic fullness mainly corresponds to the common design of Bukani's works and Zhuxianzhen New Year prints in terms of composition: full, compact, diverse and clear layers. Bukani's composition, like the Zhuxianzhen New Year prints, is full; even if the subject of the picture cannot fill it entirely, there are different decorative patterns to fill it, in

order to achieve a rich and full visual effect (figure 3.27). One of the reasons for the design of Zhuxianzhen New Year prints is that, compared to prints with blank spaces, farmers prefer a full picture that is both lively and economical. Each god depicted in the prints served a realistic function in the New Year Celebration (Hung 2000: 785). Bukani's design is derived from her a narrative impulse. Her compositional design often comes from her own dreams (Bukani 2021) and the desire to express the dreams is far greater than the limitations of a print. Although the two prints (figure 3.26 and 3.28) have different contexts, they jointly create a visually full atmosphere. Li (2021) believes that this fullness of composition is more than simply a compositional aspect but aligns with a philosophy of resilience and the "vitality" of life in a challenging environment of hardship. In a blog article discussing artworks by Black community artists with 'similar styles' he encountered in a Johannesburg tourist art market, Li states:

In terms of structure in composition, it presents its 'completeness' ... and painting also presents an unusually full and unique composition, coupled with vibrant colours almost breaking out of the picture frame. This is the best interpretation of African people's vitality. A family is a chain of life, together with all the animals in their homeland, which constitutes a theme of life vitality. Especially the most representative 'life tree': the 'family tree', this most common theme, runs through African people's values on family and life, which is extremely practical. It's a prayer for survival under harsh living conditions!' (Li 2017)

The terms 'vitality' and 'African people's vitality' present problematic elements in his restorative nostalgic approach, as they romanticise and essentialise the atmosphere of Bukani's art, suggesting an "authentic rural African experience" in relation to his longing for an "authentic folk art" in China – an imagined past that remains unreachable in both contexts. Art historian Lize Van Robbroeck (2011:79), drawing upon Stuart Hall's (Hall and Gieben 1992: 291) argument on discourse as the production of knowledge through language, conducts a critical analysis of the terms used in art writing during the apartheid era. She argues that words such as 'exaggeration,' 'distortion,' 'vitality,' 'emotional,' and 'life force' have been utilised to create the impression that 'Black artists are governed by emotion rather than reason' (Robbroeck 2011: 85). Bukani's accomplishments as an individual visual artist, which Li personally appreciates through the medium of carving, have transitioned into a longing for an imagined collective memory reconstruction of "authentic" Zhuxianzhen New Year Prints. Significantly, some of the

problematic terms Li used in the South African context have also been employed in the Chinese context to describe the “authentic” New Year Prints by the communities themselves, as an aesthetic resistance to the socialist elitist appropriation of “authentic” New Year Prints for communist ideology from the 1950s to the 1980s (Hung 2000: 785).

The peasants rejected to buy socialist prints, characterised by muted colours and shading in a “typical” black-and-white realistic revolutionary style, elicited particularly harsh criticism, criticising them as ‘stale,’ ‘old,’ and ‘lifeless’ (Hung 2000: 786–798). Between 1955 and 1958, the production of new socialist prints drastically declined to 2.6 percent, while the popularity of “classic theatrical scenes” collected by Li surged to 56.6 percent (Hung 2000: 799). This scenario mirrors the situation in South Africa, where Bukani’s prints seem to be less appealing compared to the popular crafts in her immediate community. This chapter has thus far provided a comprehensive depiction of Bukani’s life and address the community’s aesthetic needs by incorporating Bukani’s beadwork into her first solo exhibition.

Interweaving the two contexts to examine Li’s problematic terms raises the question of how we interpret these terms in the contemporary context, particularly when they are used by individuals whose culture was once considered “other” and collected as such. How do we cultivate a deeper understanding of each other’s cultures by addressing these challenges of perception?

Li’s romanticised views of Bukani’s works, coupled with his tendency to interpret the Other through the lens of self-expectations, epitomise a form of South-to-South Orientalism from below. Anas Alahmed (2020: 408) defines “the Oriental Global South” as a process of producing and categorising the Other, intended to establish a power dynamic wherein the self represents the ‘West/North/coloniser’, and the Other symbolises the ‘East/South/colonised.’ In this context, the construction of the Other underscores a discourse rooted in power relations between emerging Southern collectors and the Southern communities being collected. These dynamic parallels the broader issues of class and the political economy of transnational mobility and diasporic identity. The romanticisation of rural “vitality” and “authenticity” serves as a constructed knowledge of the Other, revealing imaginaries and identities produced outside the mainstream idealised South-South institutional discourse. It also exposes a racialised solidarity within the constructs of Blackness and hierarchy, particularly through the relationships, intimacies, and practices of art within the expansive landscape of China-African cultural studies (Simbao 2023b&2024;

Mawdsley 2020). This scenario reflects the complicity between the self and the Other within Southern societies, echoing Yoon Park’s call for a more contextualised, sensitive, and reflective approach to knowledge production on the African continent (Zheng, Cheng, and Coetzee 2021: 121). Here, the disjunction between one’s self-positioning as a vulnerable immigrant and one’s privilege as a financially and socially advantaged Other is critically examined.

Collecting a Humorous and Dramatic Atmosphere

Like that of John Muafangejo, Edith’s printmaking is full of dramatic atmosphere; even when expressing more serious topics, she is gifted with her humour. And the visual presentation is coarse and bold, with a shared visual connection with the rustic “exaggeration” of Zhuxianzhen New Year prints.



Fig 3.28: Nompumelelo Bukani, *Umqombothi Under the Bed*, n.d. Linocut on paper. Collection of Shudi Li.

Bukani’s print *Umqombothi under the Bed* remains one of her most sought-after works in the art market (Strauss & Co 2022). Originating from the 1990s, this piece was specifically crafted for tourist markets, attesting to its enduring popularity. However, the problematic categorisation of “tribes” or “traditional crafts” as products of colonialism, as observed by anthropologists and archaeologists (Kros and Wright 2022: 54), has presented contemporary challenges in engaging with these terms and art styles. The apartheid regime, grounded in anthropological theories prevalent in the early twentieth century, operated under the belief that various world cultures

were distinct entities requiring protection from mutual “contamination”. This ideology resulted in the systematic tribalisation of other cultures through racial segregation (Robbroeck 2001: 81). Consequently, it fostered a romanticised abstraction of different cultures, where its ‘exotic Otherness and difference’ were readily consumed as commodities, symbolising notions of progress and modernity (Robbroeck 2001: 83). The commercialisation and abstraction of “tribal art” often lead to a limited understanding of the information expressed in the work. Li’s (2023) interpretation of the art piece was constrained to simply viewing a costumed Xhosa couple enjoying their traditional beer. The reason why the beer was stored under the bed remains a mystery; it could be associated with religious rituals, as depicted in Zhuxianzhen prints, where each symbol carries its own social connotation, until he heard the full story from Bukani. Bukani (2023) aims to convey a dramatic and humorous narrative ending, which also reflects the daily life in the community. After all the guests have left, this couple dressed in traditional clothing, take out the *umqombothi* (traditional African beer in South Africa) hidden under the bed to enjoy. The prominent visual presentation of clothing and facial decorations is only a contextual setting for plotting the story. Just as in the prints in Zhuxianzhen, specific clothing only sets the local folklore in a narrative context. Understanding these traditional stories and local knowledge is essential to gain all the information.

Collecting an Atmosphere of Blessings for the Future

To Li, Bukani’s prints, and Zhuxianzhen New Year prints serve another important function: expressing hopes and wishes for a better future through symbolic meanings. Bukani’s prints use a lot of symbolic techniques to turn their hopes for a better life into concrete images. The setting of some problematic plots in her prints makes sense to Bukani but may seem to be incomprehensible to others. For instance, roads represent education, as shown in *Bird* (figure 3.27) and *Farm* (figure 3.29).



Figure 3.29: Nompumelelo Bukani, *Farm*, 1992. linocut on paper. It was published as an illustration in a Haiku poem book written by Marie Heese (2014: 64). Collection of Shudi Li.

I love roads because of education. You know before education, there was no road, grass and stones were on the way. Now, people are educated and working on the road. If you are on the road, you can go far away. I love roads. I am an artist, and I must love the roads because now I want to sell my works. I must go with the roads and go far away. (Bukani 2021)

Combined with her own experience of learning printmaking, roads represent opportunities for leaving their location and receive education. In her art, roads are ubiquitous in *Bird* on artworks related to farms. *Farm* (figure 3.30) appears as an illustration in a haiku poem written by Marie Heese, “Should you leave this land, your hollow heart will sound with the thump of a drum” (Heese 2014: 64). However, in Bukani’s (2021) account, the poem is not her story, and the image of her artwork was cropped in the book without her acknowledgement. The art primarily displays her memory on the farm in a humorous atmosphere on the road, with two lovers arguing next to a car without doors, ‘The car doesn’t have doors. They are not allowed to go back.’ (Bukani 2021)

A road that runs diagonally across the whole image metaphorically represents the possibility of change and moving forward with life. To Bukani, the road carries her childhood memories of going out and the hope for a better future, a way out of her current difficult reality. Li (2023d) links the metaphorical blessings in Bukani's art to the function of a constructed "happiness" atmosphere in Zhuxianzhen New Year prints. Similarly, Chinese farmers from the lower echelons of society used the prints as means of pursuing a better future to cope with the many hardships of life.

Conclusion: 'My name will be mine one day' ¹²⁴

Li's interest in Bukani's work resonated with his own deep-rooted connection to Chinese New Year Prints from his hometown, as well as his memories of carving with a knife during challenging times in his youth. Li's collecting journey represents a process of connecting the internal intangible ideas of *daowei* and *muwei* he experienced through carving in China to the external nostalgic reconstruction of a "home" in South Africa. He expressed a sense of belonging and finding a space in his "second hometown", South Africa (Li 2023). The direct transnational exchange of knowledge, albeit with problematic terms, underscores the importance of contextualised engagement. In the chapter, I attempted to decipher the implications, complexities, absurdities, as well as pitfalls inherent in configuring a Global South that aims to be beneficial for the "ordinaries" on the ground. Sensitivities and an understanding of the other "Other" are needed through further discursive contact that shifts the focus from Euro-centric to ordinary actors. Particularly, how South-to-South Orientalism manifests in intimate, ordinary encounters between individuals and institutions, highlighting the need to critically reflect on the racialised solidarity within the constructs of Blackness and hierarchy in Southern communities, particularly within the arts and cultural domain (Simbao 2023b&2024; Shi 2021).

Returning to the framework of Simbao's concept of "strategic Southernness," which interrogates the capacity of artists from Africa and other regions of the Global South to carve out a space for a spirit of solidarity—especially in light of the ontological appropriation of Third Worldism and the Bandung spirit by state-driven rhetoric in the arts domain (Simbao 2017; 2018; 2024). I advocate for an examination through the lens of "ordinariness" in relation to strategic Southernness, deeply influenced by one's situatedness and placedness (Simbao 2017;

¹²⁴ Bukani, E. (2023). 13 March. Makhanda, interview with Nompumelelo Bukani.

2016). Despite Li's relatively privileged economic and social position, stemming from an intellectual class background in comparison to Bukani, his trajectory from China to South Africa has consistently remained within the mid-range of the political economy in both contexts. This middle-ground status is also reflected in his collections, which predominantly focus on community-based artifacts and artworks situated on the periphery of the mainstream art system in South Africa. In intertwining these two lives, "strategic Southernness" reinstates the resonance of experiences tied to specific purposes and periods. Within this context, it is the shared ordinariness of lived experiences, either with or as the oppressed in their respective settings, that informs their approaches to art collecting and artmaking.

Focusing on the complexity of ordinary spaces spontaneously created outside the 'spectacle' of appearance (Ndebele 1986: 143) in high art collecting and celebrity collectors, the chapter uncovers the implications of the "manipulation" of the black community through liberal forms of modern capitalism, such as the art market, during the transitional stage of South Africa. This has impacted the ordinary lives of individuals like visual artist Nompumelelo Bukani. Interweaving Li's and Bukani's narratives and tracing their life trajectories within their respective contexts has offered a fresh perspective on the art histories of printmaking in South Africa and China, as seen through the lenses of two ordinary individuals. Through Li's lens of "propriety" (*he qingli* 合情理) felt by the "people" in the Chinese context, it uncovers how peasants rejected the state-led socialist appropriation of New Year Prints through detailed criticism of the prints. This insight provides a significant parallel to the context of South Africa, where Bukani's art is less appreciated by her immediate community. It explains the predicament of Bukani's situation, capturing 'the multidimensionality of lived experience' of "ordinaries" as proposed by Ndebele Njabulo (1986: 143), that is 'constantly in the process of a historical becoming' (Ntongela 2009: 25).

By connecting Li's experiences with prints in China, Shudi creates a visual space enriched with connections, albeit accompanied by problematic terms and nostalgic longings as an immigrant in a new context. This underscores the necessity to engage with such encounters, which may seem mundane but are essential facets of daily contact in the Global South, shedding light on a dimension of collecting that remains underexplored in the histories of collecting in South Africa. It calls for a more grounded approach to recover marginalised narratives against the politics of representation. It also calls for revision and intervention on the legacy of specific

ephemeral historical discourses during the transitional stage in appropriating art forms and ideas from the ground.

CONCLUSION

Departing from the conventional paradigm that situates art collecting predominantly within the structured frameworks of art institutions, markets and networks of elite collectors – a trajectory that has evolved from the foundational principles of museology within Western collecting traditions, this research project has adopted a transformative approach. Specifically, it foregrounds ordinary collectors within geographies and narratives often marginalised or overlooked in mainstream discourses.

My interpretation of ordinary or “ordinariness” is partially inspired by Njabulo Ndebele’s consistent unfolding of the conspicuous absence of critical literacy engagement since the 1980s, particularly the ‘deterministic politics of oppression’, where writers often confuse the superficial “spectacle” with the complex essence of the “ordinariness” of life (Ntongela 2009: 28). Ndebele (1986: 83) argues that ‘the visible symbols of South Africa’s overwhelmingly oppressive’ social structure seem to have spurred the development of a highly dramatic narrative. He demonstrates how an obsession with “spectacle” over “ordinariness” blurs the distinction between the language of exposition (a concern with seeing), focused on observation, and the language of creative writing (a fundamental engagement with ‘thinking’) which entails deeper reflection (Ntongela 2009: 28). Therefore, he calls for a ‘rediscovery of the ordinary’ through ‘literariness’, as a ‘form of intellectual analysis’ as, in effect, ‘a form of political practice’ (Ntongela 2009: 28).

The histories of collecting have largely been built around the ‘representation of spectacle’ of the North where “collecting” is a “sophisticated” and systematic manipulation. Intruding and exploiting subaltern cultures in the colonial time and a neoliberal framing of a ‘democratised global art’ scene (Simbao 2015: 261); Buddensieg and Weibel 2013) are absurd manipulations in sustaining a system of “knowledge” continuously gravitating around the North, underpinned by the invisible politics of an aesthetic regime (Rancière 2009; 2011). A preoccupation with the spectacular ‘biennialisation and global expansion in the global contemporary’ (Simbao 2015: 261) blurs the urgent need to ‘return’ and poise, and see with ‘thinking’ past the blind spot. Questioning the nature of collecting and investigating how it is practised by the less-known actors and framed in the ‘local narratives and counter-narratives’ of newly “discovered” art regions in the South (Simbao 2015: 261) has become meaningful and critical.

In this thesis, I have attempted to redirect scholarly attention towards ordinary Chinese collectors who immigrated from China to South Africa since the late 1980s. Central to this

investigation are fundamental inquiries: What can the stories of ordinary immigrant collectors in the context of China-Africa reveal about framing art collecting and the Chinese diaspora from below in the process of configuring the Global South? The thesis has uncovered their trajectories in China and attempted to examine the strategies and logics employed by three ordinary collectors as they navigate transitional identities and material encounters within the Chinese diasporic communities in South Africa. I employ the term “strategies” to denote the responses of these three collectors in navigating border-crossing experiences and identities within the Chinese diaspora. Importantly, it also alludes to an ‘alter-geopolitics of knowledge’ that exists outside the dominant, North-driven market–collecting–museum networks (Simbao 2017: 1).

In accordance with Gordon’s ‘geography of reason’ (2011: 95), this thesis positions collectors as knowledge producers, particularly when considering the disproportionate representation of Chinese collectors in South Africa compared to the dominant celebrity collectors in the South African art scene and the “global” art world. This framework challenges the North-driven market–collecting–museum knowledge production of collectors and collecting in South Africa, and further expounds upon each collector’s strategies and logics in separate chapters, employing both a ‘sideways’ biographical and an object-centred biographical approach.

Summary

Chapter one focuses on Shengkai Wu, who grew up within the ideological confines of high socialist New China and endured the loss of his comprehensive stamp collection during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, he has successfully restored his agency as a post-Mao collector in South Africa. For Wu, collecting serves as a profound mechanism to navigate and critically engage with the complexities of his positionality and national identity within the context of border-crossing experiences. Informed by familial legacies and his upbringing in a region renowned for its porcelain craftsmanship, Wu’s collecting endeavours primarily centre on stamps and ceramics. Positioned between South Africa and China, he grapples with the intricate task of growing a Chinese collection that encapsulates the unique attributes of both locales. Particularly challenging is the limited availability of exquisite Chinese artefacts compared to in the North. A testament to Wu’s discerning collecting strategy is his acquisition of the sole extant Shayuchung stamp cover known to exist on the African continent, housed in Johannesburg. His collection further encompasses Chinese semi-colonial artefacts and objects fraught with contentious identities and aesthetic nuances, including the “Shanghai Large Dragon” stamps, and

Tang blue-and-white ceramics. Engaging deeply with these liminal artefacts, I argue that Wu negotiates a complex diasporic terrain marked by banal nationalism (Billig 1995), persistently gravitating towards China. Concurrently, he transcends conventional nation-state frameworks, accentuating the convergent aesthetic qualities inherent in semi-colonial artefacts. Notably, he categorises specific items, such as the “Shanghai large dragon” stamp and German Chinese postcard, as micro-Chinese art objects by uncovering Chinese agencies in these semi-colonial objects. Furthermore, Wu’s border-crossing perspectives offer critical interventions into established discourses surrounding the origins and interpretations of blue-and-white ceramics within the South African context. It sheds light on the study of Chinese ceramic objects that have entered South Africa since the 1980s.

Chapter two looks at Yiyuan Yang’s collecting practices, primarily centring on specialised crafts and art objects crafted in New China, serving as both a homage to Beijing and a means of reconciling with life on the Loess Plateau. Adopting a humanistic approach, Yang focuses on lesser known yet ubiquitous artefacts that have largely been overlooked by art experts and dealers but maintain a widespread presence in private homes globally. Through his distinctive *minjian* approach, Yang elucidates an affective and grounded perspective, rooted in grassroots experiences. In re-evaluating the mythmaking surrounding Zheng He, particularly in relation to export brassware artefacts emulating those from Zheng He’s era across various historical epochs by *minjian* artisans, I argue that Yang has introduced a novel dimension: an object-oriented, non-narrative engagement that challenges prevailing official narratives within Sino–African discourse. His discovery in a flea market of a unique postcard detailing the repatriation history of Chinese indentured labourers, highlights an essential query: How might our comprehension of Chinese history be constrained by the omission of dispersed or forgotten *minjian* artefacts outside canonical frameworks? Such silent forms of resistance, manifesting as seals or proclamations, I argue have offered insights into the co-constituted process through which Chinese aesthetics were appropriated, mediated by interactions between Chinese labourers and the British colonial administration. Yang interprets these artefacts as quintessential expressions of Chinese artistry, due to their distinctive aesthetic elements such as calligraphy and seal-carving. Overall, Yang’s collecting practices are imbued with a profound sense of “returning home”, a sentiment recurrently echoed in the intricate seal carvings he meticulously crafts. In South Africa, Yang’s material domicile is constituted by an extensive collection comprising

hundreds of brassware items and other specialised art and crafts. Meanwhile, his intangible sense of belonging resonates deeply with the ethos of *minjian* craftsmanship.

Chapter three delves into the collecting practices of Shudi Li, whose approach resonates with the techniques and sensibilities of his oil paintings. Li's collecting ethos gravitates towards a particular aesthetic style that emphasises intangible qualities. The intricate interplay of lines and shades within his collecting evokes his 'graphic acts' during the Cultural Revolution, characterised by a striking contrast of black juxtaposed with white. Such aesthetic inclinations can be attributed to the influences of leftist artists like Tiehua Liu, whose imprints are distinctly observable in the New Year prints. Within a border-crossing context, he cultivated a sense of visual connections with South African visual artist Nompumelelo Bukani. The study broadens its scope by elucidating the political interventions inherent in the development of printmaking in both China and South Africa. Specifically, it critically examines how printmaking, as a visual rhetoric of art, has been shaped to represent and advocate for marginalised communities in both countries. Drawing upon the theorisation of atmosphere, the study illustrates how Li incorporates the simplistic aesthetic qualities of *daowe* and *muwei* into his interpretation of Bukani's art. I posit that the visual connection inherent in printmaking fosters a form of spontaneous encounter and knowing, representing a non-coercive form of cultural exchange and knowledge creation from below. Through fleshing out two ordinary lives in the South, it strategically unveils the predicament faced by ordinary Black people due to hegemonic dominance and manipulation. Additionally, the chapter explores the intricate and complex nature of perceiving the other "Other," advocating for further deeply contextualized discursive reflection grounded in the shared experiences of anti-colonial history in South Africa. It challenges and counteracts the 'epistemology of blindness' (Santos 2001) entrenched within canonical narratives, thereby foregrounding the overlooked agencies and mutual constitutions within Southern perspectives.

Collecting in Nostalgia as Means of Homecoming

The study uncovers the profound implications of the three collectors' experiences in China shaped their collecting practices in South Africa. Their endeavours in collecting reflect a deep-seated desire to forge connections with the past, thereby contributing to a sense of extended self and fostering a tangible sense of historical continuity within the material culture of South Africa (Belk 1991b). Their engagement with "red aesthetics" albeit varied, underscores the integral role of socialist aesthetic constructs in disseminating communist ideology, with even Li's intangible

collection of *daowei* and *muwei* serving as pivotal components. While discerning whether their proclivity toward collecting “red aesthetic” objects is deliberate remains elusive, it is evident that socialist collective memories have become deeply embedded in their identities, shaping their pursuit of a renewed self in South Africa.

Ndebele’s exploration of the “ordinariness” inherent in “ordinaries” is further complicated by their positioning within South Africa’s Chinese diaspora studies. They emerge as emblematic representatives of the “Other” ordinaries, occupying a liminal space within contemporary South Africa. Having experienced profound socialist displacement in the South, the collectors grapple with the pervasive ‘distortion of complex social and historical relations’ (Ntongela 2009: 26), where generic material forms encroach upon every facet of life, including cultural ownership and being deprived of individual collections. These experiences have engendered a capacity to perceive with affective eyes, fostering nuanced interpretations of their surroundings.

However, the very experience of traumatic displacement also constrains the collectors’ ability to engage empathetically with local communities from diverse cultural backgrounds. The allure of romanticism (Muensterberger 1994) exerts a powerful pull, prompting a nostalgic reconstruction of a bygone era, tethered to an imagined China that exists solely in memory. Their modes of interaction with encountered objects evoke echoes of both restorative and reflective nostalgia (Boym 2001: 41), wherein restorative nostalgia endeavours to reconstruct past monuments, while reflective nostalgia luxuriates in ‘the patina of time and history’. These collections, meticulously curated and sanctified as companions in South Africa, serve as symbolic “monuments” of a fragmented past, through decades of sincere engagement.

Wu’s meticulous study of the “Tang blue-and-white” dish stands as a testament to the painstaking restoration of origins by a border-crossing collector, while Yang’s three decades of brassware collecting and Li’s ongoing endeavours in acts of carving epitomise a longing for a homecoming to a past where they once felt a sense of belonging. These fragmented memories, encountered amidst the less-known artefacts, serve as triggers for introspection and symbolise their sense of “reflective nostalgia” within the Chinese diasporic landscape. Their evolving openness to embracing “controversial objects” of mixed aesthetics, or the ordinary Others transcends national frameworks, epitomising a longing intertwined with critical reflection – a synthesis of ‘affective memories’ (Boym 2001: 50). This complex interplay of longing and

critical inquiry ultimately shapes a self that, while distant and resistant to the gravitational pull of China or the past, finds solace in South Africa, albeit as a second home.

Collecting as Means to “Migrate” Towards an Alternative Politics of Hope

This thesis allows art collecting to be a socially engaged activity outside conventional market–collecting–museum networks, transformed by individual actors in a specific community on the ground. I contend that collecting serves as a culturally embedded and geographically specific form of representational politics. By focusing on these grassroots collectors, a plethora of previously overlooked, precarious, “kitsch”, mundane, “timid”, fragmented and obscured materials, including unique archival forms, emerge, resonating with Michel Foucault’s seminal work, *“The Order of Things”* (1966). Their significance lies in their ability to disrupt existing systems of classification and challenge dominant modes of knowledge production.

Within this emergent framework, “timid” and “precarious” artefacts such as export brassware, “Shanghai large dragon” stamps, Rand postcards and concepts like *daowei* and *muwei* are elevated by individual collectors as emblematic of Chinese art. This perspective situates Chinese art as a nexus of localised and obscured relations within the China–Africa dynamic. Notably, Chinese aesthetics undergo a transformative reconfiguration by these grassroots actors in South Africa, emerging as symbolic representations of the “New China” and serving as a “remedy” to reconcile with the Cultural Revolution era or ease nostalgia in a diaspora context.

Unearthing the agencies of marginalised *minjian* artisans embedded within Chinese semi-colonial artefacts illuminates a possibility for decolonisation by unveiling invisibilities inherent in Chinese aesthetics. Significantly, these artefacts, imbued with distinct Chinese aesthetics, facilitate a space for diasporic banal nationalism (Billig 1995), compelling border-crossing collectors to continually gravitate toward China. This gravitational pull is further facilitated by the long-standing presence of exported artefacts from the colonial era in South Africa and the limited curatorial engagements in public spaces catering to local Chinese communities. Consequently, this reinforces a nationalist collecting ethos, centralising China in the collectors’ pursuits.

In a post-colonial context, collecting represents a novel construction of material existence, transforming colonial Chinese artefacts into revered Chinese heritage and artistic objects within their collecting paradigms. Through the acts of border-crossing, collecting and gravitating toward China, these immigrant collectors reinvigorate suppressed agencies from the Cultural

Revolution era, actualised through the fluid mobility between China and South Africa. Anthropologist Chiara Brambilla (2021: 11) questions the “certainty and security” provided by the conventional modern-state-centric view of borders, which relies on rigid and enduring binary frameworks. Instead, she considers the border as a ‘process’ and calls for approaches that contemplate the ‘nature of politics and social order’ of the border as foreseeing ‘a hope’ that requires collective efforts (Brambilla 2021: 11). These collectors have strategically mobilised collecting as means to ‘migrate towards an alternative politics of hope’ (Brambilla 2021: 11). The study has provided a novel trajectory within material culture studies, illuminating the experiences of new Chinese immigrants within the South African Chinese diaspora.

Overall, by foregrounding these collectors, especially within geographies and narratives often marginalised or overlooked in mainstream discourse, I have demonstrated the implications and potentials of such a departure from Euro-centric perspectives on collecting practices. Through a thick description, small stories (Mwaba 2019) or *petit récits* (Lyotard 1984) in the South, the thesis has contributed to representing the under-represented ‘marginal and obscured’ individuals (Peltonen 2014) in the South and delineating their overlooked agency in the Chinese communities, as well as to the landscape of arts and culture in South Africa within the broad China–Africa discourse.

The collectors’ practices offer fine-textured reflection and complexity against the often-flattened China–Africa discourse that is overwhelmed by ‘big men voices’ from the top (Ruth 2019), and by predominantly macroscopic narratives of economy, politics and policy. This nuanced approach revitalises the portrayal of Chinese immigrants in Africa, transcending conventional depictions of them as low-skilled workers, peasants, merchants, engineers, and government officials found in academic and popular literature. When committing our attention to these small actors, “South” becomes a concept of spontaneous sparks of a ‘third space’, encompassing inconsistently cognisant repercussion of ‘obscured conditions’ (Lowe 2015: 2). These conditions tied to the small actors have hitherto been silent but presented in the evanescent layers of beings, spontaneous encounters and absurd entanglements in tiny spaces, in part because of the scarcity of sources reflecting their experiences.

Theoretical Contribution

Drawing from observations of the small narratives of three Chinese immigrant collectors situated within the middle-lower political economy in South Africa, this study employs ordinariness as an

analytical framework to constitute context-specific configurations of art collecting and Chinese diaspora from below. Ordinarity here is understood as an ontological state of being, an affective experience of the ordinary, a positionality relative to individual and structural power dynamics, and a form of self-identification and self-justification in response to diasporic identity and the uneven geographies of art collecting and the global circulation of material culture.

I argue that a contextualised understanding of ordinarity substantiates and complicates current discourse on a loosely defined “below” or “bottom-up” approach, revealing it to be varied, nuanced, situated, and temporal. This approach reflects a flexible, inclusive, and critical conceptualisation of the Global South in relation to class, transnational mobility, race and material culture. When art collecting in the Global South is framed through the lens of ordinarity within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa, community art and mass-produced export wares emerge as primary vehicles through which marginalised groups and commonplace artifacts, often overlooked by history, gain visibility. This process also diversifies the boundaries between ideas and roles within and beyond the epistemology of collecting and being collected in the Global South, challenging the interconnected and Eurocentric elitist art market-museum-academia system.

Within the context of China-Africa cultural discourse, the issue of race in relation to art collecting reveals three types of Orientalism within the Global South. First, the colonial archives of postcards, ceramics, and the legacy of Chinese export wares reinscribe Orientalist material culture within the discourse of collecting, where the Chinese were historically Othered and collected. Second, the China-centric focus of ordinary immigrant Chinese collectors not only connects to a diasporic identity characterised by a “home bias” in collecting but also suggests an often ‘unconscious adoption of Western frames,’ which obscures the broader structure of persistent European dominance in South Africa’s art dealership and the larger global art-museum-academia system (Huynh and Park 2018: 158; Alahmed 2020). The emergence of these new, ordinary Chinese immigrant collectors signals a shift in the historical positioning of the Chinese as the Other within South Africa’s collecting culture. However, this shift remains contested within the discourse of “internalised Orientalism,” particularly when their collections predominantly focus on Chinese artifacts. This contested ordinarity raises further questions for future research, particularly regarding whether mega art collectors in Chinese diaspora, with their broader range of collections beyond a China-centric focus, exhibit a lesser degree of or

independence from internalised Orientalism. Lastly, the intertwining of the lives of an ordinary immigrant Chinese collector and a South African printmaking artist exemplifies how South-to-South Orientalism emerges through intimate, everyday interactions. This phenomenon highlights the need to critically explore the racialised solidarity that informs constructs of Blackness and hierarchy within Southern communities, especially in the cultural context of China-Africa relations (Simbao 2023b&2024; Shi 2021). In framing the Chinese diaspora in the Global South through the lens of ordinariness, the multifaceted meanings of imagined “Chineseness” and the concept of multiple “Chinas” including but limited to aesthetics of “New China” and “Imperial Qing,” become evident through the practice of collecting ordinary objects. This practice allows individuals to embrace the self-assigned role of protectors of Chinese culture and heritage, while simultaneously shaping their diasporic identity. Their methods of collecting and relating to ordinary objects illuminate an alternative realm of cultural preservation in the Global South, one that exists beyond institutional and elite discourse. However, this ordinariness also reveals the absence of intergenerational transmission and repatriation of significant cultural artifacts within the Chinese diaspora in South Africa, contrasting sharply with the practices of Chinese diasporic collectors in the Global North (Yeh 2011: 176-184). There, successive generations of Chinese diasporic collectors have expanded their collections across continents, often repatriating significant Chinese artifacts to museums in China (Chan 2021; Wear 2001; Wang 2007 and Pierson 2017).

A critical perspective on migration, trauma, and collecting emerges when exploring the complex emotions and fears of loss associated with material scarcity and trauma in the lives of ordinary Chinese immigrants who arrived in South Africa from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. These individuals are less concerned with the social and cultural capital that art collecting might confer. Instead, they focus on the deeply personal connections that their collections facilitate in constructing a diasporic identity in South Africa. This process simultaneously draws from the past, embodying the “iterational” or habitual nature of collecting, while also looking forward, engaging a ‘projective capacity to envision alternative possibilities’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962). Their agency mobilises multiple “solidarity circles” of gravitational forces, both horizontally and vertically, in relation to patterns of social relations, beliefs, and behaviours shaped by memory, nostalgia, class, and networks (Welzel 2017). These dynamics play a crucial role in configuring notions of home, nationalism, and Chineseness. The ordinary positionality of

these collectors has fostered small clusters of ontological and epistemological entities that challenge the dominance of elitist and Eurocentric knowledge production. This approach redefines art histories and migration in the Global South as complex and dynamic temporal processes. By dissecting the different layers of manoeuvrability, creativity, and reflective decision-making, these entities provide a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese diaspora and the practice of art collecting in the Global South.

This study holds a unique focus both in its theme and its style of writing. No scholarly writings have specifically explored the experiences of Chinese collectors living in the Chinese diaspora in South Africa, nor have there been scholarly biographical studies engaged with the new Chinese immigrants in South Africa, who constitute the largest group within the Chinese communities. Due to this limited coverage, much more research needs to be conducted in the future. This thesis serves as a preliminary exploration, calling for further investigation from various perspectives by other scholars in the field.

I approach the study from the perspective of these new migrant collectors, partly influenced by my own experience as a new immigrant in South Africa. However, this perspective poses limitations in framing collecting within the varied Chinese communities. In a brief conversation with a well-known South African-born Chinese collector, he questioned my motivation for studying collecting as a racialised activity, as he perceives himself as simply a South African collector. These questions are intriguing and warrant further investigation to gain a deeper understanding of what collecting means to different Chinese communities in South Africa.

As we draw the curtains on this journey, having traversed the ordinary lives of three border-crossing collectors in this project, I would like to conclude with a visionary image: Picture yourself pausing to observe a minuscule droplet of water delicately descending onto the river's surface. Waves commence, radiating outward against boundaries in all directions. Successive waves unfold, gradually forming on the water's expanse. These unassuming collectors represent diminutive centres, each contributing in its own subtle manner to the historical alterations unfolding. They are the modest agents of on the ground, quietly shaping the river's narrative with each ripple.

GLOSSARY

<i>baimiao/bai miao</i> :	line drawing in traditional ink and brush style
banal nationalism:	a term coined by English academic Michael Billig in his 1995 book of the same name to refer to everyday representations of nationality, designed to create feelings of national identity; generally used critically
celadon:	a greenish glaze used especially on Chinese ceramics; ceramics glazed in this manner
chinoiserie:	a decorative style used in Western art, furniture and design based on Chinese motifs and techniques
fahfee:	an illegal gambling game, played chiefly in South Africa, where bets are placed on numbers. Believed to have originated within the Chinese community.
<i>Han Li/hàn lì</i> :	the official script popular in the Han Dynasty
<i>lianhuanhua</i> :	a graphic novel or comic book
meander (<i>huiwen</i>):	an ornamental pattern of winding or interlocking lines (OED)
minjian:	popular or “folk”
New Year prints:	colourful woodblock prints produced as decorations for celebrations during the Chinese New Year
<i>nian wei</i> :	the atmosphere of the year
philately:	the study and collection of postage stamps and other related materials, such as postal history and postal stationery.
saggar:	a protective fireclay box enclosing ceramic ware while it is being fired (OED)
seal:	a device engraved or incised with a specific design, used to impress a stamp on e.g. documents, in lieu of a signature
sent-down youth:	educated young people who were sent to labour in the rural areas during the Cultural Revolution
Shousan stone:	one of the most popular stones used in Chinese craft-carving, mined in Shoushan village in northern Fujian

[The] Unequal
treaty system:

The agreements reached between the Western powers and China following the Opium Wars came to be known as the “unequal treaties” because in practice they gave foreigners privileged status and extracted concessions from the Chinese. (US State Department: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/china-2>)

VOC

Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie – the Dutch East India Company, the powerful trading enterprise that largely dominated the trade between the West and Asia during the 17th and 18th centuries. Under Jan van Riebeeck it established a resupply post at the Cape in 1652.

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