

“The Bag is My Home”

Recycling “China Bags” in Contemporary African Art

Ying Cheng

Frequently used as mobile storage containers or baggage by migrants and traders moving across borders, the mesh bag made of red, blue, and white polypropylene fibers has become a prominent element of African visual culture. This light, strong, and affordable woven bag, often referred to as “China bag” or “Chinese tote,”¹ features prominently in recent artistic practices by African artists such as Nobukho Nqaba, Dan Halter, and Gerald Machona. In this essay I examine how these artistic interventions using photography, installation, video, and performance, circulating in galleries, museums, and the streets, contribute to sociological discussions about the ways in which emerging trajectories, relationships, and identities are perceived and debated in the context of the global South. I do not view the South here as a settled geopolitical order, but understand it as a concept about mobilities, transitions, and shifting relations.² More specifically, I suggest that transformation of China bags from everyday objects into art works with sociopolitical agency embodies a sense of transience and transgression that alludes to understandings of the South as a passage without settled destinations.

In these artistic practices that highlight symbolic subtexts in everyday life, the bag is much more than a container for traveling, as it plays a part in processes of individual expression, identity formation, and cultural negotiation. It embodies the ever-present element of movement, which remains an irreducible aspect of life on the African continent. Moreover, as the common name—“China bag”—implies, among the perplexed modes of migration and movement revealed in these artistic projects, one significant trajectory is the continually increasing presence of China on the continent over the past few decades. Engaging with the multiplicity of migration experiences and emerging theorizations on travel and movement, I suggest that the circulation and production of these artistic works around the bag not only

provide some nuanced insights into transnational histories and realities of everyday African lives, but also open up new possibilities to rethink familiar and authorized paradigms of mobility in the global South.

The China bag, an “ordinary object” on-the-move, is a fruitful trope to engage with the multiple meanings of mobilities in everyday living spaces in Africa. Recent academic interest in mobility studies, referred to as the “mobility turn” or the “new mobilities paradigm” (Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2006; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006), has shown that not only where we live, but also *how we move*, influences our subjectivities, narratives, and ideologies. Cresswell (2006: 1–2) argues that mobility is not only everywhere in the modern world, but also more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before: “It plays a central role in discussions of the body and society. It courses through contemporary theorizations of the city.” In our mobile era, dwelling is thought to “involve complex relationships between belongingness and traveling ... People can indeed be said to dwell in various mobilities” (Urry 2000: 157). Many people, whether they are physically on the move or not, find themselves “living their daily lives at the increasingly complicated intersection between home and mobility” (Molz 2008). Aside from the acknowledged importance of movement in the modern world (Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2008: 3), the dynamic of mobility in the context of the global South remains a neglected topic. Whereas mobility is often considered as a basic principle of modernity (Cresswell 2006: 15) or a prominent feature of globalization in the Western world, the movements of people in the global South are often characterized as constrained (Smith and Katz 1993; Pfaff 2010), passive, and too often associated with traumatic experiences. Contrary to the impression frequently produced by international mainstream media, most global migration is intraregional, occurring within the countries of the former Soviet Union, South Asia, and West Africa (World Bank 2011). Despite the significance of South-South migration and its implications on transnational movement, the debate on mobility has tended to focus primarily on movements in the “developed” world, or from “developing” to “developed” world.

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1 Migrant workers going home during the Spring Festival in 2008, Nanjing Train Station.
Photo: Zhang Yun, CNS

2 15 rand “China Bag,” New Chinese Wholesale Market, Johannesburg.
Photo: Cheng Ying.

Here I will challenge this familiar paradigm of mobility and demonstrate that mobility, circulation, and movement have always been, and remain, part of historical and contemporary experiences in the global South. Drawing on South African artist Nobukho Nqaba’s metaphor “the bag as my home,” I explore the complexity of experiences of mobility on and beyond the African continent. What are the increasingly complicated routes and patterns of movement on and beyond the African continent? How do people negotiate belonging/belongings through various intersecting mobilities of cultures, images and objects? And how does this experience of “dwelling-in-movement” inform our understanding of the global South as a mobile space of continuous movements and transitions?

These questions in turn raise others. How does this everyday object and its naming patterns illuminate the daily spaces and various trajectories in which they circulate? How do young African artists recollect and transform the quotidian object into art projects to comment on the political and material struggles of African migrants across the continent, amongst other things. Some artists use China bags to reflect new valences and meanings in current global socioeconomic shifts and how they are inextricably knitted into intensifying discourses of China-Africa engagement.³ Addressing these questions provides a more nuanced reflection on the multiple trajectories of circulation and mobility in and beyond Africa, including the circulation of artistic works as commodities. Situating this against the backdrop of recent debates on migration across and beyond the continent, we can see how the study of everyday objects and their spatial trajectories in Africa might complicate our understanding of the paradigms of migration and mobility in a wider, global context.

MOBILITY, MATERIAL CULTURE, AND THE AGENCY OF THINGS

To explore the politics of mobility and immobility in the context of the global South, we must trace not only the movements of humans but also the circulation of material objects. Recent scholarship concerning the relationship between people and things probes the social contexts of objects and commodities. “What is newly compelling about this sociological analogy,”

writes Malewitz (2014: 2), “is the notion that objects, like people, are subject to the contingencies of a continuing history, rather than to the determinist logic of origin.” Thing theorists (Brown 2001; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Hoskins 1998; Appadurai 1986) contend that material culture is similarly constructed and reconstructed by shifting social meanings and the use-value that is conferred on objects. My approach highlights the circulation of symbolic cultural objects through contexts—what Thomas





3 Nobukho Nqaba
Umaskhenkethe likhaya lam (2012)
 Archival ink on hahnemuhle paper;
 29 cm x 21 cm
 Photo: courtesy of Nobukho Nqaba
 and Art Meets

(1991) calls “recontextualization”—and how this illuminates the complex connections and shifting boundaries between different places on and beyond the African continent. As suggested by Appadurai (1986: 5): “It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things ... it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.” In this respect, an examination of the object-on-the-move—the China bag—can help us understand the spatial and cultural practices in which the object is embedded, especially everyday trajectories of life and death of people on the continent.

Objects pass through many transformations, which is why Appadurai called for a study of the “life histories” of things, and it is worth noticing that the everyday movement of things is not only material but also “artistic and aesthetic” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008: 8–9). There is a potential productivity of art works to trace in understanding mobility. In *Art and Agency* (1998), Alfred Gell draws our attention to the agency of objects (including art objects) as “a system of social action.” He suggests that the object not only assumes a number of different identities as imported wealth or commodity but may also “interact” with people who gaze upon it, use it, and possess it. Gell asserts that art is produced in order to influence the thoughts and actions of others—artists produce art works as a way of distributing elements of their own personhood or efficacy in the form of things, and these objects have agency because they produce effects and cause

viewers to respond with emotions and feelings. In this respect, he shows us a somewhat different approach to the paths of objects—while Appadurai’s approach emphasizes the ways in which things are commodified and lose personality, Gell looks at the processes by which objects are invested with personality and may have an impact. The separate directions these interpretations take may offer us a more comprehensive way of approaching and understanding the circulation of objects, from everyday materials to artistic works.

Tracing the social life or the biography of objects, including how the objects are transformed into artistic works, provides a unique way to understand the shifting spatial structures and complicated power relations of the specific context in which the objects circulate. Building on the ideas of Appadurai (1986), Gell (1998), and Urry (2000, 2007), I would argue that an examination of the circulation of objects, including how quotidian objects are transformed into artistic works with collective value and critical agency, provides further insights into the complicated paradigms of mobility, the rapidly shifting social relations, and the politics of dislocated identities in contemporary Africa, where social and cultural dynamics “are so unruly, unpredictable, surprising, confounding and yet, pregnant with possibility, invoking a rogue sensibility” (Pieterse 2013: 12).

NAMING THE BAG

The naming patterns of these bags are invariably associated with themes and trajectories of migration and reflect how people, things, and ideas move across borders. These bags go by many names in various parts of the world: “Bangladeshi bag” in the UK, “Turkish bag” or “Turkan Coffin” in Germany, “Mexican bag” in the US, “Samsonite” in the Caribbean, and so on. To some extent, they have become global symbols of migration, not only across borders but within countries too. Geocultural differentiation in the naming of the bag addresses the spatial arrangement of current economic and social processes and illustrates the complicated networks of movement and migration globally.

It is worth noting that in China, where they are manufactured, the bags are not called “China bags.” Even so, they are associated with the movement of a certain group of people. Some people call them “*mingong bao*” (民工包, meaning “migrant workers’ bag”). The bag is named after the marginal migrant class because it is often used by migrant workers who travel between rural and urban areas especially during important traditional festivals when families gather together. These rural-urban migrant workers constitute a significant portion of China’s labor force. According to *China Labour Bulletin*,⁴ there are an estimated 277 million rural migrant workers in China, making up more than one third of the entire

working population. During the annual Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) when millions of migrant workers travel back home to the rural areas, these bags are commonly seen around train and bus stations across the country (Fig. 1.)

In another instance of a naming pattern that associates the bag with a particular group of people, the bag is referred to as a “Ghana Must Go” bag in Nigeria. The name is associated with the expulsion of Ghanaians by the Nigerian government in the 1980s (Brydon 1985; Aluko 1985; Arthur 1991). In the 1970s, Ghana experienced severe economic decline when Nigeria was in the midst of an oil boom. Many citizens of surrounding West African countries, especially Ghanaians, flocked into Nigeria. But when the Nigerian economy hit a downturn due to low oil prices in the early 1980s, jobs became scarce. In January 1983, the Federal Government issued an expulsion order to Ghanaians and other African migrants, forcing them to return to their home countries. It is estimated that more than one million Ghanaian people packed what they could into large bags and were forced out of Nigeria. Because many Ghanaians used these mesh bags to transport their belongings, Nigerians named them “Ghana Must Go.” Although the term arose during a political event more than thirty years ago, nowadays, it is still in use and is constantly quoted in social and cultural discourse in West Africa. For instance, both Ghanaian-British writer Taiye Selasi’s first novel, published in 2013,⁵ and Nigerian filmmaker Frank Rajah Arase’s Nollywood comedy that premiered in 2016⁶ are named *Ghana Must Go* after these plastic bags, and deal with stories of Ghanaian-Nigerian families and immigrants.

In South Africa, the bags are commonly known as “China bags” (Fig. 2), “Zimbabwe bags,” and other names based on who uses them or where they come from. For instance, “Mashangani bag” is related to the Shangani population in the eastern portion of Limpopo Province. “*Khonza ekhaya*,” a Zulu term for the bag, means “goodbye home.” These naming patterns invariably imply different trajectories of human movement and encounter.

Mobility is understood by geographers as an important everyday life practice that produces meaning and culture, an essential aspect of modern society. However, the naming pattern of these bags reminds us that mobilities and immobilities occur dialectically. Mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural, and institutional moorings that configure and enable them. According to Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006: 3):

There is no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility, yet there is a growing capacity for more flexible and dynamic scalar shifting, polymorphism of spatial forms and



overlapping regulatory regimes. We can refer to these as affording different degrees of “motility” with mobility now being a crucial dimension of unequal power relations.

New technologies and platforms that enhance the mobility of some people also heighten the immobility of others; therefore, it is important to note that differential mobility empowerments reflect, and even reinforce, structures and hierarchies of power and position. The naming pattern of the “China bag” implies a relational nature of different spaces between “here” and “there” and, to a large degree, between the South and the North.

As a symbol of migration, voluntary or involuntary, long-distance or local, the bag raises new questions about mobility, often associated with modernity and progress. It offers a conceptualization of mobility in the global South that is aptly contradictory and provisional. The politics of an increasing fluidity are not always progressive or emancipatory. Instead, no matter whether in China, West Africa, or Southern Africa, the naming of the bag regularly implies a sense of alienation and strangeness. Varying from one place to another, it often points to the dichotomy of “here” and “there”—wanting to be here but coming from elsewhere. The mobile, everyday nature of these bags, which represent the (im)mobility of entire communities of people on-the-move, makes the artistic works that use them immediately accessible and conceptually rich.



5 Nobukho Nqaba
Umashkenkethe likhaya lam (2012)
 Archival ink on hahnemuhle paper;
 29 cm x 21 cm
 Photo: courtesy of Nobukho Nqaba
 and Art Meets

MAPPING A CONTINENT-ON-THE-MOVE: THE RECYCLING OF CHINA BAGS IN ART WORKS

As a common container often carried by migrating people, the mesh bag is a provocative symbol that captures something of the spectacle of urban life and the sometimes-inexplicable unsettling experience of everyday life in Africa. The woven bag is the central visual symbol in several recent artistic projects, such as Nobukho Nqaba's *Umashkenkethe Likhaya Lam* (2012), Dotun Makun's *Ghana-must-go* portraits (2012), Dan Halter's *Space Invader* (2010, 2015), and others.

Nobukho Nqaba's title, *Umashkenkethe Likhaya Lam* (2012), can be literally translated as "the bag is my home." *Unomgcana* or *umashkenkethe* is the isiXhosa word for the plastic mesh bag. *Unomgcana* means "the one with lines" and *umashkenkethe* means "the traveler." Also known as "the China bag project," this series of self-portraits explores the artist's personal journeys living and moving in South Africa.

Nqaba was born in Butterworth, Eastern Cape, in 1992 and later moved to Grabouw (1998) where she attended a farm school for three years. She graduated from Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town in 2012 and is currently based in Cape Town. The project is a materialization of the artist's memories of growing up with the bag and a reflection on her memories of migration within South Africa. For Nqaba, this mundane object offers a constant reminder of the past and of a childhood spent on the road locked in the daily struggle for a better future:

I have experienced many of the challenges of a migrant and it took me a long time to adjust to life in the places that I have moved to. I grew up surrounded by *unomgcana*. I remember when my mother (who worked in Grabouw) would visit our family in the Eastern Cape during the off-season, she would bring *umphako* (treats for

the family), which often included a half-cooked chicken stuffed with raw onions, lots and lots of apples, as well as a few items of clothing. During school holidays I would travel to Grabouw and my father would pack my belongings in *unomgcana*. The bag was an everyday object used by many people traveling from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town. At the Langa bus terminal massive *nomgcanas* would be packed, with peoples' names written onto them to avoid them being lost or mistaken.⁷

Nqaba's work involves the reconstruction, in studio, of an interior lined entirely with these China bags among which she acts out her life in a new context emblazoned with the instantly recognizable crisscross pattern. Since she has often had to pack away all she owns in such a bag, she has grown to see it as a kind of home. In the series of self-portraits (Figs. 3–5), viewers see shoes, pillows, quilts, books, and aprons with the red, blue, and white lines. These objects made from China bags construct a space of "fluid" home which challenges the common conceptions of home as a more stable space. The bag represents the prevalent feelings provoked by migration and movement in South Africa; as Nqaba puts it, "an issue that shakes up communities, creates fear, frustration and discomfort to both the migrant and the people of the places they move to."⁸

While Nqaba's works explore the migration of people inside South Africa, artist Dan Halter uses the bags as a metaphor of the living experiences of Zimbabweans who have fled to South Africa. The artist names his works after the 1980s arcade game *Space Invaders*. By appropriating the iconic images of alien combatants designed by Tomohiro Nishikado (Fig. 6), the artist links the stuffed "Zimbabwean bags" with the hostility African migrants are facing in South Africa. This project exemplifies the double connotation of the word "alien." According to Dodd and Kurgan (2013), in our world of ongoing and ubiquitous border zone contestations, this term has come to be used as a glib euphemism to describe immigrants and has been reinvested with a charged sense of radical otherness. The bags are also featured in short video clips shot at places that could be considered "ports of entry": for instance, a major taxi rank in Johannesburg (Fig. 7), where refugees can be identified by the bulk of their baggage—"human beings are viewed as little more than 'space invaders'" (Dodd and Kurgan 2013: 348). This choice of site combined with the specific arrangement of the bags not only evokes the intensifying xenophobic mood in certain areas of South Africa, but also familiar patterns of migration in Southern Africa.

In the *Ghana Must Go* portraits. (Fig. 8) by Nigerian artist



6 Dan Halter
Space Invaders (2008)
 Approx. 300 stuffed plastic-weave bags, colored vinyl; dimensions variable
 Photo: courtesy Dan Halter

Dotun Makun, the China bag symbolizes another route of mobility on the continent—the migration between West Africa and South Africa. Makun created this series while he was living and studying in South Africa. He painted subjects from various African countries living in Grahamstown in a series “ostensibly portraying Nigerians” (Simbao 2012b). In these paintings, the artist uses the blue and white weave of the “Ghana must go” bags as the background, reminding viewers of the bags’ use by Ghanaian refugees expelled from Nigeria in 1983. These portraits are a critique of the ignorance underlying many South Africans’ attitudes towards those from other parts of Africa: “Nigerian” becomes a generic word for foreign, and “Nigerian” facial features tend to be seen as markers of foreignness.⁹

Makun’s work also illustrates how immediate spatial context might influence viewers’ interpretation of art works. As part of Makun’s *ALIEN-Nation* exhibition in 2011,¹⁰ the *Ghana Must Go*

portraits and the repeated pattern of the bag in these portraits further complicate the meaning of the portraits: In addition to the historical event in the 1980s, it also calls to mind the contemporary social environment in South Africa in which Nigerians are subject to diverse forms of misunderstanding and vilification.

These three artists explore the meanings of “alien” and “strangeness” embedded in the naming patterns of the bag as a representation of “nonlocal identities” in contemporary South African identity politics. Halter’s works deal with “notions of a dislocated national identity and the dark humour of present realities in Southern Africa, largely a backlash to a history of oppression that continues today.”¹¹

These artistic works produced around the image of China bag offer some deep insights into at the continuing and changing practice of migration by giving voice to the life and death of ordinary Africans—an artist who lives in Cape Town but comes



7 Dan Halter
Space Invaders, Johannesburg Taxi Rank—Port of Entry (2009)
 Photo: courtesy Dan Halter



8 Dotun Makun
Ghana-must-go Portraits (2012)
 Oil on canvas, 110 cm x 100cm
 Photo: courtesy Dotun Makun

from the Eastern Cape, a Zimbabwean who has just arrived in Johannesburg, or a Nigerian who works in Grahamstown with his family. For them, the bag has become a constant reminder of feelings of displacement and memories of lost home. Nqaba says in the *Umaskhenkethe Likhaya Lam* exhibition catalogue:

I have a love-hate relationship with the bag because for me it is a symbol of struggle ... and at the same time it reminds me of where I came from, giving me more drive to succeed in life. *Unomgcana* has always been my companion, throughout my childhood life and journeys. It has been my comfort and my home.¹²

In this sense, the bag provides a metaphor of the ambivalent nature of mobilities on the continent—on one hand, the traumatic experiences of migrant displacement under difficult social conditions; on the other, the ability to leave, to move and inhabit different spaces and cultures. It is worth mentioning that these works reject the assumptions that reduce the movements in Africa as nothing but traumatic and tortuous memories. For instance, in Nqaba's works, the bag has been transformed into a material of empowerment and agency. For Nqaba, the bag is a reminder of her mother, a key figure in her life and the mainstay of the family. In this series, it also means the construction of a mobile home space: Audiences see the artist walking, sleeping, reading, and cooking with objects made from the mesh bags, confronting and challenging the value of the material. In this way, the object takes on its own agency through interacting with the viewers (Gell 1998v). The transformation of the mesh bag into a metaphor of a fluid home represents a status of transience that alludes to this ongoing process in Africa that denies a settled destination. It confirms Mbembe's positioning of Africa as a philosophical locus of passage and circulation (2010: 224). As Mbembe asserts, "It was not at all true as Hegel, and those who rely on him, intimated that Africa was a closed continent—not at all. It was always a continent that was on the move" (in Blaser 2013).

**THE AGENCY OF "FONG KONG":
 MATERIALIZING CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONS**

I would now like to pay special attention to how African artists dwell on the materiality of China bags to comment on current networks of social relations, especially the growing presence and influence of China in African countries. China is a major player that has an increasingly large market share in Africa's trading arenas.¹³ China's entry into Africa as investor and importer-exporter is a disputed topic across and beyond the continent. Unlike many other existing dialogues that focus on the economic and political impact of the China-Africa relationship, the artistic projects I am about to discuss deal with the sociological and cultural consequences of increased connections and exchanges between China and Africa.

The China bag featured prominently in an exhibition at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown called "Making Way: Contemporary Art from South Africa and China" (2012),¹⁴ which sought ways of opening up new conversations about cultural diversity at a time of intense movement and change in the global South. According to curator Ruth Simbao (2012a: 3), the phrase "making way" invokes the Chinese concept *kailu* (开路, meaning "opening roads" or "making ways") and the isiXhosa phrase *uku-vul'indlela*—"opening up the road"—by way of bringing together a range of responses to migration, travel, and movement. Besides interpreting the China bag as an important visual symbol on an endless journey of migration, artists such as Dan Halter and



9 Gerald Machona
From China, with Love (2012)
 Performance at Alumni Gallery, Rhodes University
 Photo: Mark Wilby

Gerald Machona highlight its distant manufacturer and call to mind the changing meanings of China in Africa today.

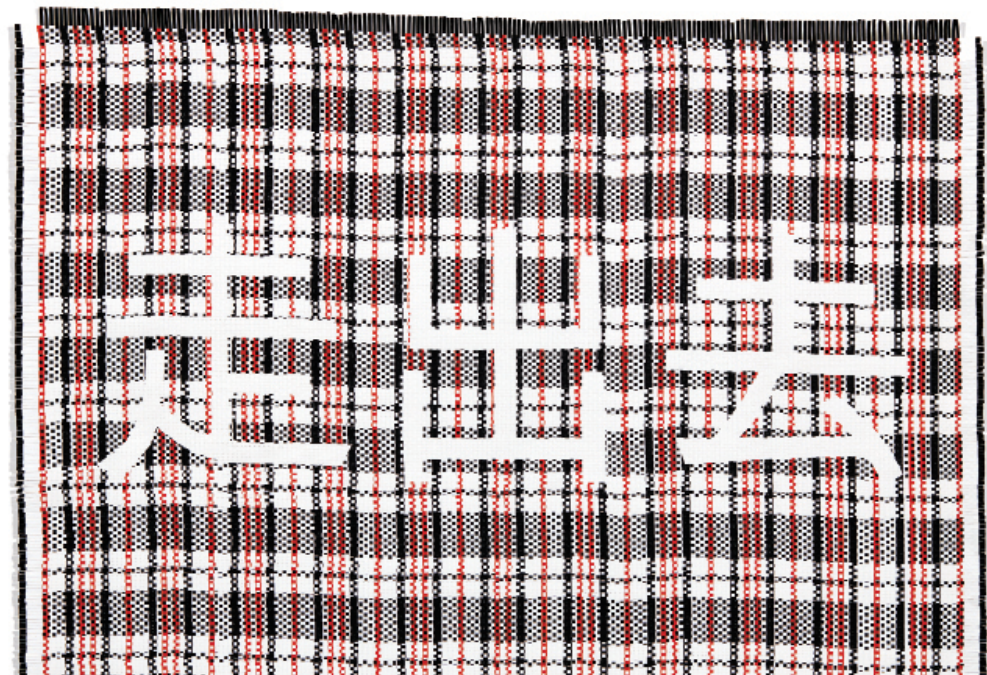
These artistic works featuring the China bag could be interpreted as “a form of instrumental action” (Gell 1998) with the potential to influence viewers and urge them to reflect on the power relations in this intensifying China-Africa engagement. The malleability of objects, and the many ways in which they may be perceived, is linked to what Gell calls the “agency” of art works, the ways in which they are invested with the intentionality of their creators and stimulate emotional responses and feelings. These artists use the China bag to provoke debates on controversial local issues, especially the intensifying China-Africa engagement, and in this way give ordinary objects and everyday movements a “political form of life.”

Interpreting the China bag as a container of *fong kong* or *zhing zhong*, some artists use it to highlight the influence of imported cheap Chinese products on local economies. *Fong kong* in South Africa, and *zhing zhong* in Zimbabwe, often refers to cheap, fake, and low-quality Chinese imports. In 1998 the term *fong kong* was made popular in South Africa by the Hunger Boyz’ *kwaito* song “Fong Kong,” which was written and recorded against the backdrop of ever-intensifying relations between China and the African continent (Sosibo 2010). Similarly, in Zimbabwean musician Wallace Chirimuko’s “Made in China,” the singer uses *zhing zhong*—a derogatory way of speaking about Chinese products lacking originality and durability (Musanga 2017)—as a metaphor

to show ordinary Zimbabweans’ views of the Chinese presence, their products, and their economic activities in Zimbabwe. As slang for “made in China,” *fong kong* and *zhing zhong* have become part of everyday discourse in Southern Africa. According to Yoon Jung Park (2013), *fong kong* has become “so widely accepted that local rap songs, journalists, and marketing firms often use it.” She adds that, “even as China continues to be criticized for ‘dumping’ these outmoded, cheap, and copy-cat goods on African markets, Africans are increasingly involved in their importation.” These *zhing zhong* and *fong kong* products, often placed in and carried by traders in China bags, are commonly believed to undermine the possibility of growth of local manufacturing sectors within African economies.

In his project *Made in China, with Love* (Fig. 9), commissioned for the *Making Way* exhibition, Zimbabwean artist Gerald Machona uses the bag to play with the idea of sensitivity and value of materials. Simbao (2012a: 26) documents his performance during the Making Way exhibition:

[Machona] carefully stitched together three-dimensional objects, such as a wallet, a watch, a pair of sunglasses, and a bag out of decommissioned Zimbabwean dollars and stitched a label on them that read “Made in China.” He then bartered with the audience in a playful process of exchange, expecting them to, for example, sing a national anthem in order to obtain one his beautifully made objects ... Machona collaborated with Chinyanta Mwenya, who begins the performance by wheeling Machona, (who is hidden inside a “Ghana-must-go” bag) into the gallery. Mwenya, a Zambian student based in South Africa, spent a significant amount of time in China, where he learnt Mandarin, and in the performance he casually spoke with the audience in fluent Mandarin, as if expecting them to understand what he was saying...¹⁵



10 Dan Halter
Go Out/Go Global (2016)
 Hand-woven archival ink-jet prints; 64
 cm x 90 cm
 Photo: courtesy Dan Halter

The artist recycled decommissioned Zimbabwean dollars and carefully stitched them together to three-dimensional art objects. He contrasts the hand-made objects that have value as “art objects” to the mass-produced Chinese products (*zhing zhong* or *fong kong*) “that are seen to be killing the informal business of handmade craft objects in Zimbabwe” (Simbao 2012a: 26).

Machona often uses currency to comment on current global discourses on economic exchanges and migration.¹⁶ Through a recurring adoption of decommissioned Zimbabwean dollars as an artistic medium, he links historical and contemporary social crises in his country. In the years 2000–2009, Zimbabwe underwent one of the greatest economic collapses and produced the largest denominational note ever printed, the 100 trillion ZW dollar note (Chagonda 2016; Coomer and Gstraunthaler 2011). In an interview, Mochona points out that, “Hyperinflation rendered the currency dysfunctional, so I soon found myself with a large volume of material that I could reassign a different function to” (Yagiz 2016). His work *Made in China, with Love* reflects on China’s intensifying economic ties with Zimbabwe and other African countries. By using the valueless Zimbabwean paper dollars as the material of the *zhing zhong*, the artist interweaves his inverted social critique of the Zimbabwean government with his critical reflection on China’s economic venture into Africa, especially the “Look East” Policy (Musanga 2017; Youde 2007). It seems that the artist believes the Zimbabwean government’s incompetent governance and mistreatment of its own citizens, gives the penetration of the China bags and Chinese products greater traction.

Dan Halter’s recent work *Go Out/Go Global* (Fig. 10) comments even more directly on Chinese presence across the continent. Halter prints three big Chinese characters—走出去 (*zou chu qu*, meaning “going out”)—against the background of a mesh bag. In the artist’s statement for this piece, Halter points out that, “Most nations favor actively attracting inward foreign investment, and would only support outward foreign investment passively. The People’s Republic of China, however, attaches importance to both inward and outward foreign investment.”¹⁷ This work highlights

the Chinese government’s “Go Out” policy, which encourages its own enterprises to invest overseas and to explore opportunities on the African continent. It is worth noting that Halter’s work also involves the dichotomy between the mass-produced and the bespoke object. He uses curio crafts to engage with the Zimbabwean dollar’s hyperinflation, as such recontextualizing the notions of work and value.¹⁸

I notice a growing number of African artists who recycle everyday objects in their artistic projects to reflect on the Chinese presence in Africa. Nigerian artist Ayo Akinwande’s 赢得-*Win* series (2017) provides another example of how the China-Africa relationship is often materialized through the recollection and transformation of everyday objects. The primary materials used for Akinwande’s piece are discarded cement sacks from Dangote company, the biggest cement manufacturer in Nigeria. These were sourced from construction sites to create an *agbada*, a three-piece ensemble worn by Yoruba men of southwest Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Akinwande’s installation consists of the *awosoke* (a large, free-flowing outer robe), the *awotele* (an undervest) and the *fila* (hat). The *awosoke* (Fig. 11) contains a belt made of aluminum sheets with the inscription “CCECC,” an acronym for the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, which handles Chinese construction projects across Africa. While the color blue is used by the company, the belt was designed to reference wrestling/boxing belts and, in this case, is symbolic of the constant fight for Africa’s resources among the Chinese, Lebanese, Indians, Europeans, and Americans. According to my interview with the artist, “the ‘CCECC’ inscription on the belt might indicate the role of China as a winner in this ongoing bout, but at the same time it also highlights how China is strangling Africa.”¹⁹ It is worth noting that Akinwande’s *awosoke* has two pockets, each of which contains twenty-seven N5 notes. According to the artist, the use of the N5 note is an engagement with the notions of “cheapness” and “affordability” attributed to Chinese products. Similarly, in South African artist Marcus Neustetter’s *Cheap China: An Installation with a Limited Battery Lifespan* (part of his *Into The Light* exhibition),²⁰ the artist

11 Ayo Akinwande
Awosoke (2017)
Used and machine-sewn sacks,
aluminium, 5-naira notes; 118.9 cm x
147.3 cm
Photo: courtesy Ayo Akinwande



recycles and transforms disposable materials into objects that allude readily to China—dead glow sticks are stitched together to construct the Great Wall of China or melted down and cast into fortune frogs, shark fins, and an ornamental dragon. According to the artist, these objects symbolize how China and Chinese culture are often perceived and imagined in the everyday sphere of South Africa.²¹ Neustetter's project specifically works with the materiality of the Chinese products. The materials used in the production of these works are purposely sourced by the artist from local Chinese markets, which typically stock an abundance of cheap light-toys and gadgets.

Everyday objects and materials are transformed to art works with agency through a technique of weaving—meshing objects or materials together to construct something else. This artistic technique exemplifies one metaphorical meaning of the woven plastic bag. It represents a process of (sometimes unbalanced) exchange and transition, and the intersection of different routes of movement in the global South. This technique has been adopted by artists such as Machona, Halter, Akinwande, and Neustetter to reflect on the intensifying economic ties and interactions between Africa and China. Roughly conforming to an infographic of immigration and emigration statistics, Halter's work *Rifugiato Mappa del Mondo* (*Refugee's Map of the World*, 2011, Fig. 12), weaves the red, blue, and white plastic mesh bags together to loosely map world mobility. Mobility in a cosmopolitan world often means the ability to move between and inhabit different places and cultures, but Halter's map reveals a strong sense of ambivalent mobility in our era of globalization: Worn bags are used to map the countries and routes with increased emigration—places more often in the global South—whereas newer bags map the more desirable destinations—countries of the global North. This work was stitched together by Sibongile Chinjonjo, a Zimbabwean refugee currently living in South

Africa. The torn fragments of the bag could be read as markers of mental and emotional trauma experienced by displaced migrants. The transformation from woven mesh bags to world map invites viewers to ask questions about labor and consumerism in the context of current global socio-economic shifts.

These artists also use the art of weaving to comment on Africa's encounter with China, especially the "materiality" of China's presence in Africa. In Neustetter's work, the glow sticks and colored plastic strips are woven together and transformed into interpretations of ancient Chinese maps and African trade routes, raising questions about Africa's status within international trade relations. Neustetter says he plans to bring these art works to China where their constituent materials are originally made: "As a result, a seemingly temporary art installation has permanent by-products in the form of thousands of discarded glow-sticks, broken LEDs, plastic casings, and packaging materials which, in turn, are assembled into new artworks to be sent back to China as a form of ritual-exchange..."²² By "exporting" these works, which comment on Chinese imported materials, to China, the artist will be urging reflection on the balance of power between these two BRICS²³ economies.

These works do not necessarily reflect how China is widely perceived by the majority of people on the African continent.²⁴ Rather, they are individual artistic attempts to reflect on issues that people often take for granted, for instance, the "win-win" rhetoric celebrated in the official discourses about China-Africa engagement.²⁵ In other words, these art projects do not provide a survey or conclusive statement about Chinese presence in Africa, but they do urge people to dwell on demanding questions that still do not have definite answers. As South African artist William Kentridge (2017: 100) asked during the opening speech of his exhibition in Beijing: "China certainly hovers over us like a huge zeppelin. The scale of it, the scale of its hunger for resources,

the scale of everything. China in Africa today, a sense of a series of questions rather than any answers. Are we here the tethered goat waiting for the tiger? Easy pickings?”²⁶ With similar doubts and uncertainties, artists such as Machona, Halter and Neustetter explore the social life of the *fong kong* materials to trigger critical dialogues about China-Africa engagement and the definition of the global South.

NEVER ARRIVING: THE PARADOX OF CIRCULATION

The mobile quality of the China bag makes it an extremely rich metaphor to understand the complexity of movement in Africa. The works analyzed here show that the circulation of the bag on and beyond the continent is not unidirectional. These art works using the mesh bag as the aesthetic material embody at least three different levels of circulation and movement—the movement of human bodies in Africa, the exchange of “Made-in-China” products in Africa, and the circulation and consumption of art works in and beyond the continent. The relational nature of the bag illuminates the importance of recognizing “contra-flow diasporas” and movements in multiple directions (Simbao 2012b; Grimm 2014). Examination of these multidirectional and multi-layered networks of movement reveals the intricate geopolitics of relationships and identities in Africa and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the South beyond simplistic stereotypes of places. In light of the work of Appadurai and Gell, I reflect on the dual nature of these works as art and commodity, and how they become embodiments of ambivalent mobilities in Africa. The artistic transformation of the China bag resembles and at the same time intensifies the dynamic social tensions between the migrant community and its host society; moreover, the politics of inclusion and exclusion embodied in the commercialized art works also epitomize the paradoxes of mobility.

The use of the China bag as a symbol of *zhing zhong* or *fong kong* represents the artists’ inward-looking social and political criticisms. At the same time, using *fong kong* to label the Chinese presence in Africa seems to be too simplistic, as these categorizations constitute another level of exclusion.²⁷ As a result, some of these artistic projects become the very emblems of the key issues they criticize, especially the issue of how to deal with racial multiplicity in a society like South Africa. Some works do not pay enough attention to the diversity of Chinese people and Chinese culture beyond “oriental food” or *fong kong*, nor do they deal with the long history of Chinese presence in Africa (Corrigall 2015; Huynh 2012; Yap and Man 1996), the diverse historical relationships between China and different African countries (Moyo 2016), or the “hybrid forms” of Chinese engagement in Africa (Dittgen 2015). Furthermore, most of these works do not

12 Dan Halter
Rifugiato Mappa del Mondo (2011)
New and used plastic-weave bags; 183 cm × 380 cm
Photo: courtesy Dan Halter



consider the alternative directions of movement—for instance, African immigrants in China (Bodomo 2010; Haugen 2012; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Castillo 2016), or the fact that the prominence of the China bag in Africa is a consequence of global economic and political processes, and that the interpretation of the China-Africa engagement cannot be separated from a wider context of global geopolitics.

As Dotun Makun's *Ghana Must Go* portraits demonstrate, the woven pattern of the China bags resembles the notion of stereotyping by labeling. Some of these art works may have failed to engage with the layered history of the often misunderstood and invisible Chinese community in South Africa before or during apartheid era (Yap and Man 1996; Harris 1995; Park 2008).²⁸ Very few art works have recognized that Chinese presence in the African context begins with thousands of people forced to leave their homes; in the case of South Africa, Chinese people have variously been slaves, indentured laborers, and independent merchants (Huynh 2012: 50). Moreover, works that only focus on criticizing the low quality of *fong kong* often fail to recognize some of the other qualities of the China bags—they are light, strong, versatile, and more affordable for people in less disadvantaged social positions. Scholars (Huynh 2012; Zi 2015, 2017) have pointed out that the prevalence of *fong kong* products on the continent is a more complicated phenomenon than “Chinese merchants dumping China-made counterfeits.” Despite the negative image attributed to *fong kong* products as well as the social criticism and the governmental restrictions applied to them, these products are still prevalent in local markets, and “have contributed to clothing the needy, initiated creativity and brought convenience to members of local society” (Zi 2015: 7). When artists engage with stereotypes constructed around Chinese people in popular discourses, some of their artistic practices, which aim to intervene in the problematic representations of immigration, again resemble or create increasing “sinophobic” sentiments (Simbao 2012b, 2016; Harrison, Yang, and Moyo 2017)²⁹ among local citizens. In this sense, China bags along with many other Chinese stereotypes become new symbolic constructs of alienness that reproduce configurations of xenophobia.

Another point that sheds light on the mobility theme is the circulation of these artistic works as commodities. Appadurai's notion of commodification reminds us to pay attention to a realm of visual power, which is embedded in a wider political economic context of unequal access to the consumption of art. Appadurai (1986) draws our attention to the ways in which objects are moved through a process of commodification and de-commodification. He is concerned with showing how the capitalist spirit of calculation remains present in shifts in object identity created by trajectories that take them through different “regimes of value” (Myers 2001). The particular body of work about the China bag discussed in the article was mostly made for a gallery audience. Although some artistic projects try to resist easy conscriptions such as the cultural commodification of pain and suffering, in most cases, the expensive price tags attached to them on the clean walls of galleries in Cape Town, Johannesburg, New York, and London have to some extent divorced them from the everyday environments and human life experiences that inspired the production of these works.

While a wide audience beyond Africa celebrates the everyday creativity of emerging visual or performative art practices on the

continent, the circulation and consumption of these provocative works prompt a few important questions: How could we use everyday objects in a “transformative way” to intervene in the politics of spaces, relationships, and identities? More specifically, what elements should be used to “represent” China, Africa, and Chinese presence in Africa? What do these materials tell us about the respective positioning of China and Africa in the context of the global South? For whom do we make or produce these artistic projects, and how should we understand the meaning and value of African artistic works as they travel across cultural and international boundaries?

CONCLUSION

In Abderrahmane Sissako's 2002 film *Heremakono: En attendant de bonheur* (*Heremakono: Waiting for Happiness*, 2002), about people waiting for happiness and the association of this happiness with mobility, there is an elusive character—a Chinese expatriate, Tchu—who spends his time selling *fong kong* trinkets on the street and singing in a local karaoke bar. What makes the scene mesmerizing is that the melancholy song he sings is a household Chinese song about prison life named “Tears by the Iron Window” (铁窗泪, 1988). The sad and beautiful Chinese lyrics could be translated as:

Iron door iron bar and iron chain
Holding the iron window and looking outside
How wonderful is the life outside
When can I return to my homeland
When can I return to my homeland ...

Just like many other intersecting characters in the film, set in the small Mauritanian transit city of Nouadhibou, the Chinese hawker has actually lost control over his mobility on this ultimate journey of migration. His timeless state of waiting and moving echoes with the title of South African artist Nqaba's artistic projects: “*Umashkenkethe likhaya lam*. The bag is my home.”

The China bag provides an enriching and powerful metaphor by which to understand the complicated paradigms of migration and mobility in Africa. As a visual element that often appears around bus stations and borders, the bag has become the ultimate expression of “crossing” and “alienation”—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. It represents an unsettling experience that plays a key role in understanding the politics of dislocated identities in contemporary Africa. As is evident in the art works analyzed here, immigrants living and moving on the continent—no matter if they are Nigerians, Zimbabweans, or Chinese—are all situated in a liminal state of “transience” and “in-betweenness.”

From “Ghana-must-go” to “Bangladeshi bag,” from “Zimbabwean bag” to “China bag,” the relational nature of these names epitomizes the ambivalent nature of mobility in the so-called global South. The visual culture around the bag creates an aesthetic vision of “southernness” as a multilayered transitional space rejecting a settled definition, where movement, transience, and transgressions seem to become the norm: Amid the fluidity and fracture in the interactions between unpredictable everyday realities and artistic creativities, novel modes of inclusion and accommodation continually emerge, and entangle with ever evolving forms of exclusion. .

Notes

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1 In South Africa these bags are colloquially referred to as “China bags” because most of them are manufactured in China. It is worth noting that the naming of the bag varies in different places, which I will talk about in a later section of the paper.

2 In this article, I explore how cultural interactions between China and Africa could contribute to the conversation about the South and “southernness.” Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of excavating the historical sensitivity and changing nuances of this particular category: Sam Moyo (2016: 67) points out that “much more research is necessary in the future in terms of understanding South-South international relations, so that many more people learn more about countries in the global South and their complex set of interactions.” He highlights the necessity of various African intellectual networks to revisit neglected historical backgrounds and resources such as the Bandung spirit. Ruth Simbao (2017: 5–6) uses the term “global South” as “a loose conceptual framework that links to situational geographies of exclusion and geographies of resistance based on shared histories of colonialism and ongoing processes of decolonization.” In this article, I pay attention to “notions of place as well as identity that are continually morphing” (Norman 2013: 401) in the context of China–Africa, and engage with the mobile meanings of the South while bearing in mind how this term has been culturally and historically produced.

3 Recent years have seen some crucial reflections on the limits in current China–Africa studies: for instance, the domination of an “international relations-esque” approach (Alden 2013), an overreliance on policy-oriented researches or macroeconomic data (Jedlowski and Thomas 2017), the dominant inclination to always put China first in the term “China–Africa” (Monson and Rupp 2013), and so on. Scholars such as Simbao (2012a, 2012b), Huynh (2012), and Jedlowski and Thomas (2017) have explored how contemporary arts, films, and other media forms offer meaningful space for analyzing the frontiers of “China–Africa” engagements.

4 <http://www.clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children>.

5 Taiye Selasi was born in London, of Nigerian descent. Her novel borrows the Nigerian phrase to tell an immigrant story in which Folasadé Savage leaves Lagos for Pennsylvania, where she meets her Ghanaian husband, Kweku Sai, a surgeon.

6 Frank Rajah Arase’s Ghana–Nigerian romantic comedy is also named after the bag. The film tells a story of two lovers of different countries of origin and the challenges they face, especially from parents, after disclosing their intention of getting married.

7 <http://www.nobukhonqaba.com/umaskhen-kethe-likhaya-lam-1/>.

8 <http://www.nobukhonqaba.com/umaskhen-kethe-likhaya-lam-1/>.

9 See more in Chris Thurman’s review of this work: <http://christhurman.net/art-and-culture/item/making-way.html>

10 In his MFA exhibition *ALIEN-Nation* (2011) at the Alumi Gallery of the Albany History Museum, Grahamstown, Dotun Makun considered themes of xenophobia, foreignness, alienation, and stereotypes and explored the complexities of the Nigerian

diaspora.

11 Artist’s statement from his website: <http://danhalter.com/text/statement/>.

12 See more in the artist’s statement for this exhibition, at <http://artmeets.agency/nobukho-nqaba/>

13 China’s trade with Africa has increased from about \$10 billion in 2000 to \$220 billion in 2014 and was approaching \$300 billion in 2015. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/09/c_134798979.htm.

14 *Making Way* opened at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, in June 2012. The exhibition was curated by Ruth Simbao, Fine Art Department at Rhodes University, South Africa.

15 For a more detailed document of Mochona and Mweny’s performance during “Making Way,” see <https://www.ru.ac.za/ruthsimbao/exhibitionsperformances/fromchinawithlove/>

16 In recent years, Machona has created some other projects that use the currency as aesthetic material to explore themes of migration and alienation, for instance, *Ndiri Cross Border Trader* (2010), *Ndiri Barman* (2010), and *Ndiri Afonaut* (2012). In 2012, he created a work titled *If you travel east far enough you end up in the west and if you go far enough west you end up in the east*, which consists of two Nike shoes (each measuring 30 cm x 25 cm x 10 cm) hand stitched from decommissioned Zimbabwean dollars, Chinese yuan, and American dollars.

17 <http://danhalter.com/category/selected-work/>.

18 Another work by Halter named *Yes Boss* (2006) is a handwoven image displaying a map of a farming region of Zimbabwe. The warp is made of pieces of the map and the weft is formed from shredded Z\$5,000 in banknotes and gold thread. The woven image evokes a number of traditional West African ceremonial wraps that emerged when the British introduced silk to Africa. The dual European and pan-African textile is used in *Yes Boss* to refer to two difficult aspects of Zimbabwe’s postcolonial history: inflation and President Robert Mugabe’s land redistribution policies.

19 Ayo Akinwande, interview with author, June 2017, Ikeja, Lagos.

20 Marcus Neustetter’s *Into the Light* exhibition was first shown at the NMMU Bird Street Campus Gallery in Central Port Elizabeth, South Africa, October 13–25, 2015. The building formed an important part of Port Elizabeth’s original import-export hub.

21 Marcus Neustetter, conversation with the author, November 2016, Circa Gallery, Johannesburg.

22 Marcus Neustetter, conversation with the author, November 2016, Circa Gallery, Johannesburg.

23 BRICS is an acronym for the economic bloc formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

24 According to Afrobarometer’s most recent report detailing citizens’ attitudes toward China. Across the countries surveyed, 63% of respondents thought China’s economic and political influence in their country was positive. In some African countries, the image of China is dominantly positive; for instance, in Mali, 92% of citizens said China’s influence in Mali was positive. <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad122-chinas-growing-presence-africa-wins-large-positive-popular-reviews>

25 In Chinese government discourses, China–Africa is often portrayed as a model of international partnership based on win-win cooperation. Recent scholarship (Musanga 2017; Marysse and Geenen 2009; Fijalkowski 2011) has raised new questions concerning the assumed “win-win” rhetoric in the discussions on China–Africa engagements.

26 The article (Kentrige 2017) is based on the transcript of Kentridge’s lecture “Peripheral Thinking,” originally delivered at the opening of his retrospective in Beijing in June 2015.

27 The *fong kong* hype that infiltrates the media has aggravated stereotypes of the Chinese community in South Africa. In September 2017, when Michael Sun, a South African-born citizen of Chinese descent and a member of the mayoral committee for public safety of the City of Johannesburg, was asked by Mayor Herman Mashaba to receive a memorandum and meet representatives from Cosatu (Congress of South Africa Trade Unions) during the Cosatu march, one Cosatu leader introduced him as “Mr. Lee” and referred to him as “*fong kong*.” This event provoked debate and indignation among the Chinese community in South Africa. More details could be found at: <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/cosatu-apologises-to-joburg-mm-c-sun-for-racist-slurs-20171003>.

28 Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man (1996) uncovered a rich history of interactions between China and Africa dating back to the seventh century. According to them, in the context of intricate racial relations in South Africa, the Chinese community “lived in limbo, neither dark enough to be Black nor light enough to be White” (Yap and Man 1996: xv).

29 Using Chinese artist Hua Jiming’s performance *Walking into Africa in a Chinese Way* (part of the 2010 “Infecting the City” performance festival in Cape Town) as an example, Simbao (2016) analyses how artists have responded to the prevalence of a sinophobic media in which Chinese entry into Africa is often simplified as a stereotype of neocolonial power.

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