Reconfiguring Racial Capitalism

South Africa in the Chinese Century

MINGWEI HUANG

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For my parents

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PREFACE

It often surprises people to learn that I am an Americanist. This book started as an American studies project. I set out to research Afro-Asia and trace radical traditions between African and Asian diasporas. By happenstance, I was funded for a research trip to South Africa. At the outset, I hoped to find continuities between the Afro-Asian solidarities of the era of the Bandung Conference and the BRICS alliance between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and South Africa, even though the apartheid state was not part of the watershed colonial conference. I was intent on understanding how ordinary people renewed the spirit of anticolonial friendship and solidarity in an era of neoliberal globalization and empire centered on China's relationship with the Global South. On my first visit to South Africa, the social vibrancy of the China Mall, the Chinese wholesale outlet examined in this book, captivated me. The mall became my fieldwork site, and I became an ethnographer. Initially, I read the mall as a space of conviviality and hybridity, but over subsequent fieldwork trips, the racialized dynamics of exploitation exposed my romance with solidarity and cosmopolitanism. I turned to the lingua franca of American studies—racial capitalism, settler colonialism, cultures of imperialism, exceptionalism, and intimacy—to make sense of a different Afro-Asia.

China's return to the African continent in the twenty-first century is one of the most storied global developments of our time. In African countries, China, it seems, is suddenly everywhere: in new expressways, construction sites,

international terminals, industrial zones, mining concessions, pipelines, residential complexes, wholesale malls, and small shops. This book grew out of a desire to complicate the dominant narrative of Chinese neocolonialism in a milieu of popular and academic writing on China-Africa engagements. *Colonialism* and *racism* are divisive terms in the study of China and Africa. I have been interrogated for my use of these terms, in claims that they are too Americanist or ahistorical to apply to China. I also find myself defensive when hearing scholars invoke neocolonialism as self-evident and singling out China as a bad global actor. And yet, for many South Africans and southern Africans I met at the mall, the actions of Chinese state companies, expatriates, and entrepreneurs are not that dissimilar from racism and colonialism in recent lifetimes. These experiences are at least similar enough to raise the comparison. Ethnography makes concrete how ordinary Chinese and African actors experience, understand, and negotiate power relations and difference at various scales, and it complicates grand narratives such as the "Chinese scramble in Africa" or "south-south cooperation." And yet, these tropes are so entrenched in popular discourse, even commonsensical, that it is difficult to dislodge them. Why is European colonialism the main framework to make sense of China's economic presence in Africa? What is it about this historical conjuncture that makes *race* and *empire*, as analytical terms, so loaded? In this book, I arrive at a similar conclusion as those with whom I take issue: there is something colonial, racial, and specifically anti-Black about Chinese capitalist projects in Africa. But I do so through a different line of argument and engagement with these terms. Through a longer historical reframing, I wager that Chinese migrants act within the global structural parameters of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, capitalism, and colonialism that they have not made but nevertheless inherited and further perpetuate. This is not to let Chinese migrants off the hook, but recognizes how colonizing capacities are produced within broader histories of domination. I am wary of how my arguments might come across to readers looking for ethnographic confirmation of what they thought they already knew. There is an ambivalence that runs throughout the book that reflects the challenge of writing about interminority relations without losing sight of histories of domination and flattening the complexity of colonialism, empire, race, and capitalism.

In lieu of neocolonialism, I found racial capitalism to be a generative analytic for Sino-African engagements. This project is shaped by the revival in the study of racial capitalism since the reissuing of Cedric Robinson's landmark *Black Marxism* ([1983] 2000), a chronicle of the Black radical tra-

dition that is often credited with coining the term *racial capitalism* and has undeniably transformed the study of capitalism. A generation of scholars have built on Robinson's work and, as I do in this book, extend the analytic of racial capitalism to other historical, geographic, and disciplinary contexts. As the study of racial capitalism has been institutionalized and expanded, the term risks losing its analytical specificity and political power (Burden-Stelly, Hudson, and Pierre 2020). My engagement with racial capitalism builds on the long-standing intellectual and political work of Black studies and traditions of Black internationalist engagement with China and Afro-Asian solidarity. In examining racial capitalism from South Africa, I engage with South African theorists such as David Hemson, Martin Legassick, and Bernard Magubane, contemporaries of Robinson whose Marxist analysis of race and capitalism under apartheid influenced his thinking. Scholars are returning to this South Africanist radical tradition to revive racial capitalism's radical potential and resituate the term in the historical conditions of its theorization. Racial capitalism—and its interconnections with empire and colonialism—is vital for understanding the colonial, racial, and capitalist oppression of the global majority in the twenty-first century.

My thinking is indebted to the comparative concerns, theoretical vocabularies, and interdisciplinary and transnational methods of American studies and critical ethnic studies. And yet, well after the postnational and transnational turns in American studies, China is still largely off the map. As Petrus Liu (2022) urges, any materialist analysis, including the study of racial capitalism, must grapple with the transformations of global political economy accompanying the rise of China. China cannot remain relegated to area studies while Americanist scholarship, a form of area studies itself, maintains the universal status of "theory." In the US academy from where I write, we need to deprovincialize social theory to better understand and transform a world in which the United States is not the center of gravity but the PRC and the Global South. As China moves from global margins to the center, Chinese racial formations and anti-Black racism are increasingly salient in and beyond China. As the PRC expands its military bases in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, the South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait, movements for sovereignty and democracy in Hong Kong and Taiwan swell. Xi Jinping's government faces criticism for authoritarianism, ethnoracial oppression, and the surveillance and detention of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang—a placename that means "new frontier." We are now three decades into the Chinese Century. Its racial and imperial forms are still emergent, but it has also sedimented enough to theorize.

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I wrote most of this book in the isolated years of 2020 and 2021. I kept a sticky note on my computer: "Tell them about us." These words came from Oscar, a Zimbabwean street vendor whom I met at the China City mall in February 2020, the last time I would be in Johannesburg for several years. Oscar came from a long line of migrants to Johannesburg and took great interest in my book and its argument about racial capitalism. He is one of many people whose structural analysis of their reality informed my thinking and writing. When I was stuck, his words reminded me of my purpose: to share the experiences and worldviews of ordinary people with readers and students. My first thanks go to the hundreds of African and Chinese people I met in South Africa, most of whom do not prominently appear in these pages but informed my research. This book is possible because they generously invited me into their shops and homes, let me tag along on outings, and shared their lives with me.

At the University of Minnesota (UMN), the American Studies Department gave me extraordinary freedom and support to pursue a project that moved perhaps too far from traditional sites, even after the postnational and transnational turns. Jigna Desai was my first reader and taught me how to think critically about knowledge production and act promiscuously with interdisciplinarity. Karen Ho brought me into the anthropology of capitalism through a feminist lineage and trained me as an ethnographer. I

couldn't have asked for a more dynamic duo of advisers. I was fortunate to work with two Afro-Asian scholars: Yuichiro Onishi introduced me to Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* in a directed reading of Afro-Asian radical texts, and Elliott Powell's cultural analysis was necessary for doing Afro-Asian studies differently. Aren Aizura and Lorena Muñoz mentored me in queer approaches to informal economies and transnational mobilities. Since the beginning, Jamie Monson was a generous reader who brought me into China-Africa studies. To the members of my longest-running group chat—Alix Johnson, Vivian Lu, Susan MacDougall, Eda Pepi, and Megan Steffen—I'm so grateful for your friendship, wisdom, and wit. Jen Hughes, Lars Mackenzie, Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, Olivia Polk, Sarah Records, Evan Taparata, Madison Van Oort, and Shana Ye were excellent co-travelers in the final years of grad school, in Minneapolis and beyond.

Every project has an origin story. When I first arrived in Johannesburg in 2013, Christopher J. Lee casually mentioned that "someone should do an ethnography of the China Mall from top to bottom." The next day, Philip Harrison and Yan Yang took me on an impromptu driving tour of the city's two Chinatowns and its Chinese malls. That was the day this book started. I am indebted to Yoon Jung Park for her generosity in sharing academic contacts to help me get started and her leadership of the Chinese in Africa / Africans in China Research Network. Jamie and Yoon have been instrumental in building the China-Africa field and bringing up a generation of scholars. In South Africa, conversations with scholars, journalists, and artists shaped my imagination and thinking: Gilles Baro, Brittany Birberick, Keith Breckenridge, Siân Butcher, Sharad Chari, Sarah Duff, Nicky Falkof, Kimon de Greef, Pamila Gupta, Will Hanke, Ufrieda Ho, Mehita Iqani, Megan Judge, Charne Lavery, Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, Dilip Menon, Sarah Nuttall, Cobus van Staden, Tim Wright, and Tanya Zack. Your ideas are peppered throughout this book. Special thanks to Mark Lewis, who has graciously allowed me to include his work in this book. Mark, your photographs always take me back to Joburg. I greatly appreciate Kenneth Hlungwane at Museum Africa and Gabriele Mohale at the Historical Papers Research Archive at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) for assistance with archival research.

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Introduction

THEORIZING IN THE CHINESE CENTURY

Even though the "Chinese century" may seem more imminent and inevitable than ever . . . "China" remains a shifting and elusive sign at once close and unreachable, familiar and alien, backward and too far ahead.

Mei Zhan, *Other-Worldly*, 2009

The challenge is to what degree, and in what ways, can we think alongside the unthought, just as relations of study are likewise relations of difference, non-correspondence, and incommensurability.

Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, "Colonial Unknowing and Relations of Study," 2017

In 2013, during my first foray into fieldwork, I met Dominic, a Zimbabwean migrant in his early twenties, working at a busy electronics shop in Cape Town, South Africa. The shop was in a China Mall, the moniker for Chinese wholesale malls that have become ubiquitous in South African cities. These China Malls are destinations for bargain hunters and southern African migrants who have few employment options without papers. Every day Dominic and Victor, from Nigeria, installed and repaired budget speakers and media players imported from China. Dominic knew little about electronics before arriving in South Africa and was proudly self-taught. While Dominic and Victor worked the floor and warehouse, Tai Jie, a middle-aged woman from Shandong, sat behind the counter. Her sister, the first in their family to come from China, was back home on a visit. Upon meeting me, Tai Jie showed me surveillance footage of a recent store break-in and intimated that Dominic and Victor were involved. Such stereotyping of Black employees as criminals was common in how Chinese traders talked about their experience in Africa. But Dominic viewed Tai Jie in a different light. Since she spoke little English, the two communicated by pointing at images in electronics catalogs. In their makeshift communication, Dominic picked up some Mandarin and "fell in love with the language." He sought out local Chinese friends and was saving up to attend night classes at a nearby language school. As a sign of commitment, he even had his name in Chinese characters tattooed on his neck. Our exchange outside the shop was brief but revelatory. Regarding the Chinese newcomers, Dominic said to me, "They come with nothing here, now they are conquering the world. I want to know how they are doing it . . . within months they are . . . driving big cars, wearing big clothes. I want to know how." He admired how "penniless" Chinese made it "big." In his three years working for Tai Jie and her sister, Dominic had received higher-paying offers to work elsewhere but stayed to study the strategies of Chinese entrepreneurs. "The Chinese rule the world," and he wanted a "head start." "I want to know a lot about them. I want to know how they make it. Why they are so strange." Although working for low pay in the present, Dominic strove to get ahead in an increasingly Sinocentric world.

Since the turn of the millennium, the steady arrival of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs, tourists, business travelers, infrastructure projects, companies, banks, and commodities has been transforming African metropolises. Johannesburg—fondly known as Joburg, Jozi, and Egoli (the last of which is isiZulu for "City of Gold")—is a city undergoing dramatic transformation. Since the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand, or Rand, in 1886, South Africa reigned as the world's largest producer of gold over the entire twentieth century. For a century, African laborers recruited from South Africa's

Native Reserves or neighboring colonies excavated the precious metal from the bowels of the earth. The mineral revolution made South Africa into the economic powerhouse it is today. As gold levels were inevitably depleted, the mining belt underwent several metamorphoses, first becoming a hub for factories and later warehouses and wholesale centers. Today along the central mining belt there are a dozen Chinese wholesale malls. Since 2010 the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been South Africa's top trading partner. In 2020 South Africa was the second largest African buyer of Chinese goods, with US$25 billion in total trade.[1] Known for their bargains, the China Malls attract working-class families, hawkers, and entrepreneurs from all over the city and the region, from Angola to Zimbabwe. The malls are a consumer paradise of abundance and variety, offering plastic toys, fast fashion apparel, luxury knockoff bags, jewelry, sneakers, wedding dresses, headscarves, wigs, electronics, furniture, party goods, and herbal medicines.

With over four hundred shops and stalls, "China City," the mall where I conducted fieldwork, is a dense site of Sino-African interactions that pulsates with the unmistakable frenetic energy of Joburg. A microcosm of the city's migrant communities, the mall is a multilingual space comprising Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani traders and workers; Malawian and Zimbabwean shopworkers; Nigerian and Black South African security guards; and contingent workers and informal economic actors who facilitate the transnational movement of people, goods, and money. China City is at once a place of sanctuary and exploitation, cosmopolitan mixing and rigid boundaries. It shines with the novelty of China and yet is deeply of Johannesburg. The mall sits atop an exhausted gold reef and is near where gold was discovered, the serendipitous sighting that catalyzed everything that followed: white settlement, industrial capitalism, Indigenous dispossession, and racial apartheid. China City emblematizes the longer histories of colonialism and racial capitalism that underly, quite literally, the twenty-first-century global transformations at the heart of this book.

Reconfiguring Racial Capitalism: South Africa in the Chinese Century examines the entanglements of Chinese and South African pasts, presents, and futures from the perspectives of ordinary people like Dominic and Tai Jie. As capitalism's center of gravity has shifted to the PRC over the past three decades, the movement of capital from the PRC to South Africa and the Global South presents a novel formation of power made possible by the debris of Euro-American empire and racial capitalism. China City is the ordinary yet remarkable place that inspires my palimpsestic approach, an analysis attuned to multiple erasures, inscriptions, and timescales that coexist within

a social formation or place. The *mining belt mall* is a metaphor for the central argument of this book: Chinese racial and imperial forms overlay Euro-American ones, not burying or displacing them but building on and interacting with the traces of ongoing "posts-"—of apartheid, colonialism, and socialism—that sediment.[2]

This story also takes place in Johannesburg's Cyrildene Chinatown, the newer of the two Chinatowns in Johannesburg and the epicenter for three hundred thousand Chinese migrants—expatriates, sojourners, immigrants, transmigrants, and entrepreneurial migrants by other names—in South Africa. These newcomers, who do not aim to stay for the long term, join a smaller multigenerational community of settled immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan who established Johannesburg as the oldest and largest Chinese diasporic community in Africa. Despite this lengthy history of Chinese presence in South Africa, a distinct shift happened in the late twentieth century. Migrant traders were in South Africa precisely because of the "rise of China." Beginning with China's reform and opening policies in 1978, the privatization of national industries, commercialization of the rural economy, and exploitation of labor propelled rapid capitalist development and created immense class and regional inequalities in its wake—a process of "post-socialist primitive accumulation" (Xiang 2014). Peasants, low-wage urban workers, laid-off state workers, and other people left behind by economic reform could achieve a stabler, more prosperous material future in China by temporarily migrating to the emerging economies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Whereas Chinese entrepreneurs choose Johannesburg from a range of Global South destinations, the same is not true for southern African migrants whose connection to Johannesburg is forged through the colonial migrant labor system. Johannesburg is a destination for generations of southern African men who journeyed to the City of Gold and continue migrating for economic opportunity. Although African and Chinese migrants are both racialized foreign nationals with precarious legal status, they are these things to different degrees. While both groups face routine police harassment, only southern Africans face deportation and the most virulent forms of xenophobic violence. The difference goes back to how southern Africans and Chinese were incorporated into the racialized political economy of the Rand and the world economy, which enables Chinese migrant traders to exploit southern African migrant workers today. African and Chinese actors are brought together through world-historical forces, and they bring different aspirations, visions of global futures, and racial ideologies to their daily encounters.

Reconfiguring Racial Capitalism is an ethnography of an epoch in the making, of non-Western racial formations attuned to forms of "minority-to-minority relationality" (Shih and Lionnet 2005), and of lateral modes of power that are difficult to name because they transpire between peripheries and across intellectual silos. The configurations of migration, exploitation, and extraction that I describe invite us to consider racial, capitalist, and imperial formations more expansively and to recalibrate understandings of race, racial capitalism, and colonialism when dislodged from their more familiar historical, geographical, and disciplinary contexts and unanchored from the white West. Theorizing in the Chinese Century examines transformations and continuities in *race*, *racial capitalism*, *colonialism*, and *empire*. It requires deprovincializing these key words and radically revising how we understand them. Whether ideas and categories formulated within the historical conditions of Euro-American modernity can be applied to the Sino-African context raises the recurring binary of China and the West. China has been frequently figured as outside Euro-American liberalism and modernity—the West's paradigmatic other (Eng, Ruskola, and Shen 2011; Liu 2015). Chinese political economy has been aptly described as "illiberal" (Vukovich 2019), the experimental adaptation of neoliberalism as nonnormative (Rofel 2007), and its partial loss of sovereignty as semicolonial. "China" is an elusive sign, far off in the future or stuck in the past, making it hard to grasp (Zhan 2009, 27). Modifying universalist concepts with "Chinese" or "Chinese characteristics" relies on essentialized notions of culture, ethnicity, and nation for historical explanation (Dirlik 1997). Equally inadequate is turning to Chinese exceptionalism, whereby China "by definition can speak only to and of itself" (Lewis and Hsieh 2017, 46). The theoretical task is to discern what is "distinctly Chinese" or "generically modern," while challenging Orientalist assumptions about Chinese difference (Pieke 2014). "Chinese difference" and the difference it makes need to be continuously interrogated.

My ethnography reframes a dominant popular and academic narrative, that of the Chinese "scramble for Africa" and conventional formulations of Chinese neocolonialism in two ways. First, the scramble narrative reductively scripts Chinese capital as a totalizing force with a singular logic—a monolithic "China Inc." (Hirono and Suzuki 2014)—penetrating African markets (Gibson-Graham [1996] 2006; Sylvanus 2013, 67). This narrative treats China as "an externalised, separate, and self-contained 'Other,'" an agent of change disembedded from the local historical contexts where it acts (Franceschini and Loubere 2022, 5). Instead, I insist on the heterogeneous,

embedded, contingent character of Chinese capitalist projects in African countries (and especially South Africa) that cannot be reduced to a monolithic "Chinese capitalism" or "Chinese capital" (C. K. Lee 2017). In Sino-African contexts, transnational capitalism is not a stable structure but a dynamic assemblage of African and Chinese social and kinship networks, moral economies, cultural ethos, and embodied processes (Appel 2019; Bear et al. 2015; K. Ho 2005; Rofel and Yanagisako 2019; Tsing 2000). Second, I problematize abstractions of China–Africa flows as a generic global capitalism, alternatively reframing Chinese capitalist projects as racial capitalism with distinct colonial entanglements and features.

Scholars of racial capitalism working across disciplines and fields—including African studies, Asian American studies, Black studies, Marxist political economy, and Native and Indigenous studies, to name a few that I engage—have powerfully demonstrated that race plays a central, not supplemental, role in capitalism. Historical features of capitalism, race and racialization processes emerged in the crucible of slavery, capitalism, colonialism, liberalism, and white supremacy.[3] The history of capitalism is a history of racial capitalism, and race is intrinsic to capitalism's most fundamental workings. As Jodi Melamed elaborates, "Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups." Racism, among other "antimonies of accumulation," create and maintain the severe inequalities necessary for accumulation (2015, 77). Capital requires social differentiation to create value, and it produces racial, national, gender, and sexual difference to create surplus populations and spaces (R. A. Ferguson 2004; Hong 2006; Liu 2022; Lowe 1996). Capitalism also abstracts these differences to turn differentiated laborers into commensurable units of labor power (Day 2016, 9). Race acts as a "social script of equivalences [through which] 'value' is created" (Lowe 2015, 83). Capitalism simultaneously mobilizes the differences of race and gender to exploit workers and create commensurable units of labor power, drawing processes of social differentiation and capital accumulation more tightly together. As the study of racial capitalism has flourished in Black studies, racial capitalism has been grounded in Euro-American racial formations and histories of enslavement and colonialism in the New World. Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy challenge the taken-for-granted centrality of the North Atlantic in scholarship on racial capitalism, asking in what other global contexts might racial capitalism be useful (2021, 16). In the era of emerging postcolonial economies of the Global South, new configurations of race, capitalism, and

colonialism are underway. An analysis of racial capitalism is necessary for understanding the contemporary dynamics of global extractive industries, land grabs, Asian foreign investment ("Asian capital"), and the superexploitation of migrant labor across south–south and south–east circuits (Hoang 2022; Koshy et al. 2022).

Scholars of settler colonialism have insisted that capitalism is intertwined with race *and* colonialism. Extending the analytic of racial capitalism to colonial racial capitalism, scholars connect contemporary regimes of predatory accumulation with histories, legacies, and ongoing processes of settlement, colonization, and racialization (Byrd et al. 2018; Day 2016; Koshy et al. 2022). South Africa's history of racial capitalism and settler colonialism has been critical to this reformulation. In their introduction to *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, Susan Koshy, Lisa Cacho, Brian Jordan Jefferson, and Jodi A. Byrd note that "we can push Robinson's analytic of racial capitalism back to the significance of the term's South African settler colonialist origins to examine how Indigenous dispossession is not the precondition for racial capitalism to emerge but always has been part of its very structure" (2022, 5). In South Africa, a settler colonial mode of accumulation enshrined the political economy of apartheid that South African Marxists named racial capitalism, which Cedric Robinson expanded on in *Black Marxism* (Robinson [1983] 2002, see also Biermann and Kössler 1980; Burden-Stelly, Hudson, and Pierre 2020; Hudson 2018; Kelley 2017; White 2020). In the 1970s, South African scholars, Black consciousness activists, and South African Communist Party members from multiple intellectual and political traditions theorized racial capitalism as the inextricable relationship between capitalism and apartheid (Chari 2021). The term countered liberal arguments that the overt racism of Afrikaner nationalism and the apartheid state was illogical to capitalism in South Africa. As they insisted, racism was not extraneous but endemic to capitalism, and racial oppression would not end with economic growth (Alexander [1983] 1985; Legassick and Hemson 1976; B. M. Magubane 1979). The term racial capitalism emerges from the specific, even unique context of South Africa, thus making its broad circulation somewhat curious (White 2022). If all capitalism is colonial racial capitalism, Chinese capitalist projects in the settler colony South Africa are no exception. Racial capitalism is malleable in its modes of production, accumulation, and racial subjugation, incorporating minoritized people and peripheral regions to sustain itself (Jenkins and Leroy 2021). This incorporation is dynamic. Chinese practices of racial capitalism in South Africa have developed along specific trajectories of race and capitalism in China and

map onto settler colonial relations, colonial legacies, and racial capitalist geographies in South Africa and southern Africa as a whole. *Reconfiguring Racial Capitalism* returns to South Africa as a key site for theorizing novel patterns of racial accumulation and exploitation in the Chinese Century.

Nested within this study of racial capitalism is an inquiry into race itself: how race is constituted in the collision of Chinese and South African racial histories, categories, and ideologies and theorized across American, African, and China studies. Studying race in the Sino-African context grapples with the *globality of race* in three ways. First, it provincializes race as a concept specific to historical, global, and epistemological contexts and destabilizes its coherence. Deprovincializing race means theorizing it beyond debates coded in Western (specifically US) terms and the universalization of a singular historic tradition. Only then can there be "scholarship that truly demarginalizes the margins while decentering the center" (Z. Magubane 2004, 196). Second, the globality of race refers to the ways in which race maps onto modern global space (Ferreira Da Silva 2015, 33), from the "West and the Rest" and "Europe and its others" to Du Bois's twentieth-century global color line. Third, a global approach to race also insists on the transnational construction of racial meanings and identities (Ferreira Da Silva 1998; Karl 2002; Z. Magubane 2004; Pierre 2013). As a method, ethnography rejects a priori formulations of what race means. By theorizing concepts from the inside-out and bottom-up, ethnography is especially attuned to the incommensurabilities of race. An ethnography of racial formation examines the processes by which race acquires social, cultural, and political meaning and how these meanings are ideologically deployed through practices and institutions (Pierre 2012). It attends to the *how* of racialization, which refers not to social situations with racial dimensions but the processes by which social life is racially ordered and the order maintained (Goldberg 2009).

Building on these ethnographic and transnational approaches to race, I examine how racial meanings such as Chineseness, Blackness, and whiteness map onto the global space of China, Africa, and the West that gesture to a regime of global racial power that exceeds the terms of white supremacy. I investigate how racial lexicons are defined through transnational circulation between China and South Africa and intertwined with gender, ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship, labor, and quality (*suzhi*). What I call race is never only about race but its intersections with other categories that amplify its force and forms. I also wrestle with multiple, layered histories of race, colonialism, and capitalism and racial vocabularies that do not neatly overlay

or align. Side by side, and concurrent but not the same, they are *adjacent*, a heuristic I develop in chapter 3. Adjacency helps us think relationally across histories, areas, and fields. Incommensurability is not an impasse but an invitation to "think alongside the unthought" (Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein 2017, 1051). In the remainder of this introduction, I give an overview of macrohistorical contexts, theoretical questions, and ethnographic sites, as well as the structure of this book.

The Long Twenty-First Century

Reconfiguring Racial Capitalism proceeds through multiple scales, from centuries and continents to individual biographies and everyday encounters to capture the granular and quotidian ways world-historical forces manifest in ordinary people's lives. The chapters that follow delve into specific histories, but first I give an overview of tectonic shifts in historical capitalism relevant to this conjuncture. "The Chinese Century"—like "China" or the "Rise of China"—is an expression that can never capture the contested geographies, histories, and visions bracketed within it. It is shorthand for a multipolar world that orbits around China. The Chinese Century is an American neologism, coined in the early 2000s as the PRC overtook the United States as the world's premier economic power (Fishman 2004; Stiglitz 2015).[4] The moniker suggests a linear progression from British, to American, to Chinese hegemony from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. The Chinese Century conjoins Chinese economic ascension with US imperial decline. While the United States began the globally unpopular War on Terror, the PRC emerged on the world stage: the 2001 entrance into the World Trade Organization, the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, and the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, a multitrillion-dollar infrastructure project larger than the Marshall Plan, to create a New Silk Road across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Oceania. American discourses about the Chinese Century and the PRC's neocolonial exploits in Africa extend a Cold War legacy of treating China as a threat to be known, contained, and harnessed for US economic and imperial interests.[5] Throughout this book, I treat the Chinese Century as a world-making project in formation, one of several competing global visions amid interimperial realignments (Rofel and Rojas 2022). The Chinese Century is provisional, incomplete, and aspirational, more of an idea and global horizon than totalizing geopolitical reality. South Africa is not a generic place where the Chinese Century unfolds but is an active force in its transformation.

While the Chinese Century seems to have emerged only in recent decades, from a *longue durée* perspective it signals the world economy coming full circle. From the fifteenth to twenty-first centuries, as Giovanni Arrighi periodizes, historical capitalism has systemically evolved through successive cycles of accumulation broken into "long centuries" of Genoese, Dutch, British, US, and Chinese hegemony. Each denotes a transition between world powers and a shift in the center of global accumulation processes (Arrighi 1994, 2007; Braudel 2009). The New Asian Age marks the cyclical return of modern Chinese empire in the age of neoliberal globalization, not a new phenomenon as understood in Eurocentric economic historiography. From 1500 to 1800, a Sinocentric international order, not a Western one, organized the early modern world economy (Frank 1998). European merchants arrived in South China with silver from the Americas to trade for silk and ceramics. With its trade networks and tributary system, imperial China was the final sink for the world's silver. In the late eighteenth century, Asia and Europe began to trade places. Europe amassed wealth through colonial conquest and slavery in Africa and the Americas and gunboat-secured "free" trade with Asia. Following the Opium Wars, the Qing state was forced to cede Hong Kong to Britain and grant extraterritoriality to Western merchants and missionaries who looted ports, evaded tariffs, and inflicted racial terror with impunity (Driscoll 2020; Li 2008; Lowe 2015). China's coasts supplied contract labor and the commodities necessary for the development of liberal free trade and settlement of New World colonies. Chinese victimization by Japanese and Western powers became the basis for Han nationalism, which paved the way for the 1949 revolution that split China into the PRC and the Republic of China. Mao Zedong's domestic program of class struggle developed the modern social, political, and technological infrastructure for China's integration into the globalizing world economy from the 1980s onward, in turn catalyzing the current trading of places (Li 2008).

From a long historical perspective, Africa and other Asian nations supplied the land, labor, and raw materials for the expansion of capitalism. South Africa played a key role through its gold. The nation is a colonial palimpsest, with overlapping histories of Dutch, Dutch-descended Afrikaner, and British settlement, as well as white supremacy. The Cape of Good Hope marks the point where the Atlantic Ocean flows into the Indian Ocean. Since the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in 1652 and the British in 1795, the Cape connected maritime routes for Dutch mercantile capitalism and the British slave trade (until the latter's abolition in 1833). The Cape

was home to the Kimberley diamond fields, which laid the infrastructure for the subsequent gold rush. The colonies that became the Union of South Africa in 1910—including the Cape's diamond fields, Natal's sugar estates, and the Transvaal's gold mines—created fortunes for British mining houses and financiers. With gold as the world's currency standard for most of the twentieth century, Johannesburg's mines played a central role in the global expansion of capitalism. Within this sweeping history of Afro-Asian connection, I am interested in the dramatic change of China and South Africa's places in the world through one point of inflection. In the early twentieth century, Chinese were brought to the Rand on British ships to work alongside African laborers. At the turn of the millennium, the Chinese returned as capitalists and exploiters of southern African labor.

Sino-African worlds are produced through the convergence of two ascendant moments of the late 1990s and early 2000s: the "rise of China" and "Africa rising." As country and a continent, respectively, China's and Africa's uneven incorporation into the capitalist world economy has entangled Chinese and African futures, prompting Achille Mbembe to pose "Africa as a Chinese question" (2021, 34). In response to a crisis of overaccumulation of capital in the United States, global productive forces have shifted to China, subsequently leading to China's spectacular economic boom and a crisis of overaccumulation (Harvey 2003). Africa now functions as a spatial fix for overcapacity in China (C. K. Lee 2017). The influx of foreign investment to the continent has fueled rapid but unequal economic growth with higher incomes and new consumer markets, including demand for Chinese goods. Crucially, China, with its large geographical area and population, has historically functioned as the last major reserve for global capitalist accumulation. Compounding capitalism-driven climate catastrophe, the mobilization of this last reserve portends the terminal crisis of capitalism as we know it (Li 2008). I situate ordinary African and Chinese actors at this twenty-first-century moment of capitalism as capital exhausts its global frontiers and reserves.

Today's promise of Sino-African engagements harkens back to the Afro-Asian and Third World solidarities of the Bandung era, a period of anticolonial solidarities marking the 1955 gathering of leaders from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East in Bandung, Indonesia. The apartheid state was not represented at Bandung, but like many twentieth-century Black revolutionaries, South African freedom fighters found inspiration in the armed struggle sweeping Algeria, Cuba, and the PRC. African National Congress (ANC) members studied the writings of Mao, peasant revolutions, and the

student-led anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement. Walter Sisulu and members of the Spear of the Nation, the armed wing of the ANC, visited the PRC to acquire military equipment and training (Meredith 1998). South African poet Dennis Brutus visited for political inspiration (Yoon 2022). In the other direction, Mao sent a cable to South Africa voicing concern over the apartheid regime's impact on Chinese merchants (Snow 1988, 70). These lesser-known solidarities and exchanges destabilize statist narratives of African-Chinese engagements and point to submerged radical traditions. Decades after the rise and fall of anticolonial nationalisms, the global consciousness and political imagination of the Bandung era remain a force in people's lives (C. J. Lee 2010). African and Chinese state appeals to south–south cooperation breathe new life into the unfinished project of decolonization, even though these appeals are mostly rhetorical. In the way Mao claimed to lead the Third World toward decolonization, Xi Jinping claims to lead the emerging economies of the Global South, most notably BRICS (the bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, expanded to include Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in 2024). China's place in and of the Global South is ambiguous, somewhere between Global North and Global South, semiperiphery and core. China's southern collaborations redirect southern surpluses to southern destinations (Arrighi 2007). But the triumphalism of China over the West papers over the PRC's fraught relationship with Hong Kong, Taiwan, and autonomous regions and its expansionist ambitions in the Global South. This book sits with the many layered histories, moods, narratives, and emancipatory possibilities of the twenty-first century—of postcapitalist, decolonial futures—while critiquing the way histories of anticolonial struggle cover for regional hegemony and capitalist extraction.

Racism without Whiteness, Colonialism without the West

Since the formal end of apartheid in 1994, xenophobia has impeded South Africa's vision for a multiracial democracy. In a stroke of historical amnesia, virulent xenophobic violence has been directed toward Black foreign nationals, southern Africans who labored on farms, mines, factories, and domestic households and contributed to South Africa's liberation struggle. Colonialism and apartheid continue to manifest as anti-Blackness and xenophobia. In 2008, sixty-two people—mostly Malawians, Mozambicans, and Zimbabweans—were killed in xenophobic attacks (Hassim, Kupe, and

Worby 2008). When I returned to China City in 2015, a second wave of xenophobic violence swept through the country after a Somali shop owner fatally shot a Black South African teenager in the southwestern township of Soweto. After months of turmoil, the country stood on the brink of national emergency. In the majority migrant space of China City, fear of imminent violence was palpable. A xenophobic attack did not require much imagination. The previous year, after a slate of immigration restrictions was passed, one of China City's two white tenants feared that the mall could be razed to the ground in a repeat of the events of 2008. As the situation in 2015 worsened, shopworkers—nearly all Malawian and Zimbabwean foreign nationals, many of whom were Soweto residents—exercised precautions traveling to and from work. Some stopped going to work altogether, and a few chose emergency repatriation. Without other options, most continued to work, praying for their own safety. The atmosphere was dark. Workers watched videos of gruesome beatings and killings on their phones. Frank, a security guard, told me, "I don't want to die in a foreign land. I will die in my father country. I will die in Nigeria."

Chinese traders monitored the situation on the social media platform WeChat. They paid close attention to the looting of foreign-owned businesses and described the tumult as riots (*baoluan*). Chinese shopkeepers in cities and townships were occasionally caught up in the mix but not targeted like their Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, and Somali counterparts. Chinese migrants also consumed images of vigilante violence but took them as proof of African "savagery." Chinese traders understood that southern African employees were the most vulnerable, but that also led to feelings of their own immunity: if a single Chinese national were harmed, they believed the Chinese consulate could pressure the South African government to protect them. As one person expressed it, China's investment in Africa buffered the Chinese from resentment toward Black foreign nationals: "When Africans want to eat, they go to China." China's global stature set the traders apart from other racialized migrants, including racially adjacent South Asian traders. While the xenophobic attacks were a matter of life and death for China City's African workers, the Chinese traders were more concerned about employee absences and property loss.

At the height of the unrest in late April 2015, rumors of a mob traveling from Durban to Johannesburg spread through social media. The China Malls near the inner city closed early as a precaution, and China City went on lockdown. I was near the entrance to a shop when someone ran in announcing, "They're here, they're here!" Word quickly spread that a group

of men had reached the mall's gates, and traders and workers, including myself, hid in the dark behind locked doors, a fleeting moment of solidarity through shared vulnerability. The lockdown ended after it was revealed that a Malawian worker mistook a group of running contingent workers as a mob. On the ride home to Cyrildene Chinatown, my fellow passengers praised the loyal employees who helped to secure their shops and cursed the disloyal ones who bolted. One passenger crassly speculated that the lockdown was a stunt, perpetrated so that "lazy" workers could go home early. In the following weeks, local Chinese leaders seized an opportunity to raise the profile of the mainland Chinese community in South African politics. Prominent businessmen, including China City's developer, donated to relief efforts and organized a bus to take one hundred Chinese traders to participate in a citywide march against xenophobia. African workers, however, had to stay at work. After the unrest was quelled, the state reenergized its efforts to curb "illegal immigration." After a Chinese factory was raided, a Chinese association called attention on social media to hefty fines bosses would pay for employing undocumented African migrants—namely, "illegal workers [*heigong*] from neighboring countries" (*Nanfei 365*, 2015a, my translation). In China the term *heigong* refers to undocumented workers, but in South Africa it racializes undocumented African workers as Black. This event impressed on how I think about lateral relations of power. How do we grapple with racialization, global racial power, and anti-Blackness when white bodies and Western discourses are largely absent? What difference does "China"—with its current stature and past subjugation—make?

Race and racism have been long ignored in China because of the myth of a monoracial society and an emphasis on ethnic (*minzu*), not racial, difference. Further clouding critical inquiry is a zero-sum logic whereby Han Chinese are the victims of Euro-American racism as the originators of race and racism, and therefore cannot themselves be racist. Contemplating Chinese racism and empire is challenging because of multiple racial vocabularies and dramatic role reversals between China and the West in a relatively compressed period. Chinese people have been subjugated to Western imperialism and racism, but since the turn of the century, the PRC has become a regional hegemonic, sub-imperial, or even neocolonial force in Africa, the Asia Pacific, the Caribbean, and Latin America (K.-H. Chen 2010). Additionally, scholars have questioned if *race* and *racism* mean the same thing in Chinese and Western contexts. Core to the West's domination of the non-West, race has been reproduced over centuries through

Euro-American empires, liberalism, and global white supremacy (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019; Lowe 2015; Pierre 2012). Imperialism introduced the construct of race to new places where race, or a concept by another name, was retooled within existing epistemologies of difference, hierarchy, and exclusion (Goldberg 2009, 3–4). And yet, race does not exclusively belong to the West to dominate the non-West. Racial ideas, unmoored from their "Western origins," can still serve as conduits for power in "non-Western" settings. Such is the case in Chinese racial thought that combines premodern ideas of social difference akin to race with Western racial ideas that circulated through missionaries, Chinese students in the West, and the Japanese translation of Western texts (Fennell 2013; S. Lan 2017). Even as some features might be recognizably Western, Chinese racial thought cannot be reduced to a Western import (Dikötter [1992] 2015). Chinese racial ideas—of color, class, civilization, human, animal, beast, and slave—emerge from a composite of premodern and modern Chinese *and* Western racial thought. Regardless of irreducible differences between Chinese and Western racial ideas, race has a social existence in China. Racial ideas are configured and mobilized in particular ways in Sino-African contexts.

Questions concerning race and empire have played out fiercely within China-Africa studies, a multidisciplinary field that emerged alongside the renaissance of China's engagements with African nation-states and African migration to Chinese cities. The debate is political and theoretical: whether the terms *racism* and *neocolonialism* apply to China and how to define them. Often assertions of Chinese racism problematically assume that the Chinese racialize and Africans are racialized; like the colonizer and colonized, the former is powerful and the latter powerless. Indeed, Chinese migrants are racialized as "the Chinese," but this does not negate how Chinese enact racism toward racial others.[6] An analysis of race in Sino-African contexts must contend with multiple directionalities, levels, and scales of racialization (Huynh and Park 2018) and the mutuality of Sinophobia, xenophobia, and anti-Black racism within local and global configurations of racial power. To break out of limiting binaries, scholars have triangulated African, Asian, and Euro-American racial identities and categories (Castillo 2020; S. Lan 2017; C. J. Lee 2021; Monson 2013; Monson and Rupp 2013). Whiteness and the West are the "dominant absences" of Sino-African relations, the silent interlocutors of interminority dynamics that are exonerated when they drop out of the frame (Palumbo-Liu 1994).

Investigating what race means in a Sino-African context requires multiple contextual frames and vantage points, and even so, there is something

that exceeds "race." Race has distinct meanings, genealogies, and histories in China and South Africa. There is no single word for it in the Chinese language. In modern Chinese racial thought, race has indexed China's place in the world. Before the arrival of Europeans, a hierarchy of skin color already existed in China. During the late Qing and Republican eras, Han racial identity, envisioned as a common patrilineal line and territory, was invented as a nationalist response to Japanese and Western imperialism. Chinese intellectuals, inspired by Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionary theories, turned consciousness of skin color and genealogical thinking into a theory of race as a breed of lineage, or *zhongzu*, the term closest to *race*. These thinkers divided the world into a hierarchy of white and yellow at the top, red or brown in the middle, and Black at the bottom (Dikötter [1992] 2015). In the Mao era, ethnicity (*minzu*) was introduced as a state category of difference that intersects with gender and class to confer status and modernity (Schein 2000). Transracial solidarity of the peoples of Africa, China, and Latin America against Western racism and imperialism was official state discourse (Fennell 2013). Since the 1980s, racial discourses took a nationalist turn. In a reversal of Maoist discourse, Chinese universities were rocked by anti-Black racism against African students. Given state restrictions on family planning, serology and eugenics regained popularity. As China's place in the world has dramatically changed over the past century, so have racial meanings and mappings of China and Chineseness, Africa and Blackness, and the West and whiteness.

Whereas race and racism have been ambiguous in China, South Africa has been treated as a textbook—even exceptional—case. Under early twentieth-century segregation and apartheid, policing racial boundaries was the cornerstone of social, political, and economic life. From 1948 to 1994, the Nationalist Party installed four official categories: White, Coloured, Asiatic (Indian), and Native (Bantu or African). Race was a fundamentally unstable biological and cultural construct tied to color, class, and status; its hybridity made racial categories open to commonsensical interpretation (Posel 2001, 59). Racial classifications determined where one could live, study, work, and move around in the city and with whom one could be intimate or marry. Racial classifications were elastic, and racial boundaries porous, but apartheid meant the "social absolutization of race" (Goldberg 2009, 301). In the postapartheid era, despite the principle of nonracialism and democratic rule, race continues to shape life chances through the imbrication of race, class, and citizenship and lasting segregation of geographies and institutions. Despite the messiness of mapping out multiple genealogies and histories of

"race," it is indispensable to naming and analyzing power in Sino-African relations. Culture, language, nation, and ethnicity all fall short.

Of special interest is Chinese anti-Blackness, a ubiquitous yet undertheorized pillar of Sino-African engagements. Anti-Blackness is a condition for the perpetuation of global capitalism, not a secondary effect, and thus key to understanding global racial capitalism (Bledsoe and Wright 2019). Anti-Blackness is analytically necessary to theorizing race in postcolonial Africa and global racial ideologies (Pierre 2013). Without specifically naming anti-Blackness, its dynamics get lost in discussions of anti-Asian/anti-Black racism that make them commensurate under white supremacy. As Afropessimists have defined it, anti-Blackness is the absolute negation of Black life, the ontological condition of Black nonbeing and suffering in the afterlife of slavery. Slavery is a relational dynamic and structure of violence, not a historical era or event. Blackness is the constitutive outside of humanity; it is universal and singular and nonanalogous with the colonialism and racism that non-Black people of color experience (Sexton 2010; Sharpe 2016; Costa Vargas and Jung 2021; Wilderson 2020, 2021). Chinese racial discourses combine Chinese and Western racial ideas to engender specific forms of anti-Blackness that complicate how we understand it as a global phenomenon. I inquire into what anti-Blackness means in a Chinese context in which racial slavery has been relatively limited, and Blackness is in translation. Black (*hei*), which refers to both the color and the racial category, signifies the sinister, dark, hidden, shadowy, and illegal (Sautman 1994). Black is associated with undocumented Black labor (*heigong*), black or illicit markets, and the "slave race" (Shih 2013). Throughout the book, I denote Chinese Blackness as *hei* as a reminder of its unstable meaning in translation. Chinese anti-Blackness may overlap with its Euro-American counterpart but remains distinctive. But this does not mean that Chinese anti-Blackness is outside the structure. Despite *hei*'s situational meanings, Chinese discourses reproduce anti-Blackness in global discursive contexts (Sheridan 2023). It is necessary to theorize Chinese anti-Blackness on its own terms, and comparatively and relationally.

I diverge from Afropessimist theories of anti-Blackness and arrive at its globality differently. In a critique of Afropessimism's core texts, Annie Olaloku-Teriba interrogates the assumption of Black as a stable, coherent category with global generalizability (2018, 105). Black becomes emptied of its historical specificity and subsumes African and slave (Olaloku-Teriba 2018). As Iyko Day (2016) further problematizes, the irreducibility of slavery and exceptionality of anti-Blackness foreclose a comparative, relational, and

dialectical analysis of race, colonialism, and capitalism. Building on these generative critiques, I treat anti-Blackness as historically contingent, not transhistorical, and as globally heterogeneous, not a unified totality. Anti-Blackness is not wholly apart from how white supremacy, settler colonialism, slavery, indenture, and imperialism have unfolded concurrently across continents and peoples. To be clear, I do not offer a genealogical study of Chinese anti-Blackness. I give an account of twenty-first-century Chinese articulations of *Blackness* and *Africanness*—terms that are interchangeable in contemporary Chinese racial discourses (K. Huang 2020)—to understand anti-Blackness as a varied global phenomenon. Although anti-Blackness is rooted in European colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy, in the era of China's global ascendance, its ever-expanding structure enlists Chinese subjects into racial projects in South Africa, where anti-Blackness has been foundational.

Mirroring debates on race and racism, dominant characterizations of Chinese neocolonialism in Africa have launched definitional debates that are theoretical, methodological, ideological, and historiographic. Imperialism, neocolonialism, and empire are often used polemically and analytically in ahistorical and inaccurate ways.[7] Duncan M. Yoon (2023) insightfully points out that although there are similarities between Chinese investment and Western neocolonialism in African countries, they cannot be conflated. What is often called Chinese neocolonialism is a different form of extraction and exploitation that nevertheless triggers the collective trauma of European colonialism. Ching Kwan Lee (2017) proposes "global China" to name the geopolitical formation of power of transnational Chinese state capital. Indeed, the PRC does not act in Africa as an imperial power with military bases and foreign direct rule, but it acts within a system of capitalist imperialism that combines "the politics of state and empire" with "molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time" (Harvey 2003, 26). The Chinese Century is a Sinocentric imperial vision with unique forms of global expansion, influence, presence, and power that we have not yet properly named. What is coalescing into Chinese empire, provisionally speaking, manifests in the molecular movements of capital across uneven geographies of development long made by empires "proper," and in the case of South Africa, ongoing processes of settler colonialism and their structures for accumulation. To consider the question of empire differently, the legacies of Euro-American empires provide the material conditions for Chinese capital accumulation in Africa, not the normative criteria to assess China's imperial likeness.

Further complicating these debates, Chinese historiography has traditionally framed China as a victim of Japanese and Western imperialism, and not a modern empire with imperial ambitions and capacities. Today the Chinese state employs the nationalist narrative of a century of colonial humiliation to legitimize its repression of ethnic and religious minorities in Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang. These regions are autonomous in name only; they are colonies settled by Han Chinese during mid-Qing continental expansion and recolonized by the PRC (Byler 2022). The PRC is the "successor and executor of empire" (Shih 2011, 711). On the politics of naming, it is useful to recall that US empire has always hid behind exceptionalism, asserting its unlikeness from Europe's overseas colonies. As Shu-mei Shih urged over a decade ago, "The spectacular rise of China as a superpower perhaps only now compels us to recalibrate existing discourses of empire and postcoloniality" (2011, 709). In the twilight of US and Western supremacy, new theories of (post)colonialism are needed as capital veers east and south. Drawing from ethnographic work on Chinese investment in Vietnam's natural resource industry, Kimberly Kay Hoang states, "This is not a simple story of exploiter/exploited, colonizer/dispossessed, but rather a new tension that is possible only in the aftermath of colonialism and imperialism." It is time to "theorize and conceptualize colonialism outside of overused binaries like East/West, global North/global South, or First World/Third World" (2022, 153). Critically, colonial empires need not be European. In places like Xinjiang, as Darren Byler argues in his ethnography of Uyghur dispossession, we are witnessing "new sequences of capitalist ethnoracialization that are not generated directly by Western powers" (2022, 10). Imperialism, capitalism, and settler colonialism constitute overlapping yet distinct modes of power. They name formations that inevitably adapt, and thus our analysis must be adapted. Chinese imperial and colonial formations may digress from nineteenth- and twentieth-century definitions but may belatedly become "classically twenty-first" definitions (Karl 2020).

I also consider Sino-African capitalist projects through racial capitalism. As Julian Go notes, "if we are to insist on the global character of racial capitalism, we must assume that analysts' racial classifications are global as well" (2021, 41). What is taking shape is not "Chinese racial capitalism" as much as "Chinese capitalism" or "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" that treats capitalist activities in and beyond China as a cultural variation of capitalism's universal core features.[8] Such a construction of "Chinese racial capitalism" assumes a universal paradigm of racial capitalism based in the Euro-American example and ambiguously modified by an essential notion

of Chineseness. In the Sino-African context, racial capitalism emerges sui generis with the movement of capital—always global and globalizing, racial and racializing—along south–east axes and distinct rubrics of race. In the dialectics of capital and race, capitalism continuously remakes itself while incorporating the particularities of Chinese racial formations and postsocialist capitalist developments in China, and at the same time, the reorganization of race and economy in postapartheid South Africa.

The complexity of Sino-African realities demands a rejection of readymade concepts and paradigms, as well as imaginative methodologies that break from the positivist, social scientific approaches that dominate China-Africa studies. Calling for a decolonial transformation of such studies, Christopher J. Lee points out that the European colonial past haunts the present as scholars rely on metanarratives of colonial scrambles and old paradigms, which "can foreclose new methodologies and obscure a more layered set of foundations and archives" (2021, 230). Toward creating new archives and paradigms, I take a palimpsestic approach to the interimperial present. Empires are coforming: as one empire emerges, it enfolds and incorporates others (Doyle 2020). Colonial histories are not flat and linear but form a mat in which "threads meet up, loop each other, and interlock" (Manjapra 2020, 5). The Chinese Century is not a linear progression from or even a superimposition of global hegemony over earlier epochs—the Dutch Golden Age, the British Imperial Century, and the American Century—but overlays them, actively building on and extending them. Imperial forms are recursive as they "*fold back on themselves* and, in that refolding, reveal new surfaces, and new planes" (Stoler 2017, 26, emphasis in the original). History follows a recursive logic that expands and calcifies what came before. Theorizing in a North American settler colonial context, Rob Nichols notes that "recursion is not . . . simple tautology. . . . [R]ecursive procedures loop back upon themselves in a 'boot-strapping' manner such that each iteration is not only different from the last but builds upon or augments its original postulate" (2020, 9). Returning to Arrighi's formulation of long centuries, each hegemonic transition enlarges the spatial and social foundations of capitalism, akin to the Marxian formula for the conversion of money to commodity to more money (M–C–M') on a global scale. Like a palimpsest, each hegemon overlaps with its predecessor and proceeds in a double movement forward and back, resurrecting and reconstituting older regimes in an expanded capitalist world system (Arrighi 1994, 79–80). Along these lines, we might think of the incorporation of China into global structures of racial capitalism, empire, and white supremacy through a similar logic of recur-

sion and double movement. The integration of Chinese difference expands on the Dutch, British, and American centuries with the effect of enlarging the legacies of European empire, settler colonialism, and white supremacy "after whiteness." Through the mining belt mall, I trace how Chinese racial, capitalist, and imperial forms are layered with Euro-American ones. Chinese neocolonialism, as the scramble narrative posits, does not simply replicate twentieth-century colonial modalities of power but intensifies, proliferates, and reconfigures them through recursion.

A Mall at the Center of the World

Located off Main Reef Road—the road's namesake being the gold-rich main reef series that started it all—China City is a symbol of Johannesburg's Chinese future and its gold mining and manufacturing pasts. Surrounding the mall are scrapyards, warehouses, derelict factories, and open mining shafts. China City resembles the megamarkets in Yiwu, China, the "small commodity capital of the world," that attract importers from every continent, including traders at China City. Surrounding the mall are row after row of decommissioned shipping containers—colorful, rust-worn boxes stacked two high that have been repurposed as warehouses and conveniently form a secure perimeter around the premises. Within the labyrinth of hundreds of shops are side corridors, stairwells, and back entrances where one can stumble on lifeworlds hidden in plain sight: an apartment complex, an underground bank, a grocery store, a prayer room, a weeknight cricket game, a vegetable garden, and a feral cat colony. I roamed the mall's corridors first as a visitor and consumer, and then, over the course of a year, as a worker, resident, and dedicated student.

All kinds of economic life flourish on the mall's edges. Outside the gate, a fleet of minibus taxis thrives on the traffic between town and the numerous China Malls in the area. There are long-distance bakkies to take customers and their wholesale hauls beyond city limits, and taxi drivers who have made China City their home base for years. China City's parking lot alone sustains many livelihoods. On busy weekends and holidays, the mall receives around six hundred cars per hour; the two thousand parking spots are full. Dozens of Zimbabwean car guards and car washers in fluorescent vests and blue coveralls adroitly direct traffic in synchronous movements, making a modest fortune from small coins. Informal vendors go around selling food and basic provisions. In a remote corner of the mall, a subcontracted team of recyclers comprising Black South African and Malawian men swiftly sorts

through heaps of plastic, cardboard, and recyclable waste generated inside the mall. On the busy corner of Main Reef Road, Zimbabwean hawkers, whom the mall security guards call "robot boys," resell goods from the mall and supply the guards with tips (for cash) on suspicious activity. Whereas other businesses treat them as a nuisance, they are the eyes and ears of China City. From early morning to early evening, over a dozen "container boys," underemployed Black South African men, wait outside the gate to unload containers. This is the final step in a container's monthlong journey from a wholesale market or factory in Guangzhou or Yiwu, to inspection at the Port of Durban, and finally to China City.

A host of services for the mall's hundreds of migrant shopworkers exists on the edges. Cross-border operators offering remittance services to Malawi and Zimbabwe circulate between taxi ranks and the China Malls. Just outside the gate, young Malawian men sell loose cigarettes and fat cakes from plastic bins. Older Black South African women serve *pap* (porridge) and stew from food stalls. Some of the ingredients come from the vegetable garden at the back of the mall, a labor of love between Frank, a Nigerian security guard, and "the gardener," the mall's longtime groundskeeper, an older Black South African man. Frank lovingly cares for the colony of feral cats that sleep beneath shipping containers and roam through the garden. The diverse actors on the mall's edges share a marginal location among Johannesburg's poor and paperless: underemployed and unemployed residents of Black townships, street vendors without permits, and southern African migrants without papers. In the symbiosis of core and periphery, they are indispensable to the mall's daily functioning. These contingent arrangements can last for years, counterintuitively showing that precarious livelihoods and urban life are not always in flux.

This book is based on eighteen months of fieldwork, from 2013 to 2020, which was primarily conducted in Johannesburg and abruptly cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. The names of all people and places, except for public figures, have been changed. While the specific locations of places I write about matter, I have omitted details about exact locations to protect people engaging in illicit activities, even if they are already open secrets to the state. At China City, I worked as a shop assistant to get an inside look at day-to-day business operations and relationships, splitting my time between Jenny's party goods store and Xiao Li's clothing store. In these shops I experienced the repetitive, cyclical, and seasonal rhythms of "mall time"—that is, having no choice but to sit behind the register hour after hour, day after day—felt most acutely

I.1 A party goods shop at China City. Photo by the author.

I.2 A hidden vegetable garden and feral cat colony. Photo by the author.

I.3 A recycler sorts through China City's waste. Photo by the author.

when Jenny returned to Fujian for a month and entrusted me with her store. Although they could sometimes be slow, these hours often went by quickly due to conversations with shopworkers, customers, and security guards and sudden events like a robbery, firing, deportation, or lockdown. For most of the time that I worked at the mall, I lived in Cyrildene Chinatown. I lived in a boisterous household of traders, most of them relatives or hometown acquaintances from Fuqing, a county-level city in Fujian Province famous for entrepreneurial emigration and clandestine migration. The house belonged to Mr. Zheng, a China City tenant and revered community leader of Cyrildene Chinatown, who turned out to be a retired human smuggler. He was my window into migration processes, underground economies, and the network of men who govern the Chinese migrant community in the liminal jurisdiction between the Chinese and South African states.

I.4 A Malawian tailor fashions curtains. Photo by the author.

Every morning I took my seat in the back of a minibus taxi that left Mr. Zheng's house for China City. The vehicle was an old security van, with its logos still intact, and these logos ingeniously shielded passengers from corrupt police and opportunistic thieves who targeted cash-carrying Chinese traders. During each ride I listened to my fellow passengers, most of them workers at Mr. Zheng's businesses, recount their exchanges with customers and employees and share gossip. The taxi afforded more than door-to-door convenience. Taking it was akin to "walking in the city," an opportunity to traverse and see Johannesburg as Chinese migrants did.

In addition to living in Cyrildene Chinatown, for several months I lived at China City's on-site apartments, a gated building that was only for Chinese traders and workers, including those who worked at other China Malls. South Asian traders at China City were turned away and lived elsewhere.

I experienced the mall after dark, with its rhythms of reproductive labor and dramas among family members, business rivals, and nosy neighbors. They welcomed an ethnographer living in their midst, the trade-off being my American English and cultural capital. I threw myself into this world as fully as I could. I joined my Chinese neighbors on trips to casinos, restaurants, karaoke bars, and shopping malls after the workday was over, and I accompanied them to the offices of immigration lawyers and banks.

Most of my interlocutors were the Chinese traders, Chinese shop assistants, and African shopworkers I saw on a nearly daily basis. I conducted fifty semistructured interviews in English and Mandarin, the latter being my first—but rustiest—language. At times the technical parlance and regional dialects of the mall exceeded the Mandarin I grew up with in my household and later relearned in graduate school when I enrolled in a heritage speaker class. I often consulted a dictionary app on my phone, which to my advantage would prompt my interlocutors to explain situational meanings. My nonnative tongue marked my positionality between inside and outside; it was both an asset and limitation that made my fieldwork possible.[9] Sitting in shops and homes, I interviewed Chinese traders about their lives back in China, migration journeys, and business practices. My interactions with African shopworkers and security guards were more constrained. Chinese traders were wary of what observant employees and security guards knew and might say about them. I interviewed workers and security guards in bars, secluded spaces before work, and over the phone in the evening. To capture a variety of perspectives, I interviewed Chinese and South African community leaders, bankers, accountants, real estate developers, mall managers, security guards, customers, and shipping agents. I spent time with car guards, custodians, recyclers, hawkers, container workers, taxi drivers, food vendors, and customers.

Although the subjectivity of the fieldworker is always vexed, it is especially fraught in China-Africa research in which there is a multiplicity of subjects and perspectives captured in the name China, then hyphenated with Africa, a country and a continent. Like the space of the hyphen, the liminal zone where social boundaries are in flux is a privileged epistemic location. For my Chinese interlocutors, my having an ancestral home in Hangzhou and my parents' story of the Cultural Revolution helped place me in a generational story, while my cultural Americanness and citizenship set me apart. Many of my Chinese interlocutors wished to go to the United States, and they asked questions about the cost of real estate, vehicles, and food and the availability of jobs. They marveled at the ease of traveling with a US passport and wondered why I would opt to leave the United States for South Africa.

By luck, I made early connections with influential Chinese businessmen. Their endorsement functioned as an all-access pass at my fieldwork sites and revealed the social authority of the "boss." Being associated with these powerful men quickly legitimized my outside presence, but I was afraid of losing access if I asked too many questions about illicit activities or said the wrong thing about labor or racism. Being ethnically Chinese put me on an inside track for opportunities for participant observation that would be otherwise closed, but I was taken aback by the immediate trustworthiness and nature of inside status. My interlocutors would glibly share racist remarks about African workers and customers, expecting that I believed the same by virtue of skin color. The remarks were pedagogical and normalizing in teaching and enforcing the rules of race. Wanting to hear more, I usually silently went along, a complicit act to uncover what I was after. At its best, ethnography is the coproduction of knowledge and not a one-way transaction. But coproduction is still fraught with complicities and the colonial tradition of Africanist anthropology (Schumaker 2001).

Among my African interlocutors who worked for my Chinese interlocutors, I was "Chinese, but not Chinese *like them*." My Chinese racial positionality aligned me with the power they associated with Chinese migrants, perhaps akin to the colonial anthropologist, but what distinguished me was my Americanness and political orientation in the world. I sympathized with them about their working conditions and asked them about their lives in Johannesburg and back home in Malawi, Nigeria, or Zimbabwe. Our discussions provided the critical language of racial capitalism, colonialism, slavery, xenophobia, and racism. My African interlocutors asked me questions about the United States, inquiring about finding a job in New York City or the uprisings against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri. Recalling Dominic's remark about Chinese "strangeness," African workers were curious about their employers and asked about Chinese food, habits, and language. Raising the stakes, they also asked me to talk to their employers about their pay, believing their bosses might listen to "one of their own." These moments tested my ability to act in solidarity with African workers without compromising my relationships with my Chinese interlocutors, on whom I depended for access, housing, and transportation. I made suggestions when I could but was usually dismissed as an idealistic outsider. The further I distanced myself from my Chinese interlocutors, the closer I became with my African interlocutors, and vice versa; my fieldwork required a constant negotiation between "two sides," and each wanted me to tell a story that was at odds with the other.

My insights about race, gender, and sexuality draw from the ways in which I am interpellated into the identities and relations of power about which I write. As a young woman on my own, I was viewed as nonthreatening and vulnerable, in need of protection from Johannesburg's racial and sexual dangers. I became acutely aware of the racial anxieties surrounding the "Chinese girl," the young, unmarried Chinese wageworker, through the way I approximated her. When I began my fieldwork, what I thought were benign relationships with African men opened me up to gossip and speculation. During my first summer as a visitor at China City, I spent my afternoons with Marcus, Julius, Roger, and Ziggy, a group of Malawian men (about whom there will be more in this book). We would eat lunch and talk while sitting on a narrow bench. The Chinese traders and workers in the vicinity refused to speak to me, because hanging out with these men raised suspicion among the Chinese. One Chinese worker, using a pejorative term for Black people, asked point-blank, "Why do you talk to black devils [*heigui*]?" This kind of interrogation happened several times. Other Chinese women gave me unsolicited warnings about untoward glances. Among South Asian traders, there were rumors that I was a sex worker. Chinese women have been stereotypically associated with illicit and commercial sex, and in this case, sex work was how my fraternizing across racial lines was seen.

As feminist ethnographers have insisted, the boundaries around identities are fluid, contested, and policed. There are negotiations, entrance fees, and embodied costs tied to race, gender, and sexuality (Berry et al. 2017; D. M. Goldstein 2016; Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020; Hoang 2015). Elsewhere I have written about a sexual assault that I experienced, an ordinary acquaintance rape except that it happened in "the field" (Huang 2016; Huang et al. 2019). This assault profoundly altered my relationships with my interlocutors in South Africa, and especially the person whom I call Mr. Zheng, who years later apologized for failing to protect me. Sexual assault can undo years of building relationships and uproot research plans overnight. It is also a predictable consequence of the social embeddedness that fieldwork demands. Like fieldwork, sexual assault is about vulnerability, power, and the ethical relationships of consent, which are more complicated than we can ever anticipate from the outset. Over time, my relationship to this story has changed; no longer does it feel urgent to talk about it. I don't want to allow this single story to overshadow my work, an impossible separation of home and field, theory and practice, and public and private. Given the options of self-citation, omission, confession, or disclosure, I raise but don't retell this story to recognize the embodied realities of ethnographic

knowledge production, especially about masculinist concepts like capitalism, and the stories that perhaps we all withhold.

The Outline of This Book

Reconfiguring Racial Capitalism offers a palimpsestic methodology for reading the colonial present. In Part I, "Layered Histories," each chapter works through a set of historical entanglements, transnational connections, and untidy conceptual overlays to tease out the recursive logics of history and contextualize Chinese ascendance in the long arc of Euro-American colonial racial capitalism. Chapter 1, "Palimpsest City," traces new Chinese developments back to the discovery of gold in 1886. The chapter examines the making of the mining belt mall, a place that metaphorizes and literalizes the unfolding of the Chinese Century across a topography of colonialism and apartheid. It visits Johannesburg's two Chinatowns, and other important Sino-African spaces in the city, to underscore fragmented geographies of Chineseness and counter notions of a singular Chinese diaspora, stable Chinese identity, or coherent idea of China. Chapter 2, "Sojourner Colonialism," tells the stories of Chinese migrants' lives and migratory routes to South Africa. To complicate the dominant depiction of the Chinese migrant as neocolonial pioneer, I recast the entrepreneurial migrant as a sojourner who engages in an *unsettler* colonial project with distinct spatial and temporal logics. These stories reflect the contradictory transformations of economic reform that produced the Chinese Century and propelled many to the Global South to catch up to the promise of a rising China. Their worldviews are apertures into Sinocentric imaginaries of a changing global hierarchy of Blackness, Chineseness, and whiteness.

Social relations at the mall are shaped by sedimented histories of racialization, settler colonialism, capitalism, and migration. Chapter 3, "Afro-Asian Adjacencies," situates contemporary Chinese migration and Asian racialization within nineteenth- and twentieth-century Afro-Asian and Indian Ocean circuits of migration, cultural exchange, and solidarity. It examines the racialization of the present-day Chinese trader by returning to their predecessor, the ex-indentured Indian "Asiatic" trader, two adjacent figures that have represented the threat of "Asian capitalism" at different moments in South Africa. Through archives, I show how Black/African, Chinese/Asian, and white/European were triangulated across metropole and colony. Colonial racialization is elastic and enduring: one hundred years later, the Chinese trader approximately substitutes for the Indian trader. Chapter 4,

"Afterlives of Gold," turns to the labor dynamics at China City through the history of African migrant labor in the gold mines. At the mining belt mall, the memory and legacies of mining live on in the political consciousness of China City's African migrant workers, most of whom come from countries that sent workers to the Rand. I read the mall through the mine to show how Chinese labor regimes remake key features of the colonial mining industry, such as the devaluation of Black labor (*heigong*), methods of discipline, and forms of social reproduction. The Sino-African color line—a twenty-first-century global color line—is enmeshed with the twentieth-century global color line and Black-white relations, triangulating Chinese and European racial, imperial, and capitalist projects and blurring distinctions between old and new.

Shifting to a biopolitical register, Part 2, "Racial Formations," theorizes Chinese racial formations and anti-Blackness at the scale of the body and the encounter, as well as through affective registers. These racial formations attend to the transnational, historical, and intersectional aspects of racial formation by tracing how language, stereotypes, and imaginaries—Black labor, Black criminality, racial nationalism, and racial contagion—shape meanings of Blackness and Chineseness as they circulate between China and South Africa and articulate with capitalist social relations and colonial residues. Chapter 5, "Criminal Obsessions and Racial Fictions," is about the everyday talk of crime that relationally constructs Chinese migrants and property as the victims of Black crime and legitimates stereotypes and surveillance practices. Extending this analysis of Chinese racial formation and anti-Blackness, chapter 6, "The Erotic Life of Chinese Racism," explores the intimacies of difference and proximities of skin. Fear of contagion and taboos around interracial intimacies provide some of the clearest examples of anti-Black racism, illuminating how Han Chinese racial nationalism, capitalism, and imperialism are intertwined with heteropatriarchy, the valorization of whiteness, and the denigration of Blackness.

Part 3, "Frictions and Futures," returns to the question of colonialism and twenty-first-century global horizons. Inspired by Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, chapter 7, "Follow the Surplus," traces the outflow of surplus value from South Africa to China and its underdeveloping effects. It details how Chinese sojourners rely on extralegal practices and African laboring bodies to remit profits back home to China, shining a light on the racial frictions of transnational capitalism that are otherwise opaque. Far from celebratory narratives of "Chinese capitalism" or "south–south cooperation," profits are squeezed from the edge of formal economies and racialized surplus populations. At stake in these quotidian practices is

what happens when they are scaled up to retrench uneven geographies of accumulation. The epilogue, "Afro-Asian Futures," meditates on "failed" Chinese capitalist projects that highlight their embeddedness in sedimented histories and the non-totality of the Chinese Century.

Ultimately, my purpose is not to coin a more specific typology of colonialism or racial capitalism or offer another grand narrative about Africa, China, and the Global South, but to conceptualize a method for grasping the contingent ways in which race, capitalism, and colonialism come together and force us to ask new questions. My account is punctuated by the uncertainty and ambivalence of holding together multiple perspectives and genealogies. I hope this book provides a different way of seeing the colonial present we inhabit to change it.

NOTES

Introduction

1 In 2020, Chinese exports to South Africa totaled US$15,243 million; Chinese imports from South Africa totaled US$9,794 million. For comparison, US exports to South Africa totaled US$4,455 million; US imports from South Africa totaled US$11,440 million (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.).

2 Many thanks to Siân Butcher for the sharp phrase "mining belt mall."

3 While scholars agree that race, capitalism, and colonialism are inextricably related, there is dissensus about their causal relationship. For Cedric Robinson ([1983] 2000), racialism, a form of racialization, already existed within European feudal society to differentiate ethnicized laboring peoples. In Gerald Horne's (2020) account of the long sixteenth century, religious difference in late feudal Europe mutated into racial difference to fuel New World enslavement, white supremacy, and settler colonialism. In these historical accounts, something like race existed in Europe *before* the transition to capitalism and was refined through colonial encounters with new racial others. Hosea Jaffe argues that race emerged *after* capitalism, which successively gave rise to Europe, European civilization, European man, and race: "Before the slave-trade in Africa there was neither a Europe nor a European. . . . Colonialism, especially in Africa, created the concept and ideology of race. Before capitalist-colonialism there were no races" (2017, 46).

4 The Chinese Century is about the PRC and the United States: China's "soft" economic influence is compared with American "hard" military power, the Beijing Consensus with the Washington Consensus, and Chinese authoritarianism with American democracy. In one of the first usages of the term, Ted Fishman (2004) begins his *New York Times* article "The Chinese Century" with "China used to be far away, the country at the bottom of the world," and notes that the PRC and the United States have traded places: "So perhaps we will be as Europe is to us today, and China will be our America."

5 In 2011, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton sought to "pivot" from the imperial theater in the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region, calling for "America's Pacific Century." The "Asia-Pacific represents such a real 21st-century opportunity for us," Clinton wrote. Meanwhile, "Africa holds enormous untapped potential for economic and political development in the years ahead" (Clinton 2011).

6 In a key essay on Sino-African racialization, Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong (2016) argue that Chinese migrants do not have the structural power to enact racism, even if their actions may seem racist, and call for a retooling of understandings of race in a south–south context.

7 There is much scholarship that debunks myths about debt diplomacy, labor regimes, and government corruption related to Chinese aid and investment in Africa. The PRC is one of many countries with political and economic dealings in Africa, but the only one singled out as neocolonial. As Ching Kwan Lee (2017) points out, there is no Chinese military presence, trading company monopolies, or foreign direct rule—the hallmarks of European colonialism—and thus neocolonialism is more rhetorically inciting than empirically accurate. Daniel Vukovich (2019) similarly argues that the historical conditions for the old modern empires—specifically, slavery and colonialism from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries—are not available for a burgeoning Chinese empire in a postcolonial world. For Vukovich, exploitation in China-Africa contexts is capitalism, not colonialism.

8 *Chinese capitalism* is a term associated with the advent of capitalism in postsocialist China and the successes of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond. *Chinese characteristics* refers to Confucian values, family structures, education, and social (*guanxi*) networks. This paradigm problematically produces a singular transnational ethnic Chinese identity aligned with global capitalism and erases differences of class, gender, and nation. As Arif Dirlik points out, the essentialist discourse of Chinese capitalism "is quite reminiscent of earlier Orientalist conceptualizations of China and Asia that denied history to the peoples of Asia, substituting for historical temporalities and spatiali-

ties dehistoricized and desocialized cultural characteristics" (1997, 322). Ching Kwan Lee (2017) asserts the need to analyze specific varieties of capital, not varieties of capitalism. Capitalism is too transnational and heterogeneous to be defined by a single logic and methodological nationalism. It is more productive to examine varieties of capital that enter national economies (such as state capital or global private capital), each with its own logic of accumulation, regime of labor, and management ethos. While Lee's formulation is helpful, in the present book *Chinese capital* is shorthand for the small-scale private capital of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs, which is distinct from Chinese state capital.

9 China City is a multilingual space in which Afrikaans, English, Gujarati, Mandarin, Ndebele, Urdu, and Zulu are spoken, as well as regional dialects from Fuzhou, Jiangmen, Nanjing, and beyond. In South Africa, a country with eleven official languages, language marks African foreign nationals as targets for xenophobia. Conversing in English is the common denominator, but doing so is not neutral. Although I did my fieldwork and interviews in English without a translator, when it came time to transcribe, I enlisted my retired mother to double-check my translation. It is always awkward to hear one's own voice on tape, but even more so in one's second tongue. I made a self-deprecating comment about how distorted my voice and pronunciation must sound in the recording, and my mother reassured me, "Don't worry, it's our [my parents'] fault." Asian American ethnographers working on Asia and Asian diasporas do not fit the role of "native anthropologist," but this inside/outside positionality can be beneficial.

Chapter 1. Palimpsest City

1 Race and consumption have been inextricably linked in South Africa. As Deborah Posel writes, "The making of the racial order was, in part, a way of regulating people's aspirations, interests and powers as consumers. The desire and power to consume was racialized, at the same time as it was fundamental in the very making of race" (2010, 160).

2 While the term "Coloured" was introduced by apartheid's racial terminology, it has persisted as an identity category capturing mixed-race subjectivity, especially in the Cape. Like any racial identity, the term is not without complexity and contest.

3 I thank Christopher J. Lee for this observation.

4 In the 1960s and 1970s, the PRC formed relationships with decolonizing and newly independent African countries during the Cold War and focused on developmental projects. Apartheid South Africa, which allied with Taiwan, was excluded from this project. Under the One China policy, the ROC had relationships but the PRC did not (Hart 2002). This