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My Burch project challenged me to my core. It was a success, but most of the time, it didn't feel that way. I went to South Africa to explore the impact of China's growing international presence on ethnic Chinese living there, but I quickly encountered obstacles outside of my control. The trip started off with lost luggage, delayed project approval, and constant anxiety. I'd originally thought my research would spark academic growth. Instead, embarking on this project forced me to reflect on my personal shortcomings and taught me the value of persistence, resilience, and flexibility in implementing a project.

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PAUL ASHTON

CHINESE IDENTITY IN JOHANNESBURG

Johannesburg has a reputation for violent crime. Arriving there, that idea badgered me again and again. *I am alone, and Johannesburg has a reputation for violent crime.* For the first part of my trip, ideas of what could happen to me if I ventured out, ignorant and alone, paralyzed me. I spent most of my time locked in my one-room apartment on Witwatersrand University's campus, waiting out Human Ethics Board approval to start contacting interviewees. Most nights, I bided my time translating local Chinese newspapers with the square head of the Hillbrow tower outside my window, popping out of an orange juice sky. When I did leave my apartment, I walked around with insecurity beating on my brow, searching for the confidence to reach out to complete strangers, whether they be coworkers, interviewees, or others.



Although I'd spent a good deal of time traveling, including a six month stint in Beijing on the Weir Fellowship my sophomore year, I'd never visited South Africa before. As anxious as the city made me, I also found myself fascinated by it. Johannesburg, the business hub of the "Rainbow nation," lived up to the country's reputation of diversity in every regard. Living there was like spinning through a kaleidoscope. People of every shade and mannerism lived in the city. Women with ankle-length skirts and bright scarves walked side by side with others in white pantssuits, hair dyed red like rusted springs. The skyline itself was colorful, with the Coca-Cola building jutting into the

sky like a tie-dye thumb.

The concept of Chinese in Africa surprised me at first, but after seeing Johannesburg's color and diversity, the idea of two distinct Chinatowns in the city hardly seemed far-fetched. I visited the two within my first week and found them radically different. First Chinatown sits in downtown Johannesburg, while New Chinatown is located in the Cyrildene suburb. On an average day, First Chinatown is windswept and deserted, while New Chinatown feels like a bustling street in Beijing. Cantonese versus Mandarin, cultural focal point versus bastion of Chinese small business, the two hold distinct places in the identity of the city and in the Chinese communities.

The two spaces also represent the most obvious distinction in the Chinese community: between South African Chinese, whose grandparents, and sometimes great-grandparents, migrated at the turn of the century, and new migrants, who mobilized on the coattails of China's booming economy and its growing relationship with South Africa. Between these two generalized extremes is a vast gray zone. I explored the community in this area, looking for people that fit in the categorizations of the Chinese community and also defy them. What did it mean to be Chinese in Johannesburg, and how do China and South Africa influence that, if at all? By focusing on the diversity the country is so well-known for, how do perceptions of the community change?

When I finally received approval for my project, three weeks before I left the city, I began reaching out to possible interviewees. My interviews took me all across the city. With each interview, my comfort and confidence grew, and I re-found the passion that sparked the project in the first place.

The experiences I encountered



defied stereotyping. I met a bilingual preschool teacher and a Jehovah's witness; a woman whose "Made in China" tattoo started her career as a filmmaker; a historian who quit her job to write a book that took nine years instead of two; a man who was perfectly happy with a life that, in his words, amounted to nothing; a woman whose goal in life was to facilitate communication between South African and Chinese artists; and a student who managed in Johannesburg with barely any English at all. The project was a huge success, simply in that the multitude of perspectives I gained from listening to these people was more valuable to me than any book I'd read on the topic.

My Burch project was a challenge. It was a success, but it didn't feel that way most of the time. I spent so much of the trip doubting myself and my ability to cope with the city that I rarely took satisfaction in the steps that I made, and even after returning from the trip I still didn't know what to make of my experience. The challenges I experienced during my Burch fellowship molded me, and I came to miss Johannesburg, the way the bright blue sky loomed above the city, a giant maw with steely blue stare.

