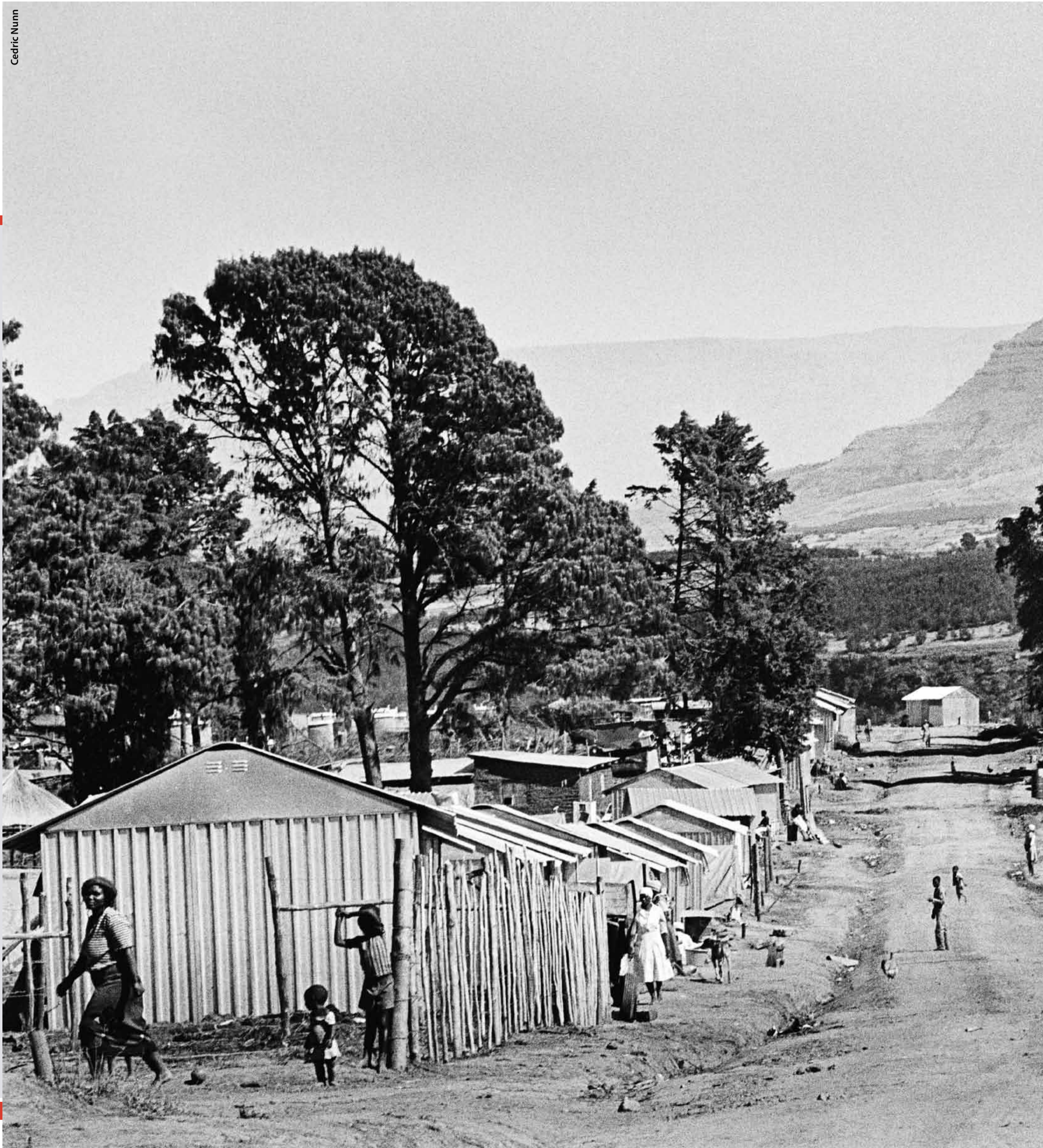


Cedric Nunn





“... EXERCISES
IN CULTURAL
TRANSLATION ON A
**MASSIVE
SCALE:
ENORMOUS**
PROJECTS OF
LISTENING TO,
TRANSCRIBING,
SIFTING,
ARRANGING AND
INTERVENING IN
THE WORDS OF
NON-LITERARY
(AND OFTEN
NON-LITERATE)
NARRATORS.”

Life's tough enough, so the wisdom goes, and it's a useful policy to celebrate your victories where they come. For a writer, a reliably triumphant moment arrives with the signing of a book deal. But when the deal you sign is for a book that promises to explain how the People's Republic of China is altering the African continent, your celebrations aren't fated to last long. For one thing, "Africa" isn't a static entity; it's a geographical agglomeration of 54 evolving countries, each with its own historical subtleties, cultural touchstones, political nuances, and economic markers.

For another, it's a daunting area to navigate, a landmass that's impossibly vast – what yesterday may have seemed like a generous advance against royalties is today, when you start to plan your route, a full-blown assault on your financial resources. Then there's the fact that China's entry into the continent isn't a monolithic concept either; there are levels and grades to the phenomenon, categories that run the gamut from Beijing-backed, state-owned enterprises to independent merchants who have no agenda other than the sending of monthly remittances back to families in Fujian.

Lastly, there's your co-author. How are you going to write this book together? What narrative thread are you going to find that stitches your themes in a way that's immediate, that's personal, that engages the reader via the charms of a compelling story? Because "story," when you're honest with yourself, is the reason you got into this gig in the first place.

In November 2010, my friend Richard Poplak and I embarked on chapter one. There had of course been a prelude, a series of events and choices that had brought us to this juncture, but those would only be appended to the plotline in hindsight. Now, we were on our way to the United States Embassy, headed for a meeting with a representative of the world's supreme superpower, who was waiting for us in what used to be the most impressive building on Pretorius Street.

What we wanted to know was how the Americans viewed the pretenders to their throne, and particularly how they were coping with the symbolic heft of the rival embassy that had just been erected up the road. Because to us, in those early days, if any signifier stood at the kernel of our story, it was this: the larger and more elaborate the embassy, the larger the geopolitical aspirations. In that respect, China appeared to be taking Africa by the throat.

And yet the sign, like its implied message, would turn out to be a frail cliché. That interview in the US embassy, our first formal interview of several hundred to come, was conducted mostly off-the-record – the American bureaucrat was more interested in asking questions than answering them, and we didn't have much to offer, except to reflect back at her what was then our own ignorance of "the Other".

So what if the Chinese had decided to build a structure that resembled the Forbidden Palace in both scale and configuration? The Americans had decided years before to build one that resembled Fort Knox, with bomb-proof walls and multiple security checkpoints, unsmiling Marines standing on guard at the main entrance, and state-of-the-art satellite equipment protruding from the roof. Also, this was Pretoria, only 45 kilometres north of our home base. We still had a lot farther north to go.

Expenses and narrative anxieties aside, nothing beats climbing into the cab of a second-hand Toyota Hilux, provisions and sleeping kit in the back, and pointing the grille at the closest border. It's one of the reasons we took on the assignment; this opportunity to discover, with a close and likeminded friend, a continent in unprecedented flux. As South Africans, as people who'd grown up here, we'd already spent months telling each other what we weren't about to do. We weren't about to go in search of Joseph Conrad's myopic metaphor, providing yet another take on a tired journey into the Heart of Darkness. We weren't about to redo Charlie Boorman and Ewan McGregor's *Long Way Down*, where the aim was more the distance covered than the insights earned. And we especially weren't about to fall into the trap set by Ernest Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa*, which to us was probably the worst book ever written by a writer who could otherwise (and legitimately) claim to be one of the greats.

As Paul Theroux drove home the point in *Dark Star Safari*: "The Hemingway vision of Africa begins and ends with the killing of large animals, so that their heads may be displayed to impress visitors with your prowess. That kind of safari is easily come by. You pay your money and you are shown elephants and leopards. You talk to servile Africans, who are generic natives, little more than obedient Oompa-Loompas. The human side of Africa is an afternoon visit to a colourful village. This is why, of all the sorts of travel available in Africa, the easiest to find and the most misleading is the Hemingway experience. In some respects the feed-the-people obsession that fuels some charities is related to this, for I seldom saw relief workers that did not in some way remind me of people herding animals and throwing food to them, much as rangers did to the animals in drought-stricken game parks."

What we were about to do was look into the gaps between these various conceptions, and the fact that our lens onto the continent would be provided by a power that stands in contrast to the West – that is in many respects the opposite of the West, the anti-West – made a certain part of our jobs a lot simpler.

After traversing four countries, when the Hilux pulled back into Jo'burg following a 17 000-kilometre roundtrip through Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, we were able to dispense with the most quoted of Western media critiques: China was not Africa's new coloniser, it had not come to complete what the West had begun. To us, the assumption that the People's Republic had imperialist ambitions on the continent was now a predictable sideswipe from the real former colonisers, who'd never truly recognised African agency anyway, and whose feed-the-people schemes (to refer back to Theroux) were no more than a postcolonial attempt to ensure that such agency was kept beyond reach.

Why was China here, then? On this score, Western media seemed to have it about right – China was in Africa for its resources. But given what China was leaving behind in return (highways, dams, power stations, a growing consumer class), the question became a lot more profound. What could Africa encompass, what could she hold?



While conducting research for his forthcoming book about the Chinese industrial advance through Africa, **Kevin Bloom** meditates on the more pragmatic difficulties of writing long-form journalism about an ever-morphing continent.

It's now May 2012, and we've travelled through 11 African countries. We have three more trips still to make, with a fourth and final one scheduled to China itself. If anything, we are less certain of our position than when we started; for every so-called rule, we have unearthed a multitude of exceptions.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, we learned that Chinese mining initiatives remain decades behind those of the West, that companies listed in London and Toronto stand to pull more out of the African crust in a day than China does in a month.

In Ethiopia we learned that economic growth rates of 10% per annum could well be based on hot air, that the Chinese model of state capitalism (or growth through massive infrastructure spend) may not be as exportable as previously thought. In Kenya we learned that a Chinese-built highway through the remote northern regions, a highway that opens the key corridor between Nairobi and Addis Ababa, has the supplementary effect of decimating, for ivory, the elephants of the Samburu plain.

But this story was always meant to be told through the eyes of the people we met along the way, and here we have stumbled upon an embarrassment of riches. On the outskirts of Windhoek we met Simeon, a young man who's putting himself through college by hawking Chinese traditional medicines to a township populace that can't afford healthcare.

Chisumbanje in southern Zimbabwe yielded two remarkable days with Graeme, a white farmer whose land was expropriated by Bob "Look East" Mugabe, and who's currently running a green fuel project funded by none other than South African fugitive Billy Rautenbach.

Zanzibar was where we had the privilege of an extended encounter with Yuning, a graduate of China's most prestigious foreign language institute, who for the past six months has been single-handedly building the world's most modern Swahili-Mandarin dictionary. There have been dozens more.

And then there's our own place in the story, a central thread we'd attempted – during a first abortive draft – to avoid. Will the reader care how we've been altered by this journey, how our individual outlooks and collective identities have evolved? Will the reader care if, at some base level, this is a book about a friendship? In the next draft, we're going to lay down the following rule with respect to the subject of caring: if we don't, the reader won't.