Modern Intimacies and Modernist Landscapes: Chinese Photographs in Late-Colonial Mozambique

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

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Introduction

This article focuses on a fragment of colonial modernity in Mozambique. I aim to narrate this modernity in a specific way: through the family photographs of Chinese
settlers from Guangdong, who came to the city of Beira at the end of the 19th Century. From the 1950s on, Beira underwent an unprecedented urban and architectural transformation. This went hand in hand with a period of rapid economic expansion, largely due to its dynamic port. In this context, various communities consolidated their presence: Indians, Greeks and Chinese opened schools, temples, associations and clubs.

2 The first contingents of Chinese (from Guangdong) to arrive in Mozambique were mainly small craftsmen and carpenters; others dedicated themselves to fishing and horticulture. The children of those early settlers born in Mozambique, became successful business owners, and many opened restaurants. Some found work as low-level employees of the colonial administration, in the port and customs warehouses. Later, the more successful ones would prosper, becoming businessmen and builders (Medeiros 2012).

3 Photography – its practices and representations – played a central role in the constitution of the cultural habitus of the Chinese of Beira. In the early 1950s, there were three photographic studios in the city, whose owners belonged to this community: Foto Estúdio, which was owned by Eginwo Shung Chin; Foto Beira, which was owned by Lee King Wing, and finally Foto Central, which belonged to Kom Loom. At these photographic studios, much of the social, sporting and cultural life of the Chinese was captured on film. However, the photographs preserved by these families were not only studio photographs. In effect, between the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s, many Chinese – normally very successful tradesmen – began to acquire consumer goods such as cameras. Thus, little by little, photography came out of the studio and began to portray daily life. It became possible to capture images of the community in numerous different situations, like picnics, the dances and parties of the Escola Chinesa, sports meetings, outings, hunting or fishing trips in the “mato” (countryside), official ceremonies, and so on. My meeting with the “Luso-Chinese diaspora” was, I may say, very much a meeting with photographic images too.

4 Through these photographs, the Chinese appropriated the modernity of Beira. Forming an intimate yet public record, these images narrate a time of peculiar architectural effervescence in the city. Based on my ethnographic work conducted among the Chinese diaspora, which originated in but wasn’t limited to Beira, I will now reflect on two significant dimensions of that colonial modernity: architecture and photography.

5 It should be recalled that the history of the province of Guangdong is closely related to the complex process of the formation of Chinese nationalism which had, in turn, far-reaching repercussions among the Chinese communities of the Portuguese Overseas Provinces (Pan 1999). In 1895, after forming the Revive China Society (Xingzhong Hui), the nationalist leader Dr. Sun Yat Sen decided that Guangdong province would become the base for revolutionary activities. The role played by the Chinese associations abroad was to be fundamental for promoting the nationalism ideal linked to the Kuomintang (The Chinese Nationalist Party – KMT). Another important association, with branches in various continents, was the Chee Kung Tong, whose codes and membership practices followed the principles of freemasonry. Its origins date back to the 18th century, when its members sought to conspire against the Manchu Qing dynasty. From the 19th century onwards, the branches of Chee Kung Tong spread throughout Southeast Asia, America, Canada, Australia, South Africa and Mozambique (Yap & Man 1996: 245).

6 In the case of the Chinese of Mozambique, their talent in exercising the role of “good Portuguese”, as exemplary citizens, lay in another two positive attributes that were
equally valuable for the colonial administration. First of all, it was a community that had its origins in the old Republican regime, which was later opposed to the Mao Tse Tung regime. They were, therefore, assumed to oppose the “communist threat”. Secondly, the habitus of the Chinese of Beira, and their ethos, which was focused on social and economic improvement, readily embraced the modernizing efforts of the Portuguese administration of the time.

From 1950 to 1960, the newspapers Notícias da Beira and Diário de Moçambique began to cover events related to the Chinese community more closely: sports events, meetings with local authorities, festivities, interviews and deaths, to name a few. The newspaper articles were marked by a celebratory and flattering tone. Learning to accept “their place”, diligently collaborating with the society of Beira, these Chinese came to be seen, in the eyes of the colonial authorities, as “good Portuguese” and “good” citizens.

Figure 1. A moment of relaxation, Beira, early 1950s

“Young”, “attentive”, “responsible”, “lively”, “upright”, “good sportsmen and women”, “orderly”, “hardworking”, “disciplined” and above all “amiable”. These are the adjectives that appeared most frequently in the newspaper chronicles of 1950 and 1960 to characterize the Chinese of Beira (Macagno 2012). These narratives of affinity were not produced in a neutral political environment. It was a period when Portugal was becoming more radical in its “multiracialist” discourse, in a context of growing international pressure to put an end to the colonial presence in its Overseas Territories. But at the same time, it was also a period when the young people of the Chinese community were increasingly following the causes of the local Catholic Church (Medeiros 2007: 171).

The attribution of amiability seen in the above-mentioned newspaper texts creates an expectation of imminent reciprocity, and therefore, the possibility of constructing a moral link (Rutherford 2009). Following those expectations, the objects of praise should respond with a firm and unequivocal gesture, in order to return the trust placed in them. Therefore, the categories of flattery helped to create on the part of the Chinese
community a virtual commitment to cooperation with the colonial regime. In other words, the metalanguage involved in this dynamic of potential affinities could be understood as: “You may be one of us, but you need to prove it”. In fact, from the very beginning of the struggle for independence against Portugal in Africa, and at a time when Maoist China was beginning to support these movements (particularly in Angola), the Chinese of Mozambique had to make a clear gesture to show their vocation as “good Portuguese”.

These public expressions of solidarity with Portugal manifested by the Chinese community of Beira were a kind of metaphor for the colonial construction of amiability. It was clear that, in the case of the Chinese of Mozambique, the attribution of amiability may have also acted as a mechanism for the creation, in the near future, of a commitment of reciprocity, implicitly obliging the Chinese to return the flattery and praise received, in the form of unswerving loyalty. Here, in a dangerously seductive way, the gestures that convey the “recognition” of the Other include another type of metalanguage: one that enables this relation to be seen as a kind of “double bind”. Neither fully Portuguese, nor fully Chinese, when the political winds changed direction, both in the Metropole and in the Overseas Colonies, the only route left for the Luso-Chinese was the diaspora. With the independence of Mozambique in 1975, and the movement of April 25th in Portugal, those “kind” friends turned into threatening enemies. In the Metropole, the protagonists of the anti-Colonialist trends leaned towards the political left. The Luso-Chinese of Mozambique, however, continued to champion an almost visceral anti-communism. Perhaps for this reason, the Portugal of the “revolução dos cravos” (Carnation Revolution) was not necessarily the best option for their immediate future. While some families settled in Portugal, most of them opted for Brazil (Curitiba and São Paulo), a country that at the time, was still ruled by a military government and was, therefore, far from the “communist threat”.

The table below shows the results of seven colonial censuses (from 1928 to 1960). Currently, according to available statistics, Curitiba has approximately 150 “Luso-Chinese” families, totaling around 1,000 individuals. In São Paulo, according to a statement from the “Luso-Chinese” themselves, there are around 50 families. In terms of proportion, therefore, we can infer that nearly half of the Luso-Chinese of Beira settled in Brazil.

Table. Census of the Chinese group individuals, 1928-1960 Mozambique

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Lourenço Marques</th>
<th>Beira</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>896</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1,449</td>
<td>1,011</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>1,565</td>
<td>1,006</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>1,613</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>1,945</td>
<td>1,141</td>
<td>804</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>888</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s, as the war between the FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front) and the Portuguese army intensified, the Chinese of Beira, as “citizens” of Portugal, began to be called up for military service to defend the Portuguese flag. Following the Carnation Revolution, independence negotiations began in Lusaka. As capitalist “owners”, and because they were suspected of complicity with the regime, the Chinese community began to feel, from 1974 – i.e. during the transition government – a growing hostility towards them. Within a short space of time, a law of nationalization came into force. And, after the III Congress of 1977, FRELIMO transformed into a Party-State, officially adhering to “Marxism-Leninism”. Although there was no deliberate expulsion of the Chinese community, these political changes meant that within a short space of time, the Chinese went from being “amiable business owners” to “undesirable tenants”. Thus, the abandonment of the country, that had begun in 1973 and 1974, intensified after independence.

**Dispersion**

In some cases, departure was planned in advance, through the mobilization of contacts and networks of external relations. Macau and Taiwan were some of the initial
destinations; however, the majority headed for Brazil, in particular the city of Curitiba. Others “dispersed” to Portugal, Australia, Canada and the United States.

Perhaps it is no mere coincidence that the Chinese from Beira chose one of the least “African” cities in Brazil. It is probable that one of the key protagonists in the choice of Curitiba was “Brother Cordeiro”, a well-known figure in the 1960s and 70s of the Colégio Marista da Beira (a high school), where many Chinese studied. Born in the south of Brazil, Brother Armando Corbellini, better known in Beira as “Brother Cordeiro” or “Pacômio”, left for Africa in 1948 after finishing his Marist studies at the Escola Normal Superior of the Instituto Champagnat, in Porto Alegre (Brazil). Before arriving in Mozambique, he had spent some time in Angola. On the eve of the independence of Mozambique, he escaped to the border and managed to reach Rhodesia, from where he took a flight to Portugal. He stayed with the Marist Brothers of Portugal for a while, but in 1975 he returned to Brazil, settling in Rio de Janeiro. One of the jobs of “Brother Cordeiro” in Rio de Janeiro was to receive and assign the retornados (returnees) to appropriate places, particularly those coming from Mozambique and Angola. This task was carried out in the context of the Movimento de apoio ao emigrante português (MAEP, Support Movement for Portuguese Emigrants), which was set up in Rio de Janeiro in September 1975.³

It may be that the dispersion that the Chinese of Beira had begun to experience after 1975 became a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, fed by their perpetual condition as “close-distant Others”. Never fully Portuguese, yet never fully Chinese, the possibility of a future for these “amiable” foreigners in Mozambique ended up becoming a fantasy at the beginning of the process of independence: “now I’m an African of Chinese origin, with Portuguese nationality, and naturalized Brazilian” said one of my interlocutors in Curitiba, recalling his peaceful life in Beira in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the Luso-Chinese of Curitiba also have their own narrative to explain their arrival in that city. In the conversations and interviews, the explanation always pointed to the figure of a pioneer: Chee Fan Lai. It is said that this pioneer arrived in Brazil before 1975, in the port of Santos, to visit his sick father who was working there. Chee Fan Lai’s father had arrived in Santos directly from China in the 1960s without passing through Mozambique. After inheriting some money from his late father, and having visited various cities in Brazil, Chee Fan Lai decided on Curitiba as his permanent home. There, he opened a small restaurant in the centre of the city.

When the Luso-Chinese, looking for a place to settle, began to enquire with their overseas family networks, the news began to spread that Curitiba might be a good destination. Chee Fan Lai had the role of receiving the first families. But the narrative of the “pioneer”, although convenient “from the native point of view”, does little to explain the structural and political factors that led to this choice. Other responses generally given by the Luso-Chinese relate to a kind of sociocultural analogy or affinity between the two cities i.e. between Beira of the late colonial period, with its hotels, clubs, cafés and networks of sociability, and Curitiba of the 1970s, which was in a period of rapid urban expansion:

Curitiba is practically a second Beira. Here [in Curitiba] people are very close to each other. That’s what it was like in Beira. We all live together in harmony. It’s a family atmosphere; when there’s a party we all get together. We communicate with each other a lot. Many people [Chinese from Beira] came here and it reminds them of Beira, they say “this is like a second Beira, pa”. There is something very similar
to Beira. The Chinese Cultural Association of Paraná was built 80 percent by the people of Beira.  

The Chinese Cultural Association of Paraná (Associação Cultural Chinesa do Paraná) (ACCP), based in Curitiba, was founded in 1989 by Luso-Chinese from Mozambique. Between 1990 and 2000, the members of the management committee of the ACCP were predominantly Mozambican. The table below indicates the names of their members and their respective origins.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAIRMAN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu Kai</td>
<td>Continental China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VICE-CHAIRMAN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humberto Moy (Vice-Chairman)</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BOARD OF COUNCILORS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willian Yan Wey Man</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Chia Chun</td>
<td>Continental China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco Chan</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sui Va</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humano Fon Switta</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sui Line</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandre Chee</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentino Low</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwan Vei Quio</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiu Leong</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernesto A. Fone</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosete W. C. Chan</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José Luis Chong</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sérgio Siu Mon</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste Yan Chu</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONSELHO FISCAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberto Y. K. Ló</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is no discernible common pattern in the experience of the Chinese who left Beira. Those whose families had a network of cultural and commercial relations in places like Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore managed to build strategies for departure and prepare their lives outside Mozambique with greater material planning. Those whose financial conditions were more favourable were able to take some personal belongings with them, including family photographs.

The Luso-Chinese (naturalized Brazilians, Portuguese, North Americans, Australians, Canadians) comprise a community of memories. This community, although dispersed, comes together both virtually (via Facebook and WhatsApp) and physically, through transcontinental family visits, for weddings, birthdays and funerals.
Photography

Returning to the methodological contributions of a series of works from visual anthropology, I start with the idea that photography involves a system of practices and representations that can illuminate various aspects of the sociocultural universe in which it is developed. The image (and its support) is, at the same time - to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu (1972) - a structuring and structured structure. Photographs are condensers of meanings, capable of generating new meanings. The interpretative possibilities that an image is capable of generating are endless, and new discoveries can be made at any moment. To put it another way, photography, as Silvia Caiuby Novaes (2005: 111) warns us, speaks “… not only about the object photographed, but also, in an equally evident way, about the culture and lifestyles of those holding the camera”. At the same time, the effects that contact with a photographic image provokes in the circumstantial observer constantly recall the famous statement of the anthropologist Ruth Benedict. Because the eye that observes is, above all, a “cultural eye”: “No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking” ([1934] 1960: 18). The narrative generated from the contact with my Chinese interlocutors and with the images has, therefore, been a central tool in the construction of the facts. Therefore, I also agree with the idea that images, like texts,

... are cultural artifacts. It is in this sense that the production and analysis of photographic, film and videographic records can enable the reconstitution of a cultural history of social groups, as well as a better understanding of the processes of social change, of the impact of economic fronts and of the dynamic of inter-ethnic relations. Image archives and contemporary images collected in field research can and should be used as sources that connect the data to the oral tradition and the memory of the groups studied.

CAIUBY NOVAES 2005: 110

At the same time, the photographic image, as part of a wider cultural system, cannot be seen in isolation from the other diacritics of colonial modernity. The images, as a producer of “interpretations of interpretations”, claim a methodological effort of thick description (Geertz 1973). In other words, the photographs not only convey the possibilities of multiple visible “facts”, but above all, a system of various layers of meanings, some of which are hidden. This interpretivist bias seeks to yield to the tensions between what the photo “is trying to say” and what it hides, but involuntarily ends up revealing: in the ambiguity of its meanders, its contours, its unforeseen revelations and its margins.

The photographic images that accompanied the newspaper articles about the Chinese community published in the Diário de Moçambique and Notícias da Beira are not simply images of a public nature. In that period, those pictures were reproduced and distributed among the families. They emerge from the “intimate” family world of the Chinese of Beira; they are, as such, part of the archive of memories protected by the diaspora itself.

In the foreground of Figure 4, we see some young students of the Chinese School of Beira, wearing folk costumes of Southern China. In the background is the famous Hotel Embaixador building, designed by the architect Francisco de Castro between 1956-57. The hotel was inaugurated on 14th August 1958. On the left is the building of the Notícias da Beira newspaper.
In 2009, some time after my interviews and conversations with Luso-Chinese in Curitiba, I returned to Mozambique, taking the reverse route to the one they had taken more than thirty years earlier. On the trip, I noticed that there were only a few dozen families of Luso-Chinese descendants remaining in Beira. I then discovered that the Agostinho Neto state school now operates in the building of the old Escola Chinesa. The old building of the Clube Chinês now serves as the regional headquarters of ARPAC (Cultural Patrimony Archive). Beyond the experience of travelling to spaces about which I had heard so much in Curitiba, it was necessary for me to confirm, through the sources of the time, the social prominence that appeared self-evident in the narratives of the Chinese diaspora. In the newspapers I consulted in the Historical Archive of Mozambique (AHM), I found various blurry images, the same ones that I had seen in Curitiba, among so many others, in their clear, original form. In Mozambique these photographs were merely historical artefacts deposited in the archives, while in Brazil they formed part of a vivid contemporary universe of references and they took on, to paraphrase Igor Kopytoff (1986), a “social life” of their own. These images constitute, for the diaspora of the Chinese of Beira, a place of memories to which it is possible to return indefinitely. The fact that they belong to both a public record (the newspapers) and a private one (family albums) makes them essential testimonies of the protagonism of these “good Portuguese” in the colonial modernity of Beira from the 1950s and 1960s – a modernity that, incidentally, they were never able to abandon.

In the 1970s Portugal was on the threshold of abandoning the designs of its imperial vocation and was beginning to face the challenges of an imminent European future. As holders of an ambiguous citizenship, the Luso-Chinese were also forced to reinvent their condition as former Portuguese born in Mozambique. However, the memories surrounding the Chinese of Beira, as well as the family photographs that evoked their past were, for them, a rich and significant source for the creation of new universes of meaning and senses of community.

What holds that multi-situated existence together, so to speak, is a community of memories, nourished by their experiences in Mozambique, particularly between 1950 and 1975. In recent years, I have taken part in various confraternization meetings with the Luso-Chinese, and have had numerous informal conversations with them. I believe
that the “rituals of commensality” that have long been practised and encouraged among the Luso-Chinese facilitate my entry to their world. The fact that they shared with me a significant portion of their family photographs is also a sign of their hospitality.

28 Throughout these pages, I have started with the idea that the photograph constitutes a cultural artifact that is not a simple object of passive analysis, but above all, a subject that provokes, challenges and interrogates the observer in a variety of ways (an observer, incidentally, who is always culturally situated, and therefore relative). At the same time, the photographic image as an ethnographic tool constitutes, besides being a tool for providing visual information, an ever-fertile generator of narratives, memories, gestures, silences and emotions on the part of those who, ultimately, “make the image speak”.

29 On several occasions during the field work, I showed family photographs from the “Mozambican period” to the Luso-Chinese living in other latitudes (Portugal, United States, Brazil). As in a transatlantic visual dialogue, the corpus of information concerning these images has continued to grow.

30 In the image above is Victor Yin, at his home in Lisbon, during our interview, looking at one of the photographic images provided to me by the Luso-Chinese from Curitiba. Yin was born 1921, in the village of Toisan, in Guangzhou. His father was Wah Qing and his mother, Ung Shee. He arrived in the city of Beira in around 1940. Victor Yin’s Chinese name is Yin Bin Cheum. In Beira, he had an important role in the Chinese Association, as a translator of documents for the Chinese who settled in Mozambique. He died in 2016, in Lisbon.

Figure 5. Victor Yin recognizing people and places in old photographs

L. M. January 2012.
The effects that the contact with a photographic image provokes constitute a privileged moment of this ethnographic present, in which image and memory feed each other in a reciprocal cycle. On the other hand, the photograph, as an artifact for socio-anthropological analysis, leads us to the analysis, not only of the “empirical evidence” but also of the thick and polysemic meanings of that which is not immediate or intentionally revealed.

I captured this image (Figure 6) in the restaurant of Mah Geu, from Beira. It was taken in Lisbon, in December 2011. Behind the image, Mr. Yum Ah Yat observes the photographer (myself) while giving prominence to the females in the scene. The women, enthusiastic, observe and comment on the photographs. On the left, Judite Yum, wife of Mr. Yat, spots somebody familiar in the image. In the centre, Susana (Yen Wan Shu), wife of Mah Geu, pays close attention to the discovery. The photo represents a triple crossing of glances: Yat observes the photographer; the women observe the photos; and the photographer observes (and captures) the scene, while he is, himself, observed.

Figure 6. Observers Observed

In recent years, the Luso-Chinese of Curitiba have very generously allowed me to digitalize hundreds of photographs taken by them in Mozambique between 1940 and 1960. The Chinese children and teenagers who appear in these photos (portrayed at social events, and trips to the African savannah and to “modern Beira”) are, today, the adults and elderly people living in Curitiba, Lisbon, New York, San Francisco, Vancouver and other cities.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the Chinese Community, through its photographic studies, conveyed a series of knowledge and practices that, directly or indirectly, helped to forge the history of photography in Mozambique. This is also the
conclusion of Drew Thompson who, in a recent essay (2019), analyzes the route taken by photojournalism in Mozambique between 1950 and 1960 with the aim of breaking down the rigid boundaries that separate “professional” photography from “amateur” photography. The focus of Thompson’s work is Lourenço Marques, where there have also been three other photographic studios run by Chinese: Foto Lu Shih-Tung, Foto Mário and Foto ABC (Thompson 2019: 142-143)

Unfortunately, the great representatives of Mozambican photojournalism, such as Ricardo Rangel and Kok Nam, were instrumental in undermining the Chinese legacy in the field of Mozambican photography and relegating it to a lower status. Kok Nam was himself a Chinese descendant. But unlike his “compatriots” he opted to remain in Mozambique and to support FRELIMO. After a long career in photojournalism, Kok Nam became the personal photographer of president Samora Machel (Assubuji & Hayes 2013). He even went as far as to use a highly pejorative term when speaking about the “amateur” photographs of the Chinese, referring to them as “shit photos”:

Nam and Rangel used genres such as “studio” and “press photography” to define their professional status and to assign meanings to their pictures. It is too simplistic to situate pictures of the Chinese community as “shit” or in opposition to more widely recognized forms of press photography (...) These genre categories distort the technical and professional interconnectivities that characterized photography’s practice in Mozambique. For example, the Chinese community’s use of photography transformed studios into printing centers as patrons no longer required studio-based photographers to take their pictures.

THOMPSON 2019: 143

Perhaps it is necessary to rewrite the history of photography in Mozambique, based on its micro-history, by recalling the well-known perspective of Carlo Ginzburg (1993). That is, a history that is not necessarily represented by the great spokespersons of local photography. It is, without doubt, a less heroic process, that dialogues with the “interconnectivities” between the various actors and knowledge that circulated among the photographic studios, the newsrooms and the downtown cafés of Lourenço Marques and Beira. This deeper look at the history of photography in Mozambique was also portrayed in an essay by Jeanne Marie Penvenne (2012). Beyond the contribution of the consecrated photographs, enquiring about other photographic records and collections helps us understand the change of focus of cameras (which is also a political change): that which operates between the passage from the portrait of the “white city” to the portrait of a new Mozambican society.

Modernities

How did the Chinese settlers in the city of Beira relate to the colonial modernity? As we see, in the 1950s, one of the tools used to appropriate this modernity was photography. Through an intimate and at the same time public record, photographs taken by the Chinese families narrate a period of peculiar architectural effervescence in the city.

In the 1950s, this modernist landscape became an essential photographic backdrop for the Chinese community. Emblematic buildings like the “Casa dos Bicos”, the “Igreja da Manga”, and the “Grande Hotel”, as well as the public sculptures and monuments, became popular backdrops, in front of which the Chinese would pose before the lenses of their cameras.
It is important to remember that the urbanization of modern Beira also has a long history, which began, above all, with the “Ante-Projecto de Urbanização da Cidade da Beira”, launched in 1943 by Ribeiro Alegre and José Porto. The challenges were great, as the marshy nature of the terrain required a huge effort to construct landfills. Later on, an important stimulus for the development of modern architecture in the city was the implementation of the “Araújo Lacerda Award”, which, between 1950 and 1960, aimed to reward notable projects “…. from the formal and innovative perspective….“ (Fernandes, Mealha, Mendes 2016: 160).

In recent years, various Portuguese researchers have contributed new perspectives to our understanding of the role of the Portuguese architecture in the Ultramar between 1940 and 1970. Due to a lack of space, it is not possible in this article to describe these significant contributions in detail, but I would like to mention, briefly, the research Project, led by Ana Vaz Milheiro (2012, 2013), on the Colonial Offices of Urbanization (Gabinetes Coloniais de Urbanização). Thanks to her work, it is possible to identify the presence of another “modernity” in the Ultramar, which was not necessarily linked to the architects inspired by Le Corbusier (or the Modern Movement/International Style) but with the promotion of a style of architecture inspired by the “Casa Portuguesa” (Portuguese House) movement, which was able to be adapted to the tropics. In another perspective, Ana Tostões (2013) takes pains to combine, in one book – Modern Architecture in Africa: Angola and Mozambique – a series of essays aimed at giving an understanding of the impact of modernism on both former colonies. However, in a stimulating article written by Nuno Domingos, those essays and books have been criticized for their “cultural revivalism”. Focusing on an aesthetical celebration, that body of scholarship on “modern-colonial architecture” naturalizes, according to Domingos (2015: 238), “a national and nationalistic version of history”. This apologetic tone in relation to the history of architectural modernism in Ultramar tends to minimize the impact of colonial domination:

Architectural histories and geographies tell the story of flourishing and glamorous cities, of modern utopias, with artistic freedom and experimentation, which are in stark contrast to the structure of social relations dominant in radically unequal urban territories.

Domingos 2015: 251-252

Here (Figure 7), a group of Luso-Chinese are standing in the pool area of the Grande Hotel, in the Ponta Gea neighbourhood of Beira. The building was designed by José Luís Porto (1883-1965), though the work was accompanied and supervised by Francisco de Castro from 1953. The Grande Hotel was inaugurated on 17th June 1955, with the aspiration of becoming a tourist attraction. However, expectations around the promising future of the Grande Hotel did not last long:

Despite the hotel’s luxury and Portugal’s colonial aspirations to continue on in Mozambique, however, the Grande Hotel was short lived: Tourism decreased substantially following the hotel’s opening and it closed in 1963, reflecting African independence struggles’ disruptions of pleasing colonial façades and occupation. Today, after the euphoric period of post-independence, the devastation of the civil conflict, and disappointments of the Mozambican government, Mozambican families arriving in Beira, fleeing the civil conflict or more recently, pursuing better economic opportunities, have reoccupied the hotel’s space.

Lazzarini 2019: 9-10
The hotel’s destiny, and the histories of the African families that took up residence there after fleeing the civil war, attracted the interest of various documentarians and filmmakers (Spinuzza 2018). In a short space of time, the Grande Hotel went from being the symbol of a kind of colonial “belle époque” to becoming a metaphor for deterioration and fragility.

Some authors (Cortês & Moreira 2011; Mendes 2012) have drawn attention to the need to understand the Portuguese architectural modernism in light of the influences that Brazilian modernism had on the countries of the region, particularly Mozambique and South Africa:

The teachings of Brazilian modernism were divulged and assimilated early on in South Africa, particularly in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Students of architecture, such as the modernist line in Portugal, used as their guidebook the Brazil Builds catalogue, which was disseminated around the campuses in 1943 – incidentally, the time when the Pretoria School of Architecture was founded, and which adopted the Brazil Builds catalogue as its canon.

PEROLD, apud. MENDES 2012: 253
Here (Figure 8) we see a group standing in front of the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Igreja do Imaculado Coração de Maria) – popularly known as the Church of Manga (Igreja da Manga), in Beira, designed by João Garizo do Carmo (1917-1974). In this photograph, the modernist outlines of the architecture also serve as a backdrop for the dresses of the Young Chinese ladies, who followed the dictates of “modern” European fashion in the post-war era.

The Church of Manga is one of the paradigmatic exponents of the influence of modernism in Mozambique. This was a work that sought inspiration in the modernism of the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. In this case, the architecture of the outlines and curves of the Church of Manga evoke the famous work of Niemeyer: the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi (Igreja de São Francisco de Assis) in the region of Pampulha (Belo Horizonte, Brazil).
It should be noted that, during this period, the United Nations was beginning to push for a process of decolonization to commence in the Portuguese territories. In the international forums, Portuguese diplomats insisted that Angola, Guinea and Mozambique were natural extensions of Portugal, with the legal status of Overseas “provinces”, and as such, could not be considered simply as dependent colonies of the Metropole. In these circumstances, the Lusotropicalist formulations of Gilberto Freyre on the cultural compatibilities and emotional affinities between Africa and Portugal began to fuel the discourse of those spokespersons who were in favor of the colonial cause. In 1952, the inventor of the Lusotropicalist doctrine visited the Luso-Chinese in Beira. The visit was part of a wider journey that the Brazilian writer made to various Overseas Provinces, through an invitation that had been extended to him, at that time, by the minister of the Ultramar, Sarmento Rodrigues. The place of the meeting between Gilberto Freyre and the Luso-Chinese was the Chee Kung Tong Club, built by the Chinese of Beira in 1923 (Freyre 1953). Therefore, this period, at the apogee of modernism, coincided with a unique political situation. Between the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, Portugal was reinforcing its assimilationist and multi-racialist discourse in the Overseas Provinces.

The public celebration of that colonial modernity, reflected in the Chinese photographs, should be analyzed together with the intimate records. “Family intimacy” is also a diacritical feature of bourgeois modernity in late colonial Mozambique. Both records, the intimate and the public, convey and reproduce the same ethos: social mobility, inclusion in the consumer society, and the use of social and class markers. This value system was coherent with the modernizing aspirations of Portugal in its Overseas Provinces.
This image (Figure 10) invites us to reflect on the relationship between intimacy and modernity in the late colonial period. The photograph conveys an intimate, feminine scene. There are five women. Four of them are focused on looking at the photographs. One, wearing dark glasses, is in a prominent position. On the right of the image, the fourth seated woman appears to be engrossed in her thoughts. She is part of the image, but in a somewhat contemplative way. This supposed passiveness appears to contrast with the complicity of the women on the left: they are chatting, exchanging impressions, perhaps commenting on the photographs. The fifth woman – the only one standing – is bending timidly over the photograph album held by the “central” lady (wearing glasses). The protagonism of the group is almost inadvertently interrupted by an “exotic” and modern object, to the far left of the image: a bottle of Coca Cola. There are no signs that a cocktail is being prepared, or that the drink is about to be poured out. The full bottle, without any prospect of being opened, is displayed almost like a trophy of modernity and consumption. From the position it occupies, it appears almost like a precious household ornament, vying for importance with the Chinese porcelain vase beside it.

The photograph above bears witness to an intimate ritual. In Beira, and in Lourenço Marques of the 1950s, looking at and commenting on photographs appears to be a female ritual, of knowledge and recognition. It is possible, then, to think of a kind of “gender division of visual work”. The men handle the photographic devices and are involved in the techniques and the chemical substances; they are the ones who “produce” the pictures. The women look at them and comment. It may be that they also played an important role in organizing the family albums.

From the 1940s, the Chinese of Beira and Lourenço Marques began to work as retailers and restauranteurs. In the image above, the group is smiling (Figure 11). It is a family scene, showing a break from the work. In the centre of the image, there are some loaves of bread in a display cabinet. In the background, there are modern objects: two refrigerators, and to the right of the background, an electric fan.
The methodological perspective that I follow consists of analyzing that late colonial landscape alongside with the “cultural environment” of the settlers. This visual archive provided by the Chinese settlers in Beira allows us to reconstruct not only the hallmarks and the legacy of the city’s modernist architecture, but also other dimensions of the cultural life of the time, such as gender relations, leisure, interethnic relations, sport, travel, political life, family, fashion, food customs and consumption. For the Chinese of Beira, all these dimensions were part of the late colonial experience. These experiences were crystallized by a “modern and modernist art” par excellence: photography. It is therefore necessary to understand how all these dimensions relate to one another, and not just to view each one in isolation. To use the famous concept of Marcel Mauss, they constitute a “total social fact”.

Figure 11. Intimacy and modernity (2)
Regional tourism, and short trips on weekends, were a way of recognizing the territory. In figure 12, the group is standing next to a sculpture designed by Jorge Garizo do Carmo (1927-1997), younger brother of the architect João Garizo do Carmo. The sculpture, called “Monumento aos pioneiros”, is located in Chimoio (formerly Vila Pery) in the province of Manica. The distance from Chimoio to Beira is around two hundred kilometres. Therefore, by car, it was possible to go there and back on the same day. It should be remembered that João Garizo do Carmo, the architect, participated in the design of the Beira railway station, as well as the design of another icon of modernism in the city: the São Jorge theatre.

In the image above (Figure 13), the group is standing in front of a column designed by the famous architect Pancho Guedes (1925-2015). The tower was erected in 1954. It is located at the entrance to the Matola Cement Factory, near Maputo (formerly Lourenço Marques). The factory was built around 1920 and went into production in 1924. In 1945 it was named the “Companhia de Cimentos de Moçambique, SARL”.

Figure 12. Modernist Landscapes (1)
The sculptor, painter and architect Amancio d’Alpoim Miranda, better known as Pancho Guedes, was born in Lisbon in 1925. He arrived in Mozambique with his family at the age of seven, and went on to study in Lisbon, Johannesburg and Porto. Guedes was part of a group of architects who gathered, in July 1953, for the 9th International Congress for Modern Architecture, in France. According to Jorge Figueira, Pancho Guedes is the first Portuguese architect to gain international recognition. In Mozambique, from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, “… he designed a remarkable number of buildings that reflect, in a particular way, the themes and debates of that era. This very prolific period ended with the decolonization process of the so-called ‘Portuguese Africa’ in 1974” (Figueira 2019: 2).

On the eve of the Independence of Mozambique, Pancho Guedes abandoned Africa to return to Lisbon. It is also important to note that he was a fundamental figure in the career of Malangantana, Mozambique’s most important painter. Also, as an article by the anthropologist João de Pina Cabral (2012) shows, Pancho Guedes, despite being an agnostic, also carried out innovative projects for the Protestant missionary churches in Mozambique.
The photograph (Figure 14) shows a group of basketball players from the Clube Atlético Chines da Beira. In the background we see the building of the Radio Clube de Moçambique, in the district of Matola, in Maputo (Lourenço Marques). The map of Mozambique is depicted on the façade of the building. It may be that the group of players from the Clube Atlético had travelled from Beira to Lourenço Marques to compete against one of the local teams.

In this photograph (Figure 15), the group of Chinese appears beside another famous building designed by the architect Pancho Guedes. This building was constructed between 1952 and 1954, in the neighbourhood of Maxaquene (Maputo). It was designed to house the factory of the Lourenço Marques Bakers’ Cooperative (Cooperativa de Padeiros de Lourenço Marques). Popularly known as the SAIPAL bakery, it operated as a cooperative for only a short period of time.
Throughout these pages, rather than starting with less operational concepts (such as “identity” or “ethnicity”), I prefer to explore the heuristic possibilities that the images, produced by the Luso-Chinese themselves, can provide for us. These material and representational supports – the photographs – place us before the intimate, and at the same time, the public. This almost minimalist approach, set in a historical context of grandiloquence and imperial expectations, is a deliberate choice. But this does not mean that we should ignore the force and violence of the great colonial Leviathan. “O Império da visão”, I recall, is the title of the important book published by Filipa Lowndes Vicente (2014) to understand the vicissitudes of photography in the Portuguese colonial context. The relationship between power and image is an intrinsic one. However, in the case of the Luso-Chinese, I prefer to adopt a miniaturist perspective. This double dimension – maximalist (imperial) and minimalist (intimate) – is coherent with the warning that Susan Sontag (2005: 138) issues before the apparent contradiction conveyed in photography as a social fact: “... On the one hand, cameras arm vision in the service of power – of the state, of industry, of science. On the other hand, cameras make vision expressive in that mythical space known as private life...”.

Conclusions

During field research, my encounters with photographic images functioned as a pretext for the reconstruction of genealogies and memories. In the narratives of the Chinese of Mozambique, these evocations concerning the “sensory world” often act as structuring elements of a collective subjectivity that is invented and reinvented in the diasporic space. However, as we have seen above, among the multiple universes of sociability that the photographs invite us to reflect on, the relationship with architectural modernity appears as a primordial dimension.

I evoke, in closing, the famous essay of Roland Barthes (1980), on photography. Despite some attempts to trivialize it, his work continues to be unlimited, particularly when it
comes to the heuristic intuitions of apparent tension between studium and punctum. The first distinction relates, precisely, to the sociological and anthropological possibilities of the analysis of the images. Or, as Pierre Bourdieu (2003: 25) puts it, “Adequately understanding a photograph (...) means not only recovering the meanings which it proclaims, that is, to a certain extent, the explicit intentions of the photographer; it also means deciphering the surplus of meaning which it betrays by being a part of the symbolism of an age, a class or an artistic group”. Therefore, beyond the analysis of this pedagogical, or sociological, effect, some photographs also invite the viewer to capture a lasting and irreducible aesthetic dimension (the punctum). Form (aesthetic) and content (socio-historical) operate synchronically in the images, producing a symbiosis that creates meaning or, differently put, an ethos and a vision of the world.

Finally, my perspective does not consist of understanding the photographs as mere thoughts of a past, but as the materialization of an absence that is stubbornly present. In other words, they do not constitute a merely historical record, but are also a factory – for the Chinese diaspora itself – that produces and reproduces contemporary meanings. The photographs evoked here are not the simple consequence of an individual’s authorship, but the result of a collective cultural production. Taken as a whole, they represent a mirror of, and at the same time, a window to a complex and exuberant late colonial modernity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES

1. In this article, I use the term diaspora not as a simple analytical concept, but as an experience of dispersion. In any case, perhaps it is no mere chance that the term “diaspora” was beginning to move away from its more restricted use – mainly to refer to “Jewish diaspora” – and began to be used for the first time in the social sciences in 1965, to refer, precisely, to the “overseas Chinese” (Haines 1965). I also consider that the Luso-Chinese case is analogous with that of other “Asian minorities” that settled in the African countries – such as the Indians – who were also forced into exile.

2. This research is currently supported by the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), Project Nº PQ-307974/2018-19.


7. Some articles published in a thematic edition of the journal L’Homme are very inspirational in this sense (Perrin 2003, Prévost 2003, Severi 2003, Vert 2003). In Brazil, a series of Works produced, mostly in the last thirty years has proven to be extremely rich and sophisticated (Leite 1993), (Samain & Bruno 2007), (Samain 2006), (Feldman-Bianco & Leite 1998).

8. My contact with the Luso-Chinese of Mozambique who settled in Curitiba dates from around 2006. As I have mentioned above, in 2009 I visited, in Beira, the few families that had remained on the African continent, in other words, those who decided to become Mozambicans. I also met some Luso-Chinese who had settled in the United States, more specifically, in New York. I also know that many of them ended up settling in California. In December 2011, in Lisbon, I interviewed various families of the diaspora: in this case, those who decided to become Portuguese. In the concrete experience of the Luso-Chinese with whom I spoke (in Curitiba, Beira, New York and Lisbon), other transnational horizons appeared, also, in the locus of this dispersion: Canada, Australia, Macau and Hong Kong.

9. At the same time, as bearers of information, many of the photographs that I have digitalized here contain, in their respective reverses, notes – mostly in Chinese – which are currently being translated and analyzed.

10. Yat was born in Lourenço Marques. His father was a rice farmer. His father sent him to China at the age of five. Afterwards, he returned to Mozambique. He left Mozambique in 1977. In Lisbon, he found a job in a shop (run by Indians) that sold biscuits. Yat is the son of his father’s second wife. The first wife (“step-mother”) did not want to go to Mozambique (she was “deafened” due to a fright she received, when there was a robbery during the rice collection). The first wife sent another woman to Yat’s father, who was Yat’s biological mother. There are seven brothers in all. Yat is the third. Yat’s mother died when he was 13, and his father when he was 14.
11. Judite Yum was born in 1937, in Lourenço Marques. Daughter of Kwan Kong Debe (known as Ah Debe) and Yee Kin Sin. She worked at a bank. Her parents were tradespeople. There are five siblings, she is the oldest. Afterwards, she worked at the airport.
12. Yen Wan Shu (Susana) is the daughter of Kwing Yin, a leading director of the Chinese Association in Beira.
13. There are more than a thousand photographs that I have managed to digitalize so far.
14. For more details see, in particular, the report written by Alegre & Porto (1946).
15. One of the works that began this effort is Geração Africana. Arquitectura e cidades em Angola e Moçambique, 1925-1975 (Fernandes 2002). Concerning the city of Beira, I would like to emphasize, also, the excellent edition of the volume Beira – Património Arquitectónico (bilingual English-Portuguese edition, with support of Cooperação Espanhola: Morais, Lage, Carrilho, Joaquim & Malheiro, no date). It is important to remember, too, that Arquitectura Moderna Tropical (Morais 2017), was republished in its second edition. In 2016, Joaquim Miranda Maloa defended a doctorate thesis entitled A urbanização moçambicana. Uma proposta de interpretação (Maloa 2016). Also worth mentioning is the doctorate thesis of Elisário José Vital Miranda, Liberdade & Ortodoxia. Infraestrutura de arquitectura moderna em Moçambique (1951-1964) (Miranda 2013).
16. As is known, the so-called “Casa Portuguesa” movement gravitated around the figure of Raul Lino (1879-1974). To understand, in detail, the discussions and repercussions of this architectural movement, see, in particular, the second part (entitled “Guerras culturais em torno da arquitectura popular”) of the book by João Leal (2000).
17. The title of this work evokes, also, contributions made in the context of other colonialisms, such as the British and the French. See, in particular (Jay & Ramaswamy 2014).

ABSTRACTS

This paper addresses a specific aspect of the social and cultural life of the Luso-Chinese in Mozambique, whose first contingents came from the Chinese province of Guangdong in the second half of the 19th century. Most settled in the city of Beira. By the 1950s, the Chinese community was already well integrated into modern life in colonial Beira. The city was going through an unprecedented urban and architectural boom. At that time, the Luso-Chinese, who were essentially merchants, also began to stand out in the field of photography. Based on a multi-sited ethnography among the Portuguese-Chinese diaspora – and their family photo albums – this paper reflects on two inseparable aspects of late-colonial modernity: architecture and photography.

Cet article aborde un aspect spécifique de la vie sociale et culturelle des Luso-chinois au Mozambique. Venus de la province chinoise de Guangdong, les premiers contingents sont arrivés dans cette région d’Afrique de l’Est à partir de la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle et la plupart se sont installés dans la ville de Beira. Dans les années 1950 la communauté chinoise était déjà bien intégrée à la vie moderne de la Beira coloniale, qui connaissait un boom urbain et architectural sans précédent. Les luso-chinois, essentiellement des commerçants, ont également commencé à se distinguer dans le domaine de la photographie. À partir d’une recherche multisituée parmi la diaspora luso-chinoise – et ses albums de photos de famille –, ce texte réfléchit à deux aspects indissociables de la modernité dans la période du colonialisme tardif: l’architecture et la photographie.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Mozambique, Chinois, photographie, architecture, modernisme
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