

NOMADS WITH IPADS: THE PROFESSIONAL EXPATS

By Dineo Bendile

First published on [Chinese Joburg](#) in 2013

DINEO BENDILE is a Wits Journalism Honours graduate and was part of the 2013 class' final in-depth project on the Chinese community in Johannesburg. Her contribution focused on the professional Chinese expats and how their business, leisure and sometimes family have developed within the South African context. Dineo Bendile is currently a news reporter at Eyewitness News.



As the only child of working class parents in China's Liaoning province, Liu Dong knew education was the way to a better life. Liu dedicated his weekdays to his schoolwork; he would start studying at 5.30 am. By 7 am he was seated in class waiting for the teacher to begin the day's lessons. Once he got home he would study again until he went to sleep at 10 pm.

Today 37-year-old Dr Liu Dong is the managing director of Tubatse Chrome Minerals, a Johannesburg-based mining company specialising in the extraction of chrome ore used to make stainless steel. The company is part-owned by Sinosteel Corporation, one of China's largest resource development and trading companies. Dong's office is on the 16th floor of the Sinosteel building in the Sandton business district. He is one of a number of professionals employed by large Chinese companies in Johannesburg.

Origins of Chinese business in South Africa

Johannesburg has one of the largest populations of Chinese immigrants in South Africa. Their origins date back to the early 20th century when families moved to 'the mountain of gold', finding work as traders and small

business owners when they were denied land ownership and individual mining rights.

Today, Chinese migration into Johannesburg continues to grow, but the scale of trade has diversified. Johannesburg has become the preferred location for Chinese businesses with investments in Africa. Many of these are state-owned companies that came to South Africa at the onset of the country's democracy, drawn in by the rich natural resources, developing infrastructure and strict legal policies that provide a stable environment for business.

According to Erwin Pon, business development director at Rand Merchant Bank, popular sectors for Chinese business in South Africa include mining, finance and infrastructure development. And the professionals are well trained in these sectors. "Many of them have been educated overseas [in China and other countries] and they are very experienced in their fields. They [Chinese professionals] are experts and a lot of them are geologists and miners and engineers.

Dong's reasons for coming to Johannesburg differ from those of small business owners. For him it is about carrying out the company's strategic plans rather than searching for opportunities for personal wealth and a better life. He and many of his colleagues are fluent in

OF THE 350,000 CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA, PROFESSIONALS ONLY ACCOUNT FOR ABOUT 5% OF THIS FIGURE.

both Mandarin and English and are committed to serving Chinese state-owned companies.

Companies like Sinosteel deploy their employees globally. Sinosteel has 86 subsidiaries – like Tubatse Chrome Minerals – 63 of which are in China and 23 abroad. Apart from South Africa, Sinosteel also has offices in India, Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, Germany, Zimbabwe and the Philippines, with representative offices in Vietnam and Turkey. These countries are linked by a network of skilled, well-travelled professionals like Dong, who link Chinese businesses with new markets.

Who's willing to take the leap?

Pon says age influences the extent of the professionals' nomadic lifestyles. In Johannesburg, professionals vary in age from their late 20s to late 40s and, he says, their age allows them to make the jump into unfamiliar territory. "Before that [age], you don't have the money to cover costs or you are still studying and after, in your early 50s onwards, you're retiring and you don't really take the chance."

Chinese professionals like Dong form a very small section of the Chinese immigrants coming to South Africa, according to Pon. Of the 350,000 Chinese immigrants in South Africa, professionals only account for about 5% of this figure. Roughly 60% of the professionals are male and 40% female. Francis Lai Hong, treasurer of the Chinese Association of Gauteng, says China produces over 18,000 engineers a year. Even with China's major interest in mining, few of these professionals choose to work in Africa.

Africa is a professional no-go zone

Africa is not the first choice for most Chinese professionals. What deters them, Dong says, is the South African crime rate.

Thirty-year-old Jin Zhang had a difficult time convincing her parents that moving to South Africa was the best choice for her career. Zhang has been working for the China-Africa Development Fund in Sandton for a year and heads up the Swaziland and Mozambique representative offices. She chose to come to South Africa when all her colleagues refused to be positioned in Johannesburg.

"People always ask my parents: 'How can you let your only child move to South Africa?' Most of the parents, if their kids were in New Zealand or Australia, they wouldn't ask: 'When are you coming back?' They would say: 'We are so proud of you.'" Regular relocation is part of the package for professionals employed by state-owned companies. This can sometimes come at a cost to the families of the employees.

Planning for the future

Unlike many state-employed professionals, who do not have any say over where they are stationed, Dong specifically requested to work in South Africa. He has been in Johannesburg since 2007 and currently has no plans for moving back to China. Dong's wife of four years recently joined him in South Africa and is making a home for herself in Johannesburg.



Sinosteel Plaza in Sandton, Johannesburg.

“She’s a student at Wits University now. She likes it very much. She doesn’t want to go back,” he chuckles. Although they do not have children, Dong is aware that starting a family means he will have to decide whether to return to China or not.

But for Zhang, the prospect of having children in South Africa is more appealing than doing so in China. She says, in China, public healthcare is of better quality than the private healthcare system. But the large population means that doctors do not have the time to give every pregnant woman a long or thorough medical examination.

“For an appointment with a doctor, you have to wake up at four o’clock or three o’clock in the morning to queue there until eight o’clock, when they start giving out the tickets. And then you will have a minute to see the doctor at 10 or 11. And the doctor will probably only see you for 10 minutes or 15 minutes. Then you will be kicked out from the room.”

Access to healthcare, and the freedom she believes South African children have, are reasons she intends to have her children here. “It’s so great to have a South African environment to grow up in. It’s such a relief when you don’t always have to be learning and studying with no other things to do. No activities, no sport. Nothing but studying.”

Home is where the job is

Next door to Sinosteel are the offices of the world’s second-largest banking group, China Construction Bank Group (CCB Group). In an air-conditioned boardroom, 35-year-old Yu Yunchuan says: “If I had a choice I would go to Hong Kong. That’s a nice country and the culture is similar to China’s. So [I would go to] Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and even some European countries also.”

Yu has worked for the CCB Group for 13 years and moved to Johannesburg in 2011 to head the marketing department. Unlike Dong and Zhang, he did not choose to move to Johannesburg and he has no control over how long he will stay, apart from the stipulation in his contract that he can only stay in South Africa for a maximum of four years before being repositioned. Because of this short time frame, he has left his wife in China. He feels it is pointless to disrupt her life for a brief stay in another country. Yu does not say much else about his family. For him, life in Johannesburg is about fulfilling his duties to his employer before heading back to China. And given the

growth of Chinese banking in South Africa, it is possible that his contract may be extended.

Banking on more growth

Banking is booming, and it is likely that more Chinese like Yu will come to work in this sector. Pon says China is currently Africa’s largest trade partner and “the largest trade partner for South Africa and it’s grown literally ten-fold in the last 10 years”. According to Pon, the value of trade between China and South Africa has increased from about US\$20 million to about US\$200 million.

Since 2008, three of South Africa’s largest banks have formed partnerships with Chinese banks. The most prominent of these is the partnership between Standard Bank and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), which has a 20% stake in the Standard Bank Group. In 2009, First Rand Bank signed a strategic co-operative agreement with the CCB Group, which is an agreement that the two banking groups will work together in the South African market. This year, Nedbank signed an agreement with Bank of China, which is less formal than the Standard Bank partnership, but is also a contractual agreement for the two banks to work together.

Although Chinese banks in South Africa were initially established as financial support structures for emerging Chinese companies operating in Africa, they are now also seeking to incorporate themselves into the local market. Yu’s purpose in the CCB Group’s South African branch is to facilitate this growth and integration.

Making the cut – employment requirements for professionals

As valuable as professionals like Yu are, South African-born Chinese who are fluent in Mandarin and English remain the most valuable employees. Tubatse Chrome Minerals employs 6,500 southern Africans, many of whom are miners, and only 20 immigrant Chinese staff. Dong says the ability of South African-born Chinese to act as a link into the South African environment makes them sought after and highly paid.

But Dong claims finding these South African professionals is difficult. The difficulty is finding people with a qualification higher than a Bachelor’s degree in South Africa, especially in the fields of computing and technology. The salaries of South African professionals are

also much higher than those of their Chinese counterparts. These factors make hiring professionals from China the simpler option.

Finding the recipe for integration

Yu takes it upon himself to help the newcomers at CCB Group integrate into the South African environment. He says following employment protocol is difficult for the Chinese. “For example if a local employee’s starting time is 8.30 am they will make sure they get to the office before that. For a Chinese guy it’s not that way. He can come here at 8.45 am or even later,” Yu says.

The source of the problem, he believes, is embedded in Chinese culture. “When you’re cooking, the Chinese philosophy is rough. It’s more-or-less. When you’re cooking soup, the Chinese recipe will tell you to add one big spoon or one small spoon. But nobody knows the exact figure. But here, it will have the exact figure like, add one litre. So the different cultures add to the different working ways.

Drawing the line – class and socialisation

For these nomads, work is the place where they connect in a disconnected enterprise. Dong says the scattered location of Chinese professionals opens them up to interacting with colleagues who differ in race, background and culture. This is in contrast to the interaction in areas like Cyrildene, where a large community of Chinese traders and their families reside. Here, Chinese residents have limited socialisation with people outside their community. Both Dong and Zhang say their educational and current social class make it difficult for them to identify or socialise with Chinese people in Cyrildene.

Being in Cyrildene is not Dong’s idea of downtime. He prefers playing golf, especially when it involves trying out courses around the country. He regularly plans trips to the coast, where he gets to do two of his favourite things – be at the sea and play golf in new terrains. “I travel all over, the West Coast, Bela-Bela, Drakensberg. And now I want to make time to go to the West Coast again, because I love travelling and there are some nice courses by the coast.”

For Yu, Cyrildene is just a place he visits when shopping for Chinese products, but he does not consider going to the area to socialise with the locals. “Don’t be

confused. Actually we are different. Although we are the same skin, we have the same blood, we are the same race, we are different. Maybe because of educational background.”

Lai Hong of the Chinese Association of Gauteng says the Chinese professionals are a growing middle class and the type of individuals who “want things like Louis Vuitton or Gucci or Fendi bags”. Their class makes them more integrated into South African society than residents of Cyrildene, many of whom have been here for more than a decade.

“It’s not so much a class distinction as much as it is a mindset distinction. They say that you go to university to learn a degree, but that’s not true. You go to university to learn a way of life,” Lai Hong says.