

Africans in China: Guangzhou and Beyond - Issues and Reviews

by

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This special issue of *The Journal of Pan African Studies* is dedicated to research on the African Diaspora in China.

Africa - China relations have increasingly constituted a prominent research topic in many humanities and social sciences disciplines since the turn of the Millennium. An important aspect of this research theme is dedicated to issues of migration between Africa and China and the formation of Diaspora communities in these two parts of the world. We often hear of research on Africans in China and Chinese in Africa. There is however a tendency to conflate the two quite distinct phenomena into "Chinese in Africa/Africans in China" and special issues of various journals are then published about these two different and rather disparate migratory and Diaspora phenomena.

This special issue aims to be uniquely focused and is dedicated solely to exploring the African presence in China and the formation of Diaspora African communities in various cities including Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Macau, and many other prominent locations within Greater China.

There is already a significant body of about 50-odd research journal articles and a book that have enabled us to have fairly good answers to empirical questions like why Africans go to China, the major cities Africans live in and visit, what they do there, and how they are received by the Chinese state and the Chinese people.

In this introductory article to the volume, I first review the issues involved in the rise of a new African Diaspora in China. Then I outline the various places in China where the African presence is most prominent. Finally, I introduce the papers featured in the volume.

Issues

With China's entry into the WTO in December 2001, there was a dramatic increase in the number of Africans coming to China to buy goods for sale back in Africa. This has created a visible presence of Africans in Guangzhou, which has been receiving, in many cases, a lot of negative coverage in newspapers and magazines on issues of immigration irregularities.

However, behind all these negative reports in the newspapers, there are many more positive stories about the presence and impact of Africans in China. In particular, their substantial contributions to the development of Africa - China relations are rarely recognized.

It has been necessary to do in-depth on-site studies beyond the occasional one-day journalistic or fly-by academic coverage to come to a deeper understanding of Africans in China. Despite the negative news coming out of Guangzhou, there are a substantial number of Africans who are employed and engaged in both the formal and informal economies of China in major cities such as Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Macau, Yiwu, Shanghai, and, of course, Beijing. What are these Africans doing in China? How are they received? And how does their presence contribute to an understanding of larger issues about Africa-in-China and China-in-Africa?

The papers in this volume address issues relative to many aspects of Africans in China: issues of history, society, culture, language, and Africa – China relations, among others. How are these Africans being influenced by their Chinese hosts and how do they in turn influence their hosts? How does their presence in China affect trade between Africa and China and how do these Africans contribute to the economies of the countries they originate from? Is this new and emerging African Diaspora different from other African Diasporas? What theoretical and methodological insights does the study of these African migrants in China have on theories of migration and Diaspora studies? These questions are tackled directly or indirectly by all the six papers in this volume.

Snapshots from Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Macau

In this part of the introduction, I outline the main parts and cities in China where the African presence is more prominent. These include six main places: Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Macau. I emphasize areas that have not been particularly more explicitly covered by the papers in the volume as a way to give a more complete review and perspective of the African presence in China.

Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong, China's richest and most industrial province, boasts the largest population of Africans in China. It is this concentration of Africans in China that has received the most attention from researchers. The four leading groups of authors in terms of number and quality of journal publications are Li Zhigang and his collaborators (e.g. Li et al 2009), Bodomo and his collaborators (e.g. Bodomo, 2012, 2010, Bodomo and Ma, 2010, 2012), Joseph Tucker and his collaborators working mainly on health issues (e.g. Hall et al 2014), and Haugen (2012, 2013). Other works include Bertocello and Bredeloup (2007), Bredeloup (2012), Han (2013), Le Bail (2009), Mueller and Wehrhahn (2013), Castillo (2014), and Lan (2014). Most of the papers in this volume describe aspects of Africans in Guangzhou. Altogether, there are approximately about a 100 000 Africans in Guangzhou but substantial numbers are beginning to be registered in neighboring cities like Shenzhen, Dongguan and Foshan (e.g. Bork et al, 2014).

Yiwu, in Zhejiang Province, is home to currently the fastest growing African population, currently estimated at about 30 000 (Bodomo and Ma, 2010). Unlike in Guangzhou where there are more Black Africans, in Yiwu we have more Arab Africans, mostly people from the Maghreb region of Africa, and increasingly from the Horn of Africa. Both groups of Africans are established traders and also have businesses that cater to the large number of visitors from Africa and other places that come to buy goods at China's largest commodities market, which is located in Yiwu. The most prominent journal articles on Africans in Yiwu are Bodomo and Ma (2012, 2012), Le Bail (2009), Cissé (2013), and now two papers in this volume by Marfaing & Thiel and Cissé. Indeed very little else is written on the second largest African community groups in China. It seems that this is one area that scholars need to pay attention to, beyond the apparent over-concentration on Africans in Guangzhou, and luckily, as mentioned above, this special issue of the *JPAS* has two articles that cover important aspects of this site.

Shanghai is often tooted as the largest, most sophisticated, and most cosmopolitan city in China but, when one looks at this city from the perspective of the African presence in China, this perception of Shanghai is highly debatable. Shanghai doesn't have a Chung King Mansions in Hong Kong, a San Ma Lou in Macau, nor a Tianxiu Mansions in Guangzhou. Indeed, rather than talking of the African presence in Shanghai, Bodomo (2012) talks of the African absence in Shanghai. With the exception of online communities of Africans in Shanghai there are hardly any public places where one can observe Africans congregating in Shanghai, contrary to what happens in Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, and Yiwu. It is not that there are no Africans and Black people in Shanghai (I estimate them to be about 3000 who mostly communicate online), it is just that they are few and far between, comprising mostly students who are normally found on University campuses. Of course, the situation can change rapidly anytime, especially with the setting up of many African consulates in the city, which is likely to attract many African businesses catering to the African diplomatic community that will be established there.

Beijing, as capital of China, is home to the most diversified African community. There are more Africans on official duty for their countries and international institutions. We have ambassadors, consuls, and other diplomats; business professionals like bankers and accountants for financial institutions, and students in the most prominent universities and colleges in Beijing. African community members, unlike in Shanghai, are very visible at public spots like San Li Tun. There are also well-established and quite famous African restaurants like the erstwhile Pilipili and Toure House where various kinds of networks have developed. Altogether, I estimate the number of Africans in Beijing to be about 50 000.

Hong Kong, as China's most international city, has a sizeable population of foreign residents, some of whom have become permanent residents or taken up Hong Kong citizenship. The most prominent publications specifically on Africans in Hong Kong include Bodomo (2007, 2009, 2012), Mathews and Yang (2012), and now Wong and Tang's article in this volume.

Among these permanent residents are some 2000 Africans, particularly White South Africans, but also a substantial number from West and East African countries. It is very difficult to get reliable figures about African issues in Hong Kong because, often, authorities would give statistics for countries and regions all over the world besides Africa and a few other regions, for which they reserve a category called "Others". Nevertheless, a substantial number of non-permanent residents are now in the city as traders, artists, tourists, along with a few who claim to be refugees seeking asylum. Altogether, I would put the number of Africans in Hong Kong at 20, 000. These Africans in Hong Kong have developed networks and even communities over the years, members of which constantly interact with each other. The best place to observe the African presence in Hong Kong is at the world-famous Chung King Mansions on Nathan Road in the Tsim Sha Tsui district of Kowloon, where they can be observed buying and selling goods such as mobile phones and fabrics. Even though the Chung King Mansions have served as the most prominent spot to showcase the African population (Bodomo, 2007), the African community in Hong Kong is far more than Chung King Mansions. These networks have branched out and many African communities and networks are now formed around African businesses such as restaurants and hair salons.

Macau, like Hong Kong, is an international city with substantial numbers of foreigners, especially from Lusophone countries such as Portugal (which colonized Macau until 1999), Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and Cape Verde. There are currently only three major published studies on Africans in Macau, Morais (2009), Bodomo (2012), and Bodomo & Silva (2012). Macau has the most established and most organized African community in China. Its members, predominantly from the Lusophone countries of Africa, are tightly connected by the Portuguese language.

Many of them are within the civil service as administrators, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals, but there is an increasing presence of other types of Africans without established professions who hang around the San Ma Lou shopping mall, which in many respects would be the equivalent of the Chung King Mansions in Hong Kong. Altogether, I estimate the number of Africans in Macau to be in the region of 10,000.

Beyond these six cities, African communities are beginning to be noticed in other major cities in Greater China such as most provincial capitals, especially those in the southern parts of the country including Nanjing, Chengdu, Chongqing, and Nanning, and of course in Taiwanese cities such as Taipei, where a lot of research remains to be done.

Articles in this Volume

While building on the works mentioned above and giving more updated answers to these questions, the six papers in this volume have addressed theoretical and methodological issues as well. Many of the papers have developed theoretical formulations to explain the African presence in China, addressing the four main competing theories or metaphors that have emerged: the migrant community as an enclave, the migrant community as an outpost, the migrant community as a bridge between source and host communities, and the migrant community as a networked community. More importantly, they have proposed new theoretical frameworks based on thorough overviews of the African presence in China.

African Diaspora in China

This work by Li Anshan of Peking University, one of the most senior African specialists in China, is by far the best historical overview of the African diaspora in China. It is a reflection on the exciting historical links between Africa and China. The presence of Africans in China dates as far back as the Tang Dynasty (618-907, A.D.). The author provides several historical facts to support his claims. It further discusses the challenges and opportunities of the African diaspora in contemporary China.

African Traders in Yiwu: Trade Networks and Role in the Distribution of ‘Made in China’ Products in Africa

This contribution by Daouda Cissé is one of the few studies on African traders in Yiwu, based on detailed observations of the field site, and on discussions with African and Chinese traders using Bambara, Chinese, English, and Wolof. Empirically rich, the paper makes an important contribution through its focus on African traders in Yiwu and their trade networks as well as their role in the distribution of Chinese consumer goods in African markets.

Networks, Spheres of Influence and the Mediation of Opportunity: The Case of West African Trade Agents in China

This contribution by Laurence Marfaing and Alena Thiel, besides its sound empirical basis, will certainly increase our knowledge about network theory with regards to the African diaspora in China. Their discussion of the relationships between “network of accumulation” and “network of survival” with regards to Africans in China will likely be the subject of some amount of discussion by scholars of the African diaspora in Asia. Like the previous paper on Yiwu, this paper is empirically rich, and makes an important contribution towards our understanding of African traders in that city and the networks they have developed between Africa and China.

Structure and Agency: Africana Immigrants in China

The results reported in this study by Carlton Jama Adams, based mainly on interviews of people of African descent in Guangzhou and Shanghai, offers an exciting perspective for understanding issues in diaspora studies with the notion of “adaptive ambivalence”. This notion aptly captures the often ambivalent responses that Africana immigrants in China provide when interviewed: they may love their countries of origins yet find that they have to emigrate, and they complain quite a bit about their host country, yet still find that it is there that they get more opportunities than in their home countries. The following quotation from the paper captures very well this ambivalent mindset: “Many contemporary immigrants adopt a stance of adaptive ambivalence with regards to both home and host country. They find admirable and constraining qualities in both cultures. As a rule Africana immigrants closely identify with the aesthetics (food, weather, vistas) and relationships of their homeland while bemoaning its structural limitations as manifested in the lack of opportunities for intellectual growth and access to material goods. By way of contrast China is admired for the availability of resources to develop intellectually and to acquire wealth. At the same time its questionable ethics, its polluted environment and its ambivalence toward foreigners is a source of stress.”

African University Students in China’s Hong Kong: Motivations and Aspirations

This paper, by Gordon Chak-pong Tsui and Hayes Hei-hang Tang, explores the motivations as well as aspirations that make people from Africa want to study in Hong Kong. Using data from 10 students, the authors gather that the high quality of education as well as good financial support offered by the university are the two leading motivating factors for students choosing the University of Hong Kong as against several others in the world. If any universities are seeking ways to attract international students, this paper would be a valuable source of information.

Counting Beans: Some Empirical and Methodological Problems for Calibrating the African Presence in Greater China

This paper, by Adams Bodomo and Caroline Pajancic, addresses a major challenge faced by most researchers in getting a rough estimate, in the absence of accurate official figures, of the number of Africans present in Greater China. The work indicates that there are around 400,000 to 500,000 Africans present in China in any twelve calendar month period. It further indicates that there are at least 300,000 to 400,000 traders, 30,000 to 40,000 students, 4,000 to 5000 professionals, 10,000 to 100,000 tourists and 10,000 to 20,000 temporary business travelers. The paper recommends the mixture of both qualitative and quantitative methods – triangulation - in research of this nature.

Conclusion

This introductory article has outlined some issues with regards to the African Diaspora of about half a million members in China and provided a snapshot review of Africans in various parts of China. The African Diaspora in China is in its early stages of establishment, and is thus constantly evolving. The six articles in this volume are among the first to draw attention to this novelty and should thus act as compasses to guide scholars and other observers of this important process of globalization in the 21st Century.

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