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The Social Construction of Guangzhou as a Translocal Trading Place

Angelo GILLES

Abstract: Guangzhou has become a key destination for sub-Saharan African traders. These traders have established multilocal forms of business organisation and, in so doing, have developed diverse practices to overcome geographical, political and cultural boundaries. This paper focuses on these practices, looking at the ways in which the movements, relations and interactions within these organisational formations are produced, transformed and lived. A close ethnographic examination was made of the livelihoods of 33 African traders from 13 sub-Saharan African countries. Through the concept of translocality, the organisational formations of these Africans are conceptualised as links between different places on a larger geographical scale; these links then meet on a local scale in the specific place of Guangzhou. Following a relational understanding of spatial constructions in social science, these links are conceptualised as one of the main drivers for the social construction and transformation of the city as a translocal trading place.

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s, and especially since the turn of the century, the city of Guangzhou has become a key destination for sub-Saharan Africans who are active in the import/export trade of Chinese goods. In recent years, a growing body of studies has examined this phenomenon as a new form of migration to the People's Republic of China, which can be seen in general as a supply-driven entrepreneurial migration (Bredeloup 2012; Müller and Wehrhahn 2013), where the great majority of Africans in Guangzhou come from West African countries (Bodomo 2012: 11):

While it is true that there have been Africans in China, including students and diplomats, for a long time, there has never been, until now, a massive presence of Africans from all walks of life actually migrating to China to start up businesses serving both Africans and Chinese. (Bodomo 2010: 695)

Scholars from a number of disciplines have focused on the African presence in China from different perspectives. For example, Zhang Li (2008) and Li Zhigang et al. (2008; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Li, Lyons, and Brown 2012) have studied the development and transformation of an “African enclave” in Guangzhou. Brigitte Bertoncetto and Sylvie Bredeloup (2007; Bredeloup 2012) have conceptualised the African presence in Hong Kong and Guangzhou as part of a system of “international trading posts” for sub-Saharan traders. Gordon Mathews and Yang Yang (2012) have defined the African trader communities in Hong Kong and Guangzhou as a form of “low-end globalisation” and a “new form of temporary migration with Chinese characteristics”, referring to the speed and transient character of this migration phenomenon as well as to the informal character of the embedded trade activities, which force the African traders to “be physically present in order to consummate deals and ensure that they are not being cheated” (Mathews and Yang 2012: 116). Adams Bodomo (2009, 2010; 2012; Bodomo and Ma 2012) has analysed the links between Africa and China, conceptualising the African communities in China as a “socio-cultural bridge” between these two sides. Heidi Østbø Haugen (2012; 2013) has focused on Pentecostal movements among Africans in Guangzhou and on Nigerian traders in that city, describing their situation as a “second state of immobility” due to local visa regulations. Tabea Bork-Hüffer et al. (2014; Bork-Hüffer

and Yuan-Ihle 2014) have analysed the changes of Chinese migration policies over recent decades and diverse responding strategies of African traders in Guangzhou and Foshan.

Although these studies have contributed to increasing knowledge about South–South migration, particularly the Sino-African migration and the diverse forms of business activities of African traders in China, the spatial perspectives differ greatly. While some of the studies focus primarily on a local or national scale of analysis – for example, when referring to the clustering of export industries or ethnic congregations, the market advantages of specific localities or the constraints of political regulations (e.g., Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Zhang 2008; Haugen 2012) – others have stressed a more global perspective, conceptualising the African traders as a “third tier of globalisation” (Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012), a “low-end globalisation” (Mathews and Yang 2012) or as part of a “transnational commercial system” (Bredeloup 2012). Even when focusing on the global–local nexus of African communities and their trade activities in China (e.g., Li, Lyons, and Brown 2012), local framework conditions and a bounded segment of space such as state, region, city or neighbourhood build the conceptual point of view that ultimately leads to another conception of the local place as a feature of the global space. Moreover, the individuals involved are mostly conceptualised as somehow powerless respondents to framework conditions such as governmental regulations, local or global price and market developments, social discrimination and so on. Individuals are not considered explicitly as powerful actors who develop strategies and mobilise resources to overcome geographical, political or cultural boundaries, or “structural holes” (Burt 1992), in the context of their trade activities (with the exception of Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014 and the partial exception of Bredeloup 2012, Haugen 2012, Müller and Wehrhahn 2013, who at certain points refer to informal visa procurements or the strategy to remain a student while conducting trade activities).

The aim of this paper is to shift the perspective from distinguishing between the global and the local to a (socio-)spatial conception that considers the simultaneity of global and local processes in one place by analysing the multiple and multilocal forms of organisation and business practices of African traders in China. By introducing the concept of translocality (Brickell and Datta 2011; Smith 2005), it is possible to conceptualise place not only as a product of multiple and

multilocal networks and practices intersecting within a local place but also as a node in a net of different places on a larger geographical scale. Stressing a translocal perspective does not mean neglecting the impact of the local. National politics, local markets, factories and trade fairs can be important “containers” for business practices and they also have an impact on the production of the place as an international trading place. But the significance of these local features lies not in the physical arrangement of warehouses, machines, products, brochures and so on, but in the ways in which these objects are intertwined with and bonded by the organisational network formations and business practices of actors within and across place (Jones and Murphy 2010). Accordingly, the organisational formations and practices of African traders in China, while intersected within a specific place, will be considered as the main drivers for the production and transformation of Guangzhou as a translocal trading place. At the same time, these formations and practices will be conceptualised as links between different places within and across national borders and on a global scale.

This paper is based on research conducted between 2008 and 2012 on African traders in Guangzhou. I also visited other trading places in China (namely, Hong Kong and Yiwu) where African trading communities have been established. Numerous interviews were conducted with African traders of different origins, whereby a close ethnographic examination was made of the socio-economic networks and business practices of 33 African traders from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Cameroon, Niger, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, who are acting mainly as trade intermediaries in Guangzhou. Narrative interviews and guided interviews were conducted with these actors, most of whom were interviewed several times within the five years of research. In addition, by using the method of participatory observation, I accompanied the intermediaries in their daily lives, not just while they conducted trading activities in various places but also in the sphere of their private lives. I was also active in an informal African Christian house church, participating in the church choir for several months as well as in other social and religious meetings within this church between 2008 and 2012. This multi-sited ethnography enabled me to reconstruct the social and economic networks, the main trading places of the actors and the

main sale centres of Chinese goods, and to analyse the strategies and mobilising resources of their trading practices. Although a range of different types of traders and practices was observed (for a differentiated categorisation of African traders operating in China, see, for instance, Müller and Wehrhahn 2013; Bredeloup 2012), the representativeness of the individual cases for the entirety of African traders in China was at no time the focus of attention. Instead, the aim was to cover the greatest possible spectrum of business practices and networks in order to observe the diversity of entrepreneurship in the context of Sino-African trade relations.

In the following, the concept of translocality will be introduced within the discourse of transnational migration and economy research in order to develop a framework for studying trading practices and networks and the production of Guangzhou as a translocal trading place in both global and local dimensions.

From Transnational to Translocal

In the context of the transnational turn (King 2012), researchers in international migration have increasingly focused upon those linkages and organisational configurations of migrants that cross national-state borders both socially and spatially. Based on the pioneering studies of Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Green Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1992, 1995; Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994), these configurations have been conceptualised as transnational social spaces, whereby the transnational is perceived as a process in which (trans-) migrants “develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organisational, religious and political – that span borders” (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994: 8). Migration itself is no longer understood as a unidirectional displacement of people between two places, or exclusively as a migratory movement. Rather it is considered as a way of life (Pries 2001: 49) in which migrants span their lives across several geographical spaces with the result that their social spaces lose the attachment to just one place. By referring to social spaces, the transnational perspective is generally based on the idea of social relations as the constitutive elements of the transnational (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landholt 1999: 219; Smith 2005: 235; Vertovec 2009: 38). As transmigrants – through circular movements, everyday practices and institutions – develop and main-

tain multiple and multilocal relations between their countries of origin, settlement and other places, they permanently connect actors, markets and societies from different states and localities. Following Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004: 1009), the net of social relations and other linkages generated through these relations leads to the emergence of cross-border transnational social fields, which are defined “as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organised and transformed” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1009). The development and maintenance of such transnational social fields is fostered by the substantial progress in communication and transport technologies of recent decades. In this context, Steven Vertovec (2009: 14) articulated a new “technology of contact” that nowadays provides migrants with more intensive, more numerous and more favourable opportunities to conduct socio-economic forms of cross-border organisation (cf. Kellerman 2010; Smith and King 2012). Thus, drawing on the multiple interlocking networks and the inherent resources of transnational social fields leads to opportunities that did not previously exist. At the same time, migrants and their multiple and multilocal networks constitute the driving force for current international (economic) integration nexuses:

Transmigrant entrepreneurs [...] *caused* some of the last half century’s increase in international trade. That is, because more people had access to the requisite ethnic resources, the world sprouted more international entrepreneurs, and more world trade ensued. (Light 2010: 93; emphasis in original)

In other words, more migrants or potential traders can now access the key business-supporting resources for international trade such as international social capital, bilingual or multilingual skills, self-employment opportunities and so on.

In the past, the idea of transnational social fields crossing several national-state borders has often led to a notion of actors who are in some ways de-territorialised conducting their lives and activities detached from any locality and thus conceptualising the expansion of their social relations in a space of flows (Castells 1996; see also Appadurai 1990; Giddens 1990; Ohmae 1995), rather than in a space of places. This notion of the dis-embeddedness of transnational migrants and their socio-economic activities was criticised by authors who questioned the “too-vague free-floating narrative of transnation-

alism with its emphasis on hypermobility and the de-territorialisation of space and place in migration” (King 2012: 144; see also Mitchell 1997). These authors argued that transnational migrants do not simply exist in a borderless in-between space, but must necessarily be grounded somewhere (Ley 2004; Pries 2005). Indeed, they are simultaneously embedded in socio-cultural, economic and politico-institutional elements of different localities and are thus “prone to articulate complex affiliations, meaningful attachments and multiple allegiances to issues, people, places and traditions” (Cohen 2006: 189; see also Glick Schiller 2010; Guarnizo and Smith 2006). This multilocal embeddedness holds especially true for (im)migrant entrepreneurs – more precisely, for traders and their international trading networks: “Trade, more than other economic activities, encourages the diversification of social relations [and] face-to-face interaction” (Schmoll 2012: 227). It requires the mobilisation of resources and practices beyond traditional forms of loyalties and belongings such as cross-cultural and experiential knowledge (Müller and Wehrhahn 2013) or the organisation of trade in mixed economies and the use of weak ties for trade activities (Pécoud 2010; Nederveen Pieterse 2003).

The “rediscovery” of locality does not imply that the discourse of the transnational is grounded in the place-making practices of one locality. Rather, the localisation of the transnational (social field) must occur in particular places and over transnational space, thereby considering both the cross-border movements and organisational formations and their local situatedness (Blunt 2007; Lazár 2011; Smith and Eade 2008). Taking spatial dimensions and their mutual conditional relations into account has led to the formulation of a “new geography of migration” (Hillmann 2010) that, rather than conceiving of processes or phenomena as either global or local, or through an “either-or logic”, views them through a “both-and logic” that accommodates a space of flows and a space of places (Faist 2006; Hannerz 2009). Thus, the relevant space in present-day migrant research is no longer the nation-state or other containerised segments of space, but the multiple and multilocal organisational formations constructed by the everyday socio-economic practices and interactions of the individuals involved.

This focus on practices and interactions includes not only migrants as the constitutive actors of these formations:

The new insights gleaned from studying migration through a transnational lens – namely, the need to include non-migrants as well as migrants, consider the multiple sites and levels of transnational social fields beyond just the sending and receiving country. (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007: 142; see also Glick Schiller 2010; Wimmer 2007; Pécoud 2010)

The additional focus on individuals outside bounded migrant communities or containerised segments of space, such as neighbourhoods, cities or nations, has ultimately led to the conception of a “translocal geography” that seeks “to understand translocality in other spaces, places and scales beyond the [trans]national” (Brickell and Datta 2011: 3–4; see also, Freitag and von Oppen 2010; Gielis 2009). It has to be recognised that this concept does not intend to neglect the nation-state. Instead, the concept of translocality considers

a multitude of possible boundaries which might be transgressed, including but not limiting itself to political ones, thus recognising the inability even of modern states to assume, regulate or control movement, and accounting for the agency of a multitude of different actors (Freitag and von Oppen 2010: 12).

In addition, translocality takes into consideration the ability of these actors to overcome boundaries.

The basic idea of translocality as a concept was articulated by Doreen Massey in the late 1990s as she requested that places be imagined “as particular articulations of [...] social relations, including local relations within the place and those many connections which stretch way beyond it” (Massey 1999: 22). In this respect, localities, neighbourhoods, cities, regions and so on are understood as “meeting places” (Massey 1999: 22), and thus as spatial constructions “defined by the ways the (people in the) place interacts with places and social processes beyond” (Gielis 2009: 277). In other words, “place is no longer a single locality, but becomes a complex of localities or [...] a translocality” (Gielis 2009: 280) produced by the diverse forms of connections, relations, interactions and practices of the actors. Therefore, the concept of translocality incorporates both spatial dimensions: the emplacement and the mobility or flow through places. Moreover, while the production of place is conceptualised as a “process [and not a static occurrence] of actual everyday relations” (Brickell and Datta 2011: 10), the concept of translocality opens up a relational and dynamic understanding of geographical space and place.

However, while translocality describes a phenomenon of dynamic relations crossing several spatial scales, it also refers, as noted, to “new modes of being-in-the-world, by which [...] people are able to be co-present in more than one place” (Gielis 2009: 281). While these modes are characterised by the tension and interplay of mobility and emplacement, the concept of translocality does not privilege the importance of one or the other. Instead, it focuses on the ways in which the actors establish these new modes of being-in-the-world or a translocal livelihood. Hence, the translocal perspective again urges us to focus on the practices and ways in which the movements, the diverse relations and the interactions within the organisational business formations of African traders are produced, transformed and lived in translocal social spaces. Moreover, following the concept of translocality as outlined above, the organisational formations of African traders within Sino-African trade can be conceptualised as links (and paths) between different places that meet in the city of Guangzhou and are therefore major drivers for the production of the city as a translocal trading place.

Focusing on the business practices and networks of African traders in China, the present study answers the following research questions: What are the main structural features shaping the translocal social spaces of African traders operating in the Sino-African small-scale trade? What is the role of the locality of Guangzhou within this small-scale trade and within the translocal social spaces of African traders? How do the interviewed traders organise their trade and what kind of strategies and resources do they develop and/or mobilise? To what extent does the embeddedness of African traders within structural features of different localities and different geographical scales such as national migration policies or local experiential knowledge affect the development and mobilisation of strategies and resources? What (new) forms of spatial organisation emerge through specific business practices? How do these organisational forms reshape the importance of (coming to) Guangzhou within the Sino-African small-scale trade? And how, specifically, do the business practices and networks of African traders contribute to a spatial construction of Guangzhou as a translocal trading place?

The Social Construction of a Translocal Trading Place

The emergence of Guangzhou as a translocal trading place within the Sino-African trade can be connected to various developments taking place on a structural dimension on different scales. First of all, there is the economic transformation of the city in conjunction with the restructuring of the Chinese economic system into a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics. In historical terms, the port of Guangzhou has always played a significant role in international trade, being the springboard for the “Silk Road of the sea” (Vogel 1989) and generating foreign trade links with the Middle East and Europe. However, it was only after the transformation of the Pearl River Delta (PRD) – the hinterland of Guangzhou – from an agrarian-oriented economy to a centre of labour-intensive manufacturing industries that the city developed into one of the fastest-growing metropolises of the world. The main drivers for this development can be seen in the reform and open-door policy that China introduced in 1979, which has led to a remarkable transformation process shaped by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation processes, particularly in the urban centres of the eastern Chinese coastal provinces. In addition, diverse structural incentives, specific planning measures and events have considerably increased the development of Guangzhou into one of the new centres for Chinese industrial production and a linchpin of global trade (particularly for African small-scale trade, as described below) (Bercht 2013; He and Wu 2009; Zhao and Zhang 2007). These measures and events include massive foreign direct investments in the PRD (especially from Hong Kong); a strong rise in export-oriented trade and production; the breakdown of international marketplaces like Bangkok and Jakarta after the Asian financial crisis in 1997; the integration of China into the world economy, consolidated by its accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001; a pro-growth strategy since the late 1990s focusing on large key projects (such as Baiyun International Airport, which opened in 2004 with direct flights to important world metropolises and increased direct connections to major African cities such as Addis Ababa and Nairobi; the construction of the new “Zhujiang New Town” CBD, which was mostly completed by 2011; and the New Guangzhou Railway Station in Shibi, opened partially in 2010 with express links to Shenzhen,

Hong Kong and Macau) and on megaevents, such as the Asian Games in 2010. Furthermore, the biannual international China Import and Export Fair (Canton Fair) in Guangzhou attracts thousands of foreign businesspeople, mostly from traditional industrial nations, and one-third of annual Chinese exports are traded here. However, the competitive advantage of cheap Chinese consumer goods over products from the West makes them particularly attractive for people from developing countries, who often have lower income than their Chinese contemporaries and, consequently, have relatively low purchasing power. Therefore, it is unsurprising that, in recent years, African markets have been flooded with cheap Chinese products manufactured in the PRD (Goldstein et al. 2006), to the extent that Zhang Li (2008: 388) described a “Chinese goods tsunami”. But how is this tsunami organised?

China’s engagement on the African continent focuses on infrastructure projects and the expansion of the extractive industry, and is usually carried out by Chinese state-owned enterprises (Besada, Wang, and Whalley 2008), although there have been some investments in the services sector and an increasing number of private companies in Africa’s labour-intensive manufacturing sector (Shen 2013; Ali and Jafrani 2012). Chinese investment in other economic areas is almost non-existent, which might not be very different from the foreign direct investments that are traditionally attracted to the African continent (for a general discussion on Chinese investment in Africa see, for instance, Drysdale and Wei 2012). There are many reasons for this but, according to Broadman et al. (2007), these reasons are based primarily on high transaction costs for Chinese firms:

For instance, there are costs associated with compliance to procedures for the collection and processing of international transactions; transport costs; and search costs associated with imperfections in the “market for information” about trade and investment opportunities. (Broadman et al. 2007: 219)

Carey, Gupta, and Jacoby (2007) also emphasised the high risks for enterprise investment and discussed the lack of access and information within the African market.

In the context of small-scale trade, a way to overcome the high trade and investment barriers, gain market information and satisfy the existing demand for consumer and industrial products on African markets is to use ethnic networks and (informal) business relations

carried out by African small-scale or short-term traders. For instance, the majority of Chinese imported goods in South Africa were smuggled in by informal traders through Durban Harbour (Broadman et al. 2007); smuggling and hidden business models were also identified in the case of Chinese imported goods to West African markets (Marfaing and Thiel 2011: 15). Informal networks also exist to allow the intra-continental transport of goods through national borders to landlocked African countries such as the DR Congo, Uganda and Burundi. According to my own interviews conducted in China, African traders who know the “best” border crossings and have informal contacts with the appropriate officials are the key. These examples are concerned with border access to African countries, but recent studies of African and Chinese traders show that non-state small-scale trade also plays a large role in the export organisation of Chinese goods and the introduction of these goods into local African markets (e.g., Dittgen 2010; Giese and Thiel 2012; Mohan and Lampert 2013; Marfaing and Thiel 2011; Müller and Wehrhahn 2013; Mathews and Yang 2012).

The city of Guangzhou plays an important role within this small-scale trade conducted by African traders, both as a global trading spot and as a local and regional manufacturing centre (in Asia) that offers all kinds of industrial and consumer goods for developing- and developed-nation markets. As we will see, Guangzhou’s importance for African traders has accelerated over the last 15 years or so due to (local and global) structural features, as mentioned in the previous section. However, rather than conceptualising this structural dimension of the place-making conception of a specific locality in a simple push-and-pull logic of economic market mechanisms, the following sections will show that the locality of Guangzhou (and its associated structural features) has to be embedded in a relational conception of translocal spaces of African traders, in which the use of local experiential knowledge, specific organisational business arrangements, transformation processes of (entrepreneurial) mobility practices, strategies in response to Chinese migration policies and the role of other Chinese (and non-Chinese) cities encompass diverse localities – meaning, their structural features, structural differences and linkages.

African Traders on their Way to China

One of these small-scale traders is a 31-year-old Malian trader who arrived in Guangzhou at the end of 2003. Before he started his own business career in mainland China, he was active in his uncle's trading company, buying textiles and clothing at international marketplaces in the Middle East and Asia. When his uncle's trading business started to deteriorate due to the Asian financial crisis at the end of the 1990s and the breakdown of international marketplaces in Indonesia and Thailand, the Malian trader decided to go into business for himself. With a one-off starting credit of 4,000 USD received from his uncle, he decided to investigate the business opportunities offered by the Chinese market, which had recently opened up to the global economy. On a short business trip to Hong Kong at the end of the 1990s, the Malian trader had established some loose business contacts with Chinese wholesalers, and in 2003 he travelled to Hong Kong in order to strengthen these relations. However, after he discovered that most of the products were produced in mainland China, the Malian trader decided to buy directly from the manufacturers in the Pearl River Delta in order to avoid transaction costs. He subsequently relocated his trading base to Guangzhou at the end of 2003. According to his statements, there were very few African traders in Guangzhou at this time and there was nothing like an African community or neighbourhood in the town. Nonetheless, some wholesale stores specialising in products for foreign markets already existed. These stores had been developed mostly in the 1990s and are clustered predominantly in two areas of the city, namely the Sanyuanli area in the Baiyun district and the Xiaobei area in the Yuexiu district, both of which are close to the former central railway station and the former international airport (Zhang 2008). While there are currently hundreds of these wholesale stores that form a year-round market dominated by customers from mostly lower-income countries, particularly African ones (Müller and Wehrhahn 2011), back in the 1990s there were only a few of these stores, frequented by a limited number of foreign traders from all over the world. According to the Malian trader, Chinese sellers and firms headhunted around the stores, distributing their business cards and inviting foreign traders to visit manufacturing sites not only in the PRD but all over China in order to establish business deals with customers. At first, the Malian trader spent a lot of time (and money) visiting various manufacturers, checking product prices and quality,

and thus establishing initial business relations with mainland Chinese suppliers and producers. During his first two years in Guangzhou he used these relations to place business deals between mainland Chinese suppliers and African traders in Hong Kong, thereby acting as an intermediary between these two parties. The Malian already knew some of the African traders from his time in Hong Kong and other international marketplaces, and new African customers were contacted face-to-face during several trips to Hong Kong. These trips were also part of a strategy to regularly obtain a three-month business visa for mainland China, which the Malian trader could not apply for in Guangzhou itself. Instead, because of his former short-term visa status for PR China, he was forced to leave the country once every 30, 60 or 90 days in order to apply for a new business or tourist visa from diverse procurers in Hong Kong. In this context, it is important to note that, as a citizen of Mali, the trader had a 14-day visa-free entry for the territory of Hong Kong. This privilege is not shared by citizens of other developing-world nations such as Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Burundi and the DR Congo, who then used other entry points into mainland China such as Thailand, Malaysia or Singapore or who were forced to return to their home countries to apply for visa renewal (Bredeloup 2012; Marfaing and Thiel 2011; Mathews and Yang 2012).

Although it was possible to earn a steady income with this business concept – he received a commission of between 0.5 and 10 per cent of the merchandise value from the Chinese companies and a brokerage fee from the African customers – the financial gains were gradually whittled down as more and more African traders came to mainland China either via Hong Kong or directly from their home countries in order to avoid transaction costs. The Malian trader noticed the increasing competition from these people and decided to diversify his business model and start to organise his own export trade to his home country in 2005. He set up his own trading company in Mali, dealing with furniture. For sales and distribution in Africa, he opened up a shop in his native city, run by his brothers. His brothers transfer to him by e-mail or telephone local customers' demands and wishes, and the Malian trader himself remains in Guangzhou, controlling the manufacturing and export of his own trading goods and conducting further intermediary services. As an owner of a foreign trading company with a fairly regular income, the Malian trader was

able to open up a representative office in Guangzhou near the Xiaobei area. This also allowed him to obtain a long-term business visa that he has to renew only once a year.

This narrative of an established businessperson can be used as an example of many of the African traders who arrived in mainland China in the early 2000s. Based on former trading experiences in their home countries or other international marketplaces, these individuals managed to build up a stable economic base, both in China and – with the help of family members – in their home countries. Their main place of residence is the city of Guangzhou, in the Xiaobei area or in Sanyuanli, and it is there that they build up their social and economic networks within and beyond China. Most of their African customers remain in these two locations during their sojourn – renting rooms in hotels, visiting cafés and restaurants, and doing business inside wholesale markets – and the long-term residential African intermediaries also conduct their business in these locations. In addition, the concentration of the African population in these two locations, whether residential or not, plays an important role in terms of social life. African restaurants, hairdressers, cafés and house churches serve the Africans as meeting points, market squares and trusted places, where the omnipresence of a black population communicates a sense of home. The established African businesspeople generally act both as traders with their own foreign companies and representative offices in Guangzhou, and as intermediaries for African customers or commercial travellers who come to China for short trips on a 30-day tourist visa and who are supervised by the intermediaries. The latter usually take care of visa issues for their African customers. For example, they organise the invitation letters from Chinese firms or organisations that are needed in order to apply for a business visa; arrange the registration process for Chinese university courses necessary for applying for a student visa; and in some cases use informal channels to acquire visas, such as buying fake visas from Chinese agents in Guangzhou and other parts of China (see also Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014: 145f.; Bredeloup 2012: 45). In addition, African intermediaries arrange the accommodations for the customers' short-term stays, as well as all the business contacts with Chinese companies, and take charge of the production, packaging and shipment of the ordered goods after the African customers return to their home countries. For all these services, the intermediaries are paid both by Chi-

nese companies and their African customers (for more details, see Müller and Wehrhahn 2013). Due to their long-term residence and many years of trade experience in China, the established businesspeople have explicit knowledge about the cheapest goods on offer and the best places to buy the products, not only in Guangzhou but also in other cities in the PRD and all over China. For example, one particular 38-year-old businessman from Burkina Faso regularly travels to Yiwu. This city in Zhejiang Province has become one of the largest export centres for daily consumer products and, in recent years, has attracted more and more sub-Saharan African traders wishing to buy commodities or to open up representative offices (see also, Lin 2010; Pliez 2010). Other places of production and wholesale centres with different ranges of products on offer, where African traders purchase goods, include the cities of Foshan, Shunde, Dongguan and Shenzhen within the PRD, and Wuhan in Hubei Province (see also, Mathews and Yang 2012). In addition to their knowledge about the supply and production chains, the established businesspeople are familiar with the local logistical infrastructure and official (and informal) regulations, which enables them to organise the shipment of the goods to Africa. For example, the African intermediaries have developed strategies to reduce shipping charges by leasing cheap stockrooms outside Guangzhou, where they store the goods ordered by their customers in order to organise groupage container deliveries to certain African destinations. In order to reduce customs duties on imports and exports, both in China and Africa, some intermediaries also told of false customs declarations obtained through bribing officials (cf. Broadman et al. 2007; Marfaing and Thiel 2011).

The Impact of Local Experiential Knowledge

Apart from this commercial and logistic knowledge, the established African businesspeople possess another decisive advantage over other African actors who are not able to interact long-term within the Chinese socio-economic context: experiential knowledge and specific cultural competencies in organising the exchanges between African customers and Chinese sellers. First of all, they are able to communicate in Mandarin or sometimes even in Cantonese, which makes them well equipped to bargain with Chinese counterparts in the latter's mother tongue. They also know the norms, the conventions and

the business practices of the Chinese partners and the African customers. For example, many interviewees reported that African traders who visited China for the first time and deal directly with Chinese firms without any experience of the local business practices or the help of an intermediary have been cheated by Chinese businesspeople. Some traders reported that, upon receiving the goods in Africa, a large proportion of the order was either missing or incorrect. Such a “breach of contract” may result in a loss of economic livelihood for those Africans with limited financial capital who invested all of their money in one trading deal. Even if a complaint is made, the chance of regaining money from Chinese salespeople is virtually nonexistent. This is due mainly to the fact that business agreements between African customers and Chinese sellers and firms are mostly oral in nature or are based on handwritten receipts in Chinese, which the African customers are not able to read. The only way to avoid a breach of contract is to personally oversee the production and packaging of the ordered goods, but such a process can be quite lengthy. For African commercial travellers whose visits are limited by their tourist visas, time in China will often run out before the goods are ready for shipment. Owing to these hindrances, more and more African customers make use of the services of African intermediaries who are best equipped to make the economic exchange culturally possible. By using their Chinese-language skills, their local experiential knowledge and cultural competencies within the Chinese socio-economic context, as well as their commercial and logistical knowledge, the African intermediaries perform the function of a guarantor, organising and mediating business deals between African customers and Chinese counterparts. Moreover, they overcome the structural (and geographical) hole in the Sino-African small-scale trade system (cf. Müller and Wehrhahn 2013).

Local-to-local Relations and the Transformation of Mobility Practices

While some of the African customers still make several trips a year to China in order to purchase goods, many African intermediaries and established businesspeople reported that their customers are mostly self-employed petty traders with limited financial capital who try to avoid expensive travel and visa costs. In addition, visa regulations in China have become more restrictive, which has meant that Chinese

visas are difficult to obtain due to shifting policies as part of the Chinese foreign affairs system (for more detail, see Callahan 2013; Liu 2009; Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014). For example, during the 2008 Olympic Games and the 2010 Asian Games, visas seemed to be granted at random, not only to African traders but also for Western expats or representatives of international organisations. In certain periods before and between these events, it had been relatively easy to obtain visas; suddenly, however,

applications for multi-entry visa were turned down, extra documents were called for and, depending on nationality and/or status, visa extensions were only possible in the applicant's home country and could not be granted as hitherto in Hong Kong or Macau. (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014: 138)

As a consequence, informal channels for acquiring visas or a relocation of the place of residence to other Chinese cities (due to reduced visa control and while continuing to operate in Guangzhou) have increased (cf. Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014; Bredeloup 2012; Haugen 2012).

Another consequence of the restrictive policy of granting visas, as reported by African customers, is that after their first or second visit to China and their first or second successful trading experience with an African intermediary, some African customers prefer to remain in their home countries and commission their intermediaries back in Guangzhou with new orders via e-mail or telephone; such decisions can also be attributed to expensive travel and visa costs, as mentioned above. Therefore, the position of the African intermediaries within the Sino-African (small-scale) trade system is replacing the former migratory movements of some African traders to China, although a general and ongoing quantitative increase of African (supply-driven) migration to China can be witnessed (cf. Bredeloup 2012; Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012). Furthermore, in some cases the African intermediaries in China even prevent, or at least render unnecessary, migratory movements of African traders, who travel back and forth between Africa and China, as the following cases illustrate. The abovementioned Malian trader established a long-term trade relationship with a former business connection of his uncle: a woman who acts as a trade agent in Zambia. This woman forwards customer enquiries from her home country to the Malian trader in Guangzhou where he organises all the services necessary to send the ordered goods. The customers in Zambia have never been in face-to-face

contact with the Malian trader in Guangzhou, nor have they ever travelled to China themselves. Another example is a 35-year-old Burundian trader who established himself as an intermediary in Guangzhou at the end of 2008. Due to a wide social network in Burundi, Rwanda and the DR Congo (he grew up in both Burundi and Rwanda, he has family members in the DR Congo and he is part of a large Christian church in Burundi), along with his growing reputation as a reliable businessman, the Burundian trader continuously receives orders via e-mail from people back in Africa who get his contact details by word of mouth from his family or from friends and church members, sometimes by sheer chance. A third example is a 43-year-old intermediary from Niger, who has been living in Guangzhou since 2003. He built up his most important business contact via a Jamaican woman he once met in Guangzhou. Upon her return to Jamaica, she gave the contact details of the Nigerien trader to her uncle, who was interested in buying Chinese consumer products. Following several online agreements, the Nigerien trader and this uncle concluded their first “commercial contract” via e-mail without any institutional guarantees and without ever having met face-to-face.

Multiple and Multilocal Relations beyond Traditional Affiliations

Apart from replacing former migratory movements of African traders to China, these examples also show that the contacts of the African intermediaries in Guangzhou to African customers were not based exclusively on ethnic affiliation or shared nationality – although it could be said that most of their customer contacts are with co-nationals. Instead, they strive to establish business contacts by “word of mouth” – based on former business contacts, their entrepreneurial reputation or kinship networks – and “face-to-face”, crossing multiple ethnic and national boundaries and, in so doing, linking traders of various African nations to the economy of China and the city of Guangzhou. In other words, the African intermediaries in Guangzhou bring together different merchants and markets in their personal business networks and thus also operate outside traditional relations of interaction between country of origin and context of destination.

The investigations also revealed that the intermediaries act in a pattern of self-organisation by using their social capital (in the form

of established access to information, a good competitive position and structural power) as a competitive advantage. It was observed that forms of cooperation between family members and other co-nationals and co-ethnics exist when focusing on the African distribution system for trading goods or collective forms of solidarity in the initial stage of an intermediary's business career in Guangzhou. In addition, Tabea Bork-Hüffer et al. (2014) and Heidi Østbø Haugen (2012) report on the social (and, to a certain extent, economic) support of migrant organisations in China. However, lucrative (formal and informal) business contacts to manufacturers, sellers, freight carriers or public authorities in China are generally kept private (cf. Bredeloup 2012; Mathews and Yang 2012). According to the interviewees, every African who wishes to establish himself or herself long-term as a trader in China must build up a business network and, most important, possess a minimum amount of money to invest and make a living in China. The intermediaries attribute these business practices to a generalised feeling of mistrust between potential business partners based on experiences of betrayal and cheating even within family ties. In order to ensure survival and to build an economic base in China, highly autonomous business action and the use of local experiential knowledge seems to be the best strategy in the competitive market niche of intermediaries in Guangzhou (for more details, see Müller and Wehrhahn 2011, 2013).

Chain Migration and Strategies to Obtain a Residence Permit

The transformation of mobility practices due to the services of established African intermediaries in Guangzhou, the growing competition in the Sino-African small-scale trade and the limited nature of employment opportunities in China for foreigners could lead one to assume that the migration of Africans to China will quantitatively decline. However, the empirical investigations reveal a different situation. The number of Africans with an official residence permit in Guangzhou increased by 30 to 40 per cent each year between 2003 and 2007 and now totals approximately 20,000 people (Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012). Other sources estimate the number of Africans living in Guangzhou to be 200,000 due to the growing presence of irregular migrants (Li, Lyons, and Brown 2012). My investigations revealed that a form of chain migration has been established with the

African population already staying or living in Guangzhou. For example, it was possible to observe and accompany the arrival of 20 Burundians who had just finished or quit university in their home country. In contrast to the established businessmen described above, these newcomers had no particular trading experience but hoped to profit from the economic opportunities offered by the Sino-African trade. With the help of a Burundian friend from their hometown in Burundi who had been established in Guangzhou as a trader since mid-2008, these people managed to obtain places in a Chinese language course, which enabled them to obtain student visas for at least six months. Although they had to attend language classes in order to keep their residence permits, the main goal of these newcomers was to establish themselves as traders in order to finance their livelihoods. A lack of financial capital prevented them from undertaking their own trading deals or opening shops in one of the wholesale stores, at least in the initial stage of their trade careers, so almost all of them tried to act as intermediaries, organising small trading deals for relatives or friends back in their home countries or trying to build up business contacts with African commercial travellers in Guangzhou, to whom they offered their intermediary or translation services. While a few of the Burundians managed to establish themselves as “successful” intermediaries with an unsteady income of less than a few thousand US dollars a year (one 33-year-old Burundian reported sales worth 1,000 USD a week, but also noted that he had some months with no income), the majority failed either to build up a stable economic base or to achieve permanent visa status. Accordingly, some of the newcomers decided to overstay their visas while others managed to use informal connections to extend their residence permits. For example, one Chinese entrepreneur reported that it was possible to use bribery to buy visas within Guangdong Province for several thousand US dollars or to engage Chinese agents with the connections to obtain visas in other provinces for less.

The African overstayers or irregular migrants run the risk of being caught and deported by police. This is especially the case in Guangdong Province and the city of Guangzhou, where the local police authorities have accelerated visa checks since 2009, forcing some irregular African traders to move to other cities like Foshan (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014). However, it is perilous to be economically active, even for those with a regular student visa. According to the

Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People's Republic of China, which came into force on 1 July 2013 (for more details, see Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014), foreign students are not allowed to conduct work-related activities such as teaching foreign languages or conducting commercial/trade activities, a regulation that does not greatly differ from those of other countries. Therefore, because these individuals were officially registered as students, they lacked valid trading and business licences and did not declare their non-wage incomes. In addition, according to interviewees and observations, they also participated in several semi-legal activities, since many of the Chinese companies they dealt with do not operate under valid business licences and therefore often maintain orders and profits “off-book”. However, as long as the newcomers fail to earn a sufficient and steady income with which they could then open their own companies and finance representative offices, they cannot apply for regular business visas and business licences, and therefore continue to deal informally. Consequently, informality as a practice becomes “an adaptation strategy in the context of certain economic and political constraints” (Etzold et al. 2009: 5).

Informal Trading Deals and the Role of Hong Kong as a Financial Hub

It is not only the Burundian newcomers or African “students” of other origins who are active as intermediaries and deal informally. According to the three established businessmen – the 38-year-old from Burkina Faso, the 43-year-old from Niger and the 33-year-old from Burundi, who have been living in Guangzhou as official traders for eleven, ten and six years, respectively – even officially registered Chinese companies sometimes try to maintain profits “off-book” in order to save on taxes. To this end, they try to avoid having official contracts with African customers or intermediaries. In addition, they demand that customers or intermediaries pay in cash, preferably in yuan in order to avoid the currency exchange. This method of payment becomes a problem once the value of the trading goods exceeds a certain amount. According to the African intermediaries, it is only possible to withdraw the equivalent of 5,000 USD a day from a mainland Chinese bank or Western Union, or to import 5,000 USD at one time as a foreign currency. Otherwise, a customs declaration is needed, such as a trade agreement and a forthcoming payment transaction

with a Chinese company, which would entail the payment of export duty for the foreign customer and income tax for the Chinese company. In order to avoid the payments and to be able to pay the Chinese partners in cash, the African intermediaries carry out most of their financial transactions via Hong Kong, where interviewees report that it is possible to withdraw as much money as required. This means that the intermediaries usually keep an account in Hong Kong to which their customers transfer money from Africa. The intermediaries then travel from Guangzhou to Hong Kong by train, take out the money and smuggle it into mainland China. Although it was not possible to observe exactly how the intermediaries manage to bypass the border controls and customs examinations, this narrative shows that Hong Kong still plays an important role within the organisational business networks of African traders and Chinese entrepreneurs operating in mainland China. It also emphasises the important role of African intermediaries staying permanently in Guangzhou in order to organise these informal transactions. Without their local experiential knowledge and their cultural competencies, many African customers would find it impossible to make successful trading deals with Chinese sellers and firms.

Conclusion

If we focus on the spatial dimension of the relations and practices of African traders residing on a long-term basis in Guangzhou, we encounter a form of socio-economic organisation that can be described as multilocal embeddedness in different localities, or as “translocal social spaces”. In addition to the business relations to manufacturers in Guangzhou and other Chinese cities, the business relations to their regions of residence or the social relations within the local African communities, the African intermediaries in Guangzhou conduct customer relations across ethnic and national boundaries and, thus, also operate outside traditional relations of entrepreneurial interaction between country of origin and context of destination. All of these relations are simultaneously part of phenomena or systems on different geographical scales. For example, on a global scale they link the production sites of the Pearl River Delta and the city of Guangzhou to the world trade of Chinese products. Moreover, they add the city of Guangzhou to the system of international marketplaces (cf.

Bredeloup 2012) that are competing to use certain location economies. On a more regional scale, the African presence in China and the related economic relations can be interpreted as a specific characteristic of the Sino-African small-scale trade system, which is characterised by informality, the exploitation of differentials of local markets and the importance of local experiential knowledge. At the same time, the African presence in China is a feature of South–South migration that is fostered and maintained by migrant networks as well as by diverse strategies to overcome political and geographical boundaries (such as regulations regarding visa or financial transactions). On a local scale, the concentrations of the African population in certain areas of Guangzhou (residential or otherwise) can be attributed to the clusters of wholesale and industry markets as well as to forms of chain migration.

The simultaneity of different localities (and their structural features) – as particular articulations of relations – on different geographical scales becomes visible in the organisational formations of African intermediaries in Guangzhou and their translocal social spaces. These formations can be conceptualised as links between different places or localities on a national scale (when focusing on the production centres across China) as well as on a global scale (when focusing on the multilocal business relations across Africa or the strategies to organise (informal) financial arrangements via Hong Kong). In addition, the different actors within these organisational formations (that is, the African commercial travellers who come to Guangzhou on a tourist visa, the African customers who stay in their home countries, the Chinese sellers and firms in Guangzhou and other Chinese marketplaces, and the African intermediaries and traders operating and staying long-term in Guangzhou), as well as their interplay of mobility and emplacement and their diverse forms of connections and relations, can be considered as the constitutive elements of the increasing Sino-African small-scale trade in recent years. Moreover, they are one of the main drivers of the production and transformation of Guangzhou into a translocal trading place. In addition to their function as a catalyst for further Sino-African economic exchange and for the chain migration of new African traders coming to the city, they also help develop an informal and formal infrastructure of cheap hotels, cafés and restaurants specialising in foreign cuisine, currency exchange and transfer offices, travel agencies and freight services, and a

low-segmented residential market in the city. Thus, the locality of Guangzhou can be conceptualised as a dynamic spatial construction of the diverse forms of relations and practices of African traders and their translocal social spaces. In other words, it is possible to speak of Guangzhou as a translocality that is constantly shaped and reshaped by the organisational formations observed, as well as the embedded multiple and multilocal relations, diverse localities and practices of African traders.

The scope of the present paper does not include the extent to which this transient character of the translocal social spaces of African traders and the embedded (trans)locality of Guangzhou could contribute to a general declining role of the city within the Sino-African small-scale trade. The discussion on whether the establishment of African trading communities in Guangzhou and all over China can be characterised as stable or transient has only just started (e.g., Bredeloup 2012; Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012; Mathews and Yang 2012). However, a translocal approach provides a more holistic view of this trade phenomenon by simultaneously taking into account different localities, their structural features and linkages, as well as diverse boundaries on different geographical scales and various practices on the part of actors to overcome these boundaries. By focusing, among other things, on the organisational business practices of African traders and their transformation – for example, through African intermediaries residing long-term in Guangzhou (Müller and Wehrhahn 2013; Mathews and Yang 2012) or African traders who relocate their place of residence to other Chinese cities while continuing to operate in Guangzhou (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014) – the question about the meaning of Guangzhou within Sino-African small-scale trade will be answered not by referring to quantitative migration data of African traders but by focusing on how these traders continue to link the locality with people, places and markets within their translocal social spaces.

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