



# Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Topical Issue: Foreign Lives in a Globalising City: Africans in Guangzhou  
Guest Editor: Gordon Mathews

---

Mathews, Gordon (2015)

Africans in Guangzhou, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44, 4, 7–15.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-9123>

ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this introduction and the other articles can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org)>

---

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is an Open Access publication.  
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <[ias@giga.hamburg](mailto:ias@giga.hamburg)>

For an e-mail alert please register at: <[www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org)>

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family, which also  
includes *Africa Spectrum*, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* and *Journal of  
Politics in Latin America*. <[www.giga-journal-family.org](http://www.giga-journal-family.org)>.



## Africans in Guangzhou

Gordon MATHEWS

For a number of years, there was only a trickle of academic work being done on Africans in China, and on Africans in Guangzhou, the dominant city of African residence in China, as opposed to the flood of writings dealing with Chinese in Africa. However, that trickle has grown into a full-fledged stream over the past few years. In 2015 alone, to mention just a few articles on Africans in Guangzhou, Shanshan Lan has provided an ethnographic discussion of Nigerian–Chinese marriages in Guangzhou in *Asian Anthropology* (Lan 2015), Tu Hyunh has written ethnographically about female African traders in Guangzhou and how their business strategies and practices differ from those of male traders in *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* (Hyunh 2015), Roberto Castillo has examined place-making and precariousness among Nigerians in Guangzhou as seen through community leaders in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (Castillo 2015), Lavinia Lin and her co-authors have investigated barriers to African access to healthcare in Guangzhou in *Global Public Health* (Lin et al. 2015), and Tabea Bork-Hüffer and her co-authors have explored how African migrants help to create new forms of social spaces in Guangzhou in *Population, Space and Place* (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2015). Also in 2015, a special issue of *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, edited by Adams Bodomo and entitled “Africans in China: Guangzhou and Beyond – Issues and Reviews,” includes six articles (Li 2015; Cissé 2015; Marfaing and Thiel 2015; Adams 2015; Tsui and Tang 2015; Bodomo and Pajancic 2015) that, while they do not specifically focus on Africans in Guangzhou, do discuss Guangzhou and its African population and ethnic relations at least in passing. I have no doubt missed a number of further articles relevant to this topic, as so many are now being published.

The fact that there is a rapidly growing number of articles on Africans in Guangzhou, and in China more generally, is a very good thing indeed, because it signifies that the academic examination of Africans in Guangzhou is able to deal with increasingly complex and variegated themes. A few years ago, broad-based reports on Africans in Guangzhou simply reporting on their presence were sufficient, but those days are long gone: more specific empirical treatments, on spe-

cific aspects of Africans' lives and livelihoods in Guangzhou and in China at large, examined with more theoretically sophisticated arguments than in the past, have become necessary. This field has come of age. The study of Africans in Guangzhou and in China should be of considerable interest to scholars exploring all aspects of current Chinese society, in that it signifies China's remarkable shift into becoming an immigrant society (Pieke 2012) and a transnational society. As long as the scholarly study of Africans in China remained less sophisticated than the study of Chinese in Africa, scholars of China might have been justified in not paying it much attention. This justification is valid no more, as work on Africans in China, and in Guangzhou in particular, is beginning to attain a high level of specificity and complexity.

With this topical issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, we add to this growing stream of articles, with treatments in several areas that have heretofore been largely neglected in the literature. The first article, by Angelo Gilles, offers a new theoretical perspective from which to consider African traders in Guangzhou: not in terms of the global or the local but rather the translocal. The second article, by Tabea Bork-Hüffer, links transnational mobility to Chinese internal migration and compares the health-seeking practices of Africans in Guangzhou with those of the rural-to-urban migrants in the city, in order to consider healthcare in the city on a comparative cross-cultural basis. The third article, by Roberto Castillo, discusses African musicians in Guangzhou, considering them in terms of their life aspirations, and how their presence in Guangzhou enables them to better pursue these aspirations. The fourth, by Gordon Mathews, examines African logistics agents as middlemen and as cultural brokers between their African clients and Guangzhou's Chinese world. The articles in this topical issue come from different disciplines, each with their different research foci and forms of presentation, but are all of value in their own right, and shed considerable light on one another. In this brief introduction, I first discuss each article, then compare their disciplinary approaches, and, finally, make an argument for the necessity of cross-disciplinary research.

Angelo Gilles's "The Social Construction of Guangzhou as a Translocal Trading Place" aims

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.

Gilles argues that earlier articles portrayed traders as more or less powerless in the face of global forces; through the concept of the translocal, he seeks to conceptualise the intersection of the local and the global in a fuller way, depicting traders' own agency. The traders he profiles belong to transnational social fields but also to distinctly local worlds in several different places. Citing Gielis, Gilles notes that "place is no longer a single locality, but becomes a complex of localities or [...] a translocality," going on to describe "new modes of being-in-the-world, by which [...] people are able to be co-present in more than one place." The article then discusses a Malian businessman, among other interviewees, and the layers of local, translocal, transnational, and global knowledge that enable him to succeed at what he does. Gilles subsequently offers a complex and detailed discussion of not only the levels of knowledge of traders but also the importance of this at a time when Chinese visas have become increasingly difficult to procure, as was the case during the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou. Unlike the authors of the other three articles, Gilles seeks to make not so much an empirical contribution as a theoretical one:

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.

Anyone doing research among African traders in Guangzhou and their interactions with the Chinese and transnational world around them will quickly recognise the validity and usefulness of his argument, particularly given the sterility of simply discussing the contrast between the global and the local.

"Healthcare-Seeking Practices of African and Rural-to-Urban Migrants in Guangzhou," by Tabea Bork-Hüffer, examines two populations that live side by side but that are not often compared. As Bork-Hüffer points out, while Chinese rural-to-urban migrants have been investigated by various scholars in terms of healthcare, Africans in Guangzhou have not been investigated until recently. Her research endeavour is to compare and contrast the healthcare-seeking prac-

tices and barriers to healthcare experienced by African migrants and by Chinese rural-to-urban migrants – two disadvantaged groups in the city, as opposed to legally recognised Chinese residents. She finds that “internal migrant interviewees often profoundly distrusted doctors and had doubts about the pricing, the quality of care, and doctors’ competency,” preferring big public hospitals because of this mistrust. In contrast, African interviewees in the qualitative interviews quoted by Bork-Hüffer typically “showed a remarkable openness towards and trust in the Chinese healthcare system and Chinese health professionals.” In fact, Bork-Hüffer’s research indicates that African migrants suffer from problems and discrimination in seeking care more often than internal Chinese migrants. But in terms of perceptions, internal Chinese migrants are more critical of the medical care they receive than are external African migrants. This, I speculate, might be because Chinese medical care, even if occasionally accompanied by racial discrimination and linguistic difficulties, is of a higher calibre than that typically encountered in a number of African countries. In any case, Bork-Hüffer’s article is highly interesting in that it compares two groups that are obviously parallel yet have been empirically compared in the literature only infrequently. It seems unlikely that the recommendations for improvement Bork-Hüffer offers will ever be implemented, but the strength of her article lies in its groundbreaking analysis itself – we need more analyses comparing China’s internal and external migrants.

“Landscapes of Aspiration in Guangzhou’s African Music Scene: Beyond the Trading Narrative” begins like a novel in its opening vignette, capturing the reader in its portrayal of a Nigerian musician and his faltering efforts to ascend the global stage. Its author, Roberto Castillo, is trained in cultural studies, but writes like an ethnographer, in that he is deeply involved with the main interviewees portrayed in his study, allowing him to intimately depict them. Castillo is concerned with moving beyond the stereotypical discussions of Africans in Guangzhou as solely economic agents and exploring the dreams and realities of musicians who are striving to “make it” on the Chinese and international music scene. He writes,

Indeed, most of the Africans that I have met in Guangzhou over the last four years regard (and utilise) trade not as an end in itself, but as a tool to achieve other (sometimes more important) mid- and long-term objectives.

These musicians did not come to China to simply escape their home countries, or primarily for economic reasons – rather, China was a foreign land for them that could serve as a platform for their dreams. China, more than anywhere else in the world, is for these African men the land of dreams and opportunity. The fact that both of the musicians Castillo portrays might not achieve their dreams is beside the point – musicians around the world dream, and most fail. The key for Castillo is portraying these two musicians as making their lives rather than just their livings, the latter represented by the trade that both engage in as a day job, but which is not what truly motivates them in their lives. His implicit call is for deeper, fuller ethnographic portrayals of Africans in Guangzhou, in all their individual dreams, fears, and hopes. A number of scholars are already exploring aspects of African life and African–Chinese interactions in Guangzhou beyond the purely economic, but Castillo’s call is for additional and deeper explorations in order that a fuller and truer picture can be painted.

In “African Logistics Agents and Middlemen as Cultural Brokers in Guangzhou,” Gordon Mathews asks,

how do sub-Saharan Africans, those who by virtue of their skin colour may be seen as the most foreign of the foreign by many Chinese, learn to adjust to the Chinese world to which they have come?

Chinese generally do not help with this, because of the brief stays of many Africans in China, because of racism, and above all, because of the implicit sense of many Chinese that China is for Chinese and foreigners have no real place as long-term residents. There is thus a void, and it is African logistics agents who fill this void, Mathews argues. They do this not just from their civic consciousness and out of the goodness of their hearts, but more to keep their customers happy and returning – they are cultural brokers by necessity rather than by choice. Mathews notes the absence of discussion of cultural brokers in the anthropological literature, and the need for such discussion in a world of globalisation in which Kenyan and Nigerian traders might wind up in a radically foreign environment 24 hours after leaving their homeland for the first time. He examines the roles these brokers play as logistics agents and middlemen, and how these roles intertwine. He also looks at these cultural brokers’ own ambivalent relationships with China, against the backdrop of their own

strong Muslim and Christian religious beliefs. This article, like Castillo's, looks at a particular aspect of the lives and livelihoods of Africans in Guangzhou in relation to the Chinese world in which they live: not that of cultural artists but rather that of cultural ambassadors and brokers. Understanding how African traders can get by in a largely indifferent foreign land also requires fuller ethnographic examination.

Each of these four articles has its own genuinely groundbreaking contribution to make, as the above summaries illustrate. However, the differences in their aims, methods, and implications also make for a fascinating comparison. Most striking are the very different approaches taken by Castillo and Mathews on the one hand, and Bork-Hüffer and Gilles on the other. The latter two articles are written by scholars working in the field of geography, and reflect a particular emphasis on data collection and theorising, with minimal portraiture of individuals. The former two articles are written by scholars working in cultural studies or anthropology, and emphasise the portraiture of individuals over large-scale theorising and hypothesising. In a very broad sense, the latter two articles reflect a more generalising, even scientific approach, and the former two articles emphasise a more particularistic, ethnographic approach. An innocent reader coming upon these articles might be driven to ask, *Is valid social science a matter of theorising, and of hypothesising and collecting data to prove or disprove one's hypothesis? Or is it a matter of portraying individuals as fully as possible, using them as illustrations of humanity rather than proof of anything?* Clearly it may be both, depending upon whether the scholar is working in a "hard" social science such as economics or psychology (or, to a lesser degree, geography or sociology), or in a "softer" social-scientific or humanistic discipline, such as anthropology, cultural studies, or history. And clearly there is room for both, even if their approaches are not always harmonious. (I should mention that, in fact, both Bork-Hüffer and Gilles engaged in extensive ethnographic research in Guangzhou, lasting many months. Their research was absolutely not the "quickly jump in, interview a couple of people, hand out some questionnaires, and quickly leave" style of superficial research that has characterised some practitioners of their and some other social-scientific disciplines. They did the ethnography and know their topics in great depth. But their discipline's requisite style of writing and reasoning did not enable them to fully demonstrate this in their articles.)

One could criticise Castillo's article for focusing only on two musicians: *How can they be representative of anything but themselves? What can they teach us about Africans in general in Guangzhou?* One could criticise Mathews for focusing only on ten logistics agents: *Maybe if he had interviewed all the logistics agents in Guangzhou instead of the people he just happened to know, he could provide a more accurate picture.* But of course the very strength of these two articles lies in the fact that the authors know their interviewees well – well enough for their interviewees to fully reveal their lives to them, enabling the authors to, in turn, portray the interviewees in all of their individual complexity to a world of readers. One could criticise Bork-Hüffer's article for the fact that its author never followed her respondents to the clinics they went to – *Most of her respondents simply filled out a form for her. How deeply does she really understand their lives?* – even though her investigation, in its breadth, tells readers something new and provides enough empirical rigour to make it convincing. One could criticise Gilles's article for its minimal ethnographic depiction of Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou and its elaboration of theory that might seem common sense to some: *Does the concept of translocality really add anything that we don't already know?* But then, solid theory such as that of Gilles typically takes a concept that researchers implicitly know as common sense but have never adequately formulated, and makes this concept explicit so that it can be utilised and examined in full.

Indeed, each of the disciplines from which the above authors write are in their own particular investigative worlds, with their own particular methods and questions; referees usually come from within their own disciplines, and so it is sometimes only in topical issues such as this that these different approaches can meet head on. In a sense, this topical issue's papers might remind the sceptical reader of the parable of the blind men and the elephant – we each to some extent use our own investigations of a particular part of the elephant's anatomy to falsely generalise about the elephant as a whole. But I am more sanguine than this. Understanding the social world of Africans and African–Chinese interactions in Guangzhou, like any other social world, is an immensely complex undertaking, so complex that no single observer can comprehend the whole elephant. We who depict parts all add to the knowledge of the whole – we do things differently, but we need one another in order to acquire a full depiction. And

it is to the credit of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* that it is so open to this type of interdisciplinary investigation.

And indeed, in this topical issue, we can all learn from one another. Castillo's musicians and Mathews's logistics agents are very definitely players within Gilles's translocality; were the first two authors to use the ideas of the other two authors, their analyses might be richer. Bork-Hüffer's health-service data might be usefully employed by Mathews's logistics agents, who sometimes take their clients to hospitals; Mathews himself was surprised to learn that African patients view Guangzhou clinics and hospitals so favourably, given his own observations of negativity towards Chinese institutions. Gilles's theorising could definitely benefit from the detailed depictions of Castillo and Mathews, adding ethnographic heft to his theorising. To make a large generalisation, sociological and geographic research may be characterised as broad but shallow; ethnographic research may be characterised as narrow but deep. To combine them means to be both broad and deep, a social-scientific ideal. This issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* strives towards this ideal, as we researchers all should. Despite the growing stream of research dealing with Africans in Guangzhou, there is surprisingly little disciplinary interrelation. What we need are more topical/special issues and more edited books that will put together different disciplinary investigations, and enable us to see the elephant as a whole. This will allow us to truly understand the remarkable phenomenon of Africans in Guangzhou: a recently monocultural Chinese world being made, before our eyes, into a world that is multicultural and global.

## References

- Adams, Carlton Jama (2015), Structure and Agency: Africana Immigrants in China, in: *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7, 10, 85–108.
- Bodomo, Adams, and Caroline Pajancic (2015), Counting Beans: Some Empirical and Methodological Problems for Calibrating the African Presence in Greater China, in: *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7, 10, 126–143.
- Bork-Hüffer, Tabea, Birte Rafflenbeul, Zhigang Li, Frauke Kraas, and Desheng Xue (2015), Mobility and the Transiency of Social Spaces: African Merchant Entrepreneurs in China, in: *Population, Space and Place*, doi: 10.1002/psp.1900.

- Castillo, Roberto (2015), “Homing” Guangzhou: Emplacement, Belonging and Precarity Among Africans in China, in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, doi: 10.1177/1367877915573767.
- Cissé, Daouda (2015), African Traders in Yiwu: Their Trade Networks and Their Role in the Distribution of “Made in China” Products in Africa, in: *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7, 10, 44–64.
- Huynh, Tu (2015), A “Wild West” of Trade? African Women and Men and the Gendering of Globalisation from Below in Guangzhou, in: *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, doi: 10.1080/1070289X.2015.1064422.
- Lan, Shanshan, (2015), Transnational Business and Family Strategies among Chinese/Nigerian Couples in Guangzhou and Lagos, in: *Asian Anthropology*, doi: 10.1080/1683478X.2015.1051645.
- Li, Anshan (2015), African Diaspora in China: Reality, Research and Reflection, in: *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7, 10, 10–43.
- Lin, Lavinia, Katherine B. Brown, Brian J. Hall, Fan Yu, Jingqi Yang, Jason Wang, Joshua M. Schrock, Adams B. Bodomo, Ligang Yang, Bin Yang, Eric J. Nehl, Joseph D. Tucker, and Frank Y. Wong (2015), Overcoming Barriers to Health-Care Access: A Qualitative Study among African Migrants in Guangzhou, China, in: *Global Public Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice*, doi: 10.1080/17441692.2015.1076019.
- Marfaing, Laurence, and Alena Thiel (2015), Networks, Spheres of Influence and the Mediation of Opportunity: The Case of West African Trade Agents in China, in: *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7, 10, 65–84.
- Pieke, Frank N. (2012), Immigrant China, in: *Modern China*, 38, 1, 40–77.
- Tsui, Chak-pong Gordon, and Hei-hang Hayes Tang (2015), African University Students in China’s Hong Kong, in: *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7, 10, 109–125.

**Dr. Gordon Mathews** is a professor of anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the author of *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions*, Hong Kong (2011) and co-editor of *Globalization from Below: The World’s Other Economy* (2012).  
E-mail: <cmgordon@cuhk.edu.hk>

# Contents

## Foreign Lives in a Globalising City: Africans in Guangzhou

### Editorial

- Karsten GIESE  
Ten Years After – A Personal Note 3

### Introduction

- **Gordon MATHEWS**  
**Africans in Guangzhou** 7

### Research Articles

- Angelo GILLES  
The Social Construction of Guangzhou as a Translocal  
Trading Place 17
- Tabea BORK-HÜFFER  
Healthcare-Seeking Practices of African and Rural-to-  
Urban Migrants in Guangzhou 49
- Roberto CASTILLO  
Landscapes of Aspiration in Guangzhou’s African  
Music Scene: Beyond the Trading Narrative 83
- Gordon MATHEWS  
African Logistics Agents and Middlemen as Cultural  
Brokers in Guangzhou 117

### Research Articles

- Catherine S. CHAN  
The Currency of Historicity in Hong Kong:  
Deconstructing Nostalgia through Soy Milk 145

■ Bill CHOU New Bottle, Old Wine: China's Governance of Hong Kong in View of Its Policies in the Restive Borderlands	177
<b>Contributors</b>	211