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# Landscapes of Aspiration in Guangzhou's African Music Scene: Beyond the Trading Narrative

Roberto CASTILLO

**Abstract:** This article is an exploration into the personal aspirations that converge in Guangzhou's African music scene. I argue that despite being often traversed, articulated, fuelled, and constrained by economies and economic discourses, aspirations are not necessarily economic or rational calculations. I contend that the overarching trading narrative about "Africans in Guangzhou" has left little space for issues of agency, emotion, and aspiration to be considered in their own right. Drawing on a year of continuous ethnographic fieldwork, I show how aspirations are crucial arenas where the rationales behind transnational mobility are developed, reproduced, and transmitted. Indeed, aspirations can be thought of as "navigational devices" (Appadurai 2004) that help certain individuals reach for their dreams. By bringing the analysis of aspirations to the fore, I intend to provide a more complex and nuanced landscape of the multiple rationales behind African presence in Southern China; promote a better understanding (both conceptually and empirically) of how individuals navigate their social spaces and guide their transnational journeys; and draw attention to the incessant frictions and negotiations between individual aspirations while on the move and the constraints imposed by more structural imperatives.

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## Introduction: African Nightlife on the Pearl River

After a couple of informal meetings, Dibaocha (43), a well-known Nigerian singer in Guangzhou, finally invited me to one of his performances. We arranged to meet at a Starbucks near the Garden Hotel – a landmark in Taojin (one of the most affluent parts of Guangzhou). When I arrived at midnight, Dibaocha was already waiting inside his black SUV. As I jumped in, I caught a whiff of air freshener mixed with the fading smell of a new car. As I relaxed in the air conditioning, I sensed a certain tension, however. Dibaocha was talking intensely on the phone and failed to acknowledge my arrival. As he argued in English about some payments, he anxiously zapped through his latest album, which was blaring through the sound system. At the same time, he was texting in Igbo and pinyin on a second phone. As I waited for the conversation to end, I took note of his attire. I knew from our previous meetings that Dibaocha was stylish (I always felt comparatively underdressed), but that night was special. He was wearing neon-blue pants with a pair of impeccable white shoes and a matching tee. He also had a few silver chains around his neck and a glitzy blue hat. On his right wrist, a gold bracelet with the name “DIBAOCHA” set in “diamonds” shined in the phone’s light. Strewn across the back seat of the car were dozens of copies of his two albums, flyers, clothes, and a handful of cables. Hanging above them on a cable extending from window to window were four tutus and four sexy nurse costumes in dry-cleaning bags. In addition to all this, there was a big metallic box on wheels with a cash slot at the top and a couple of posters of Dibaocha taped to it.

As the argument on the phone abruptly ended, Dibaocha was clearly upset. “This is wrong, man. The dancers don’t want to come to the show,” he told me. “You need to convince them to come,” he commanded, handing me his phone. Surprised by his request, I felt I had no choice but to comply. After several attempts to reach “Irina Dancer” again, she finally picked up the phone and said, in what I assumed was a thick Russian accent, “I told you, we will not go to your show,” before promptly hanging up. I called back several times, but to no avail. Finally, Dibaocha asked me to call from my own number. This time Irina did not hang up, and as I introduced myself rapidly, Dibaocha started driving in the direction of the venue – Wave Bar in Zhujiang’s Culture and Art Zone (an area on the bank of the Pearl River renowned for its nightlife). Irina was adamant that she

would not go to the show that night, saying that Dibaocha needed a manager – someone to help him organise his events. In one of the several conversations we had that night (Dibaocha kept insisting that I call back), Irina made me promise that I would be the one to contact her in the future, instead of Dibaocha. In turn, I made her promise to try and find us some available dancers amongst her contacts that night.

The drive to the bar, which should have taken 20 minutes, eventually extended upwards over an hour, as Dibaocha didn't know the way. As we drove down empty streets and criss-crossed the Pearl River several times, I started getting anxious and asked him to pull over and ask for directions. A few blocks ahead, we spotted a young man waiting at a bus stop on a lonely street corner. Dibaocha lowered the window, pulled over, and asked for directions in perfect Mandarin. The man seemed to know the place, but had trouble explaining how to get there. "Get in the car and take us there," Dibaocha commanded. Much to my surprise, the young man didn't hesitate before jumping in the back seat amongst the tutus and nurse costumes, and directing us to the venue.

When we finally got to the bar (at around 1:30 a.m.), it was almost empty. There were two Chinese dancers and a Chinese DJ on stage, and another 30-odd people (including the staff) roaming around. The speaker volume was intolerably loud, so we sat on the terrace outside the bar, ordered a couple of beers, and waited. "A lot of people will come. Don't worry," Dibaocha told me. I kept calling Irina, but she eventually said that neither her Russian friends nor some Colombian dancers she knew would be able to make it. At around 2:30 a.m., a group of Dibaocha's Nigerian friends arrived and sat with us – there were two businessmen who lived in Foshan, a "middleman" from Dongguan, and another singer from Guangzhou.

By 3 a.m., only a few of Dibaocha's "fans" had arrived and, without dancers, the show seemed doomed to fail. Nonetheless, Dibaocha appeared calm and was positive that people would still show up. An hour later, only 30 tickets had been sold, but Dibaocha's friends had started pressuring him to get on stage. Finally (at around 4:30 a.m.), he opened the night (or the morning) with one of his most popular singles, "I Believe." A few minutes before getting on stage, he had told me that he was not happy about performing without dancers and that he was still waiting for some important people to

arrive. As he started singing, a group of foreign students dancing on the stage failed to realise that a concert had begun.

Subsequently, I attended several of Dibaocha's shows, and most of them were packed to the hilt. Nonetheless, that first night gave me an insight into some of the difficulties faced by African musicians in Guangzhou: advertising and self-promotion; negotiating with venue owners; booking dancers and/or back-up singers with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds; dealing (personally and financially) with the possibility of people not showing up; and, to some extent, fearing police raids.

## African Presence in Guangzhou: Beyond the "Trading Narrative"

Dibaocha is among the countless foreigners who, over the last 15 years, have entered China in search of material and immaterial well-being. The southern metropolis of Guangzhou, more than any other city in the country, has become a magnet for scores of African entrepreneurs (i.e. businesspeople, traders, producers, adventurers and explorers, etc.) whose attempts to "make it big" have led them to try to set foot in the country. Despite the huge and well-documented presence of Africans in the city, no one really knows how many Africans there are in Guangzhou at any given time. Population figures have been widely and controversially discussed (see Bodomo and Pajancic 2015; Castillo 2013), and over the years, scholars have provided figures ranging from 1,500 to 20,000 to over 100,000 (Zhang 2008; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Bodomo 2010). At the same time, ubiquitous media reports have spread rumours of a population between 200,000 and 500,000 growing at a rate of 30 to 40 per cent annually since 2003 (see Branigan 2010; Osnos 2009, amongst countless others). Recently, however, in the wake of popular fears over a potential ebola outbreak in China, Guangzhou's authorities revealed that less than 5,000 citizens of African countries were residents in the city (Zhuang 2014; Huynh 2015). Needless to say, official figures do not reflect the potential number of visa overstayers, and also do not account for those who stay short-term (i.e. transient population).

African presence in the city has been a magnet for scholars; and over the last eight years, almost 50 academic articles have been written about the subject. At the end of the first decade of the 2000s,

Bertoncello and Bredeloup (2007, 2009), Le Bail (2009), and Bodomo (2010) sketched the general contours of the phenomenon and highlighted the emergence of new African trading posts and communities in China's "city-markets" where "transnational entrepreneurs" functioned as bridges for Africa–China relations. Around the same time, Chinese researchers Li, Ma, and Xue (2009) and Zhang (2008) led the early explorations into the urban spaces that, they argued, were transforming into (transnational) "ethnic enclaves." While this early body of research established a foundation for the study of African trading activities in Guangzhou, it also fostered notions of Africans in the city as merely mobile profit-seeking subjects in search of "comparative advantages" (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007: 101).

Soon after, Haugen (2012) and Mathews and Yang (2012) shed crucial analytical light on the case study. By highlighting the complexities involved in the mobilities/immobilities that inform African experiences in the city, Haugen (2012) challenged previous assumptions about the hyper-mobility (free flow) of transnational entrepreneurs. Mathews and Yang (2012) used the analytical framework of "low-end globalisation" (previously developed by Mathews [2007, 2011] in the context of Hong Kong) to make sense of the commercial activities carried out by foreigners in Guangzhou. In that framework, African and South Asian traders in Southern China are cast as carriers of globalisation as they acquire, export, and sometimes smuggle cheap, and often counterfeit, goods across borders.

Currently, most of the literature on Africans in Guangzhou focuses on trading activities and connections (see, for instance, Müller and Wehrhahn 2013; Cissé 2015; and Marfaing and Thiel 2015). Some more grounded and insightful explanations have emerged from the analyses of these activities at the "local" level, however. Bredeloup (2012), for instance, furthered her previous insights on trading posts in the city by highlighting a crucial issue: the recurrence of what she calls a "commercial form." In discussing the recurrence of this form, Bredeloup's work resonates with Li, Lyons, and Brown's (2012) analysis of the "African enclave" as "restlessly restructuring." Whether one agrees with the existence of such an enclave, notions such as "recurrence" and "restructuring" paved the way for the discussion of a crucial notion in more recent research: transiency (see Castillo 2015; and Bork-Hüffer et al. 2015). Indeed, African presence in Guangzhou is to a great extent informed by what Bork-Hüffer et

al. (2015) call “new transient spaces”: unstable, transforming spaces where transnational and translocal activities converge. The transiency and instability characterising these spaces, and the strategies individuals and collectives design to cope with difficulties, are described in Castillo’s (2015) analysis of “precarious homing.” The migratory precarity, for instance, that some Africans face in Guangzhou has been tackled in Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle’s (2014) discussion of changes to migration laws in the Hu–Wen and Xi–Li eras and, more importantly, in Lan’s (2014) analysis of state regulation of “African migrants.” In this analysis, Lan makes a case for the existence of an “anti-African immigrant campaign” in the city that has influenced the ways in which China manages foreigners on a national scale.

Moreover, some scholars, such as Haugen (2013a), writing about Pentecostalism and its promise of delivering prosperity for Africans in the city, Bodomo and Ma (2012), exploring emerging foodscapes, and Han (2013), expanding extant knowledge on the complex linguistic exchanges in what she deems an “Africa Town in Guangzhou,” have painstakingly attempted to provide descriptions that broaden imaginings and conceptualisations of African presence in China. Of late, Lin et al. (2014) and Huynh (2015) have also addressed issues of health and gender, but much remains to be done in those areas. Additionally, the ways in which African students defy clear-cut classifications by switching between multiple roles and activities has been explored by Haugen (2013b) and Bredeloup (2014), but could benefit from further investigation.

The aforementioned body of research is crucial not only to understanding certain aspects of the African diaspora in Asia, but also to making sense of the issues I discuss throughout these pages. Thus, what follows is an attempt to contribute to the growing diversification of literature on African presence in China. In this article, I explore the area of personal aspirations in Guangzhou’s African music scene. Drawing on a year of sustained ethnographic fieldwork, I show how aspirations are not necessarily economic or rational calculations – ancillary to trade – despite being often traversed, articulated, fuelled, and constrained by economies and economic discourses. I contend that the overarching trading narrative has left little space for issues of agency, emotion, and aspiration to be considered in their own right. 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-range and long-term objectives (see Castillo 2015).

By bringing the analysis of aspirations to the fore, I intend to, first, provide a more complex and nuanced account of the multiple rationales behind African presence in the region; second, promote a better understanding (both conceptually and empirically) of how individuals navigate their social spaces and guide their transnational journeys; and third, draw attention to the incessant frictions and negotiations between individual aspirations and the constraints imposed by structural imperatives. I do this from an ethnographic perspective and by emphasising certain transnational strategies that individuals design in order to fulfil their aspirations.

Taking a cue from Yiu Fai Chow's method of "following a person" (Chow 2011), I decided to follow a couple of musicians: Dibaocha, a Nigerian Igbo R&B singer, event organiser, entrepreneur, and father who has lived in the city for over eight years, and Manivoo, a young Ugandan who is in the process of becoming a musician. As I followed them, I started to see their entanglements – in particular, their anxieties over the need to fulfil their main artistic aspirations (i.e. to "make it big" in China and beyond) and how they struggled against a background of complex regimes of mobility that in some cases severely curtailed their aspirations but in other cases enhanced their opportunities.

As will become evident, this article draws heavily on ethnographic data I generated. Indeed,

there is no single definition of ethnography or a uniformed practice of ethnographic method, nor should there be: ethnographic practice responds and adapts to field research situations. (Strauss 2003: 162)

Ethnography, as I have experienced it, is an unpredictable, intersubjective, and open-ended process that entails participation, interpretation and reinterpretation, creation, ongoing reflection, and representation. Moreover, ethnography is a method of knowledge production (primarily based on the ethnographer's experiences and conversations "on the ground") that

does not claim to produce an objective account of reality, but should aim to offer versions that are as loyal as possible to the context and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was created. (Pink 2001: 18)

Moreover, as an unpredictable, open-ended process whose point of departure is “on-the-ground” fieldwork, the ethnographer “embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytic protocols are often devised after the fact” (Strathern 2003: 6). Frequently, as Strathern explains, ethnography is a “deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection” (Strathern 2003: 5). However, the data upon which the ethnographic production of knowledge relies is generated (through participant observation, interviewing, and other qualitative techniques) rather than simply collected. Indeed, as Dourish puts forward, ethnographic data

is a result of an ethnographer’s *participation* in a site rather than simply a feature or aspect of the site that the ethnographer harvests while hanging around. (Dourish 2014: 2; emphasis added)

Accordingly, the analysis I present here emerges from exchanges at particular points in the lives of certain individuals. As such, it is not an exhaustive representation of all kinds of aspirations that Africans involved in Guangzhou’s music scene may harbour. However, the two case studies in this article do provide an insight into the entanglements of hope and possibility involved in individual attempts to use talent, knowledge, and connections to build a future in China, Africa, and beyond.

Two notes are in order here. First, in this article I have chosen not to hide the identities of my two main research subjects, even though conventional social sciences methodology typically requires disguising key interviewees’ identities with pseudonyms. I have chosen this course not only because the musicians whose stories I present here are already publicly well known (especially Dibaocha) but, more importantly, because a condition of my engagement with them was that everything I wrote about them would use their artistic names. I have consented to that since the beginning of our engagements. As artists, the subjects were interested in having their names associated with their stories. Also, parts of their stories have appeared in several journalistic pieces and in a couple of documentaries. It is worth noting that individuals depicted here have read and given their consent to the publication of their stories in this final form, and that other than the two main research subjects, other identities have been disguised.

The second is a note on terminology. In this piece, the term “mobility” is preferred over migration. I believe that the concept of (im)migration fails to account for the complexities of the geographical mobilities involved in this case study. Moreover, following de Bruijn, van Dijk, and Foeken (2001), I contend that as mobility is an umbrella term encapsulating a plethora of types of movement (i.e. travel, exploration, migration, tourism, nomadism, pilgrimage, and trade), it is more accurate to talk about “African mobilities” in China, rather than “African migration” to China.

## Landscapes of Aspiration: Contextualising African Aspirations in Southern China

Aspirations are crucial arenas where the rationales behind transnational movement are gestated, developed, reproduced, and transmitted. In this article, I conceptualise aspirations as the drivers (i.e. hopes and/or desires) caught between the burdens of everyday life and the imaginations we have about possible futures. Aspirations, however, are never simply constituted by individual hopes or desires; they are products of the interactions of discourses, traditions, family matters, educations, imaginations, and beliefs about life, death, and the self (“the thick of social life”) (Appadurai 2004: 67). In his essay on the “capacity to aspire” as a “cultural capacity” (in the context of Indian poverty), anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2004) suggests that rather than mere rational calculations produced by individual actors, aspirations form part of wider systems of ideas that are assembled contingently by a multiplicity of actors.

Often, as Bunnell and Goh (2012: 1) suggest, aspirations give temporal direction to passions and energies and have the power to move and motivate people. Indeed, as Appadurai (2004) puts forward, aspirations can be thought of as “navigational devices” that help certain individuals to work through a series of obstacles to achieve their goals or reach for their dreams. Put another way, aspirations are sense-making (narrative) tools that give meaning and direction to our journeys. For many individuals, aspirations function as critical transformative drives that not only have the potential to help them find the necessary resources to contest, alter, and/or escape their (economic, social, and cultural) living conditions, as Appadurai

(2004: 59) explains, but that unveil possibilities/positions from which new ways of being and becoming are enabled.

## From the “World’s Factory” to a “Dream Factory”

Before proceeding, some contextualisation is needed. For centuries, Southern China has been a crossroads for multiple flows of people, merchandise, and technologies. Guangzhou – one of the region’s main urban centres and ports – has historically played a pivotal role in connecting China to several parts of the world (Ouyang 1997). Over the last three or four decades, the economic transformations in China have fuelled the agglomeration of diverse, export-oriented manufacturing processes in Guangzhou, and the city/region has been coined “the world’s factory.” Indeed, it is now a major hub in transnational networks of production and global commodity chains (see Zhang 2008; Wu and Ma 2006).

The pursuit of aspirations amongst Africans in Guangzhou needs to be framed within the complex background of intersecting mobilities criss-crossing the Southern China region. Indeed, over the last 15 years, increasingly diverse forms of transnational mobility have coincided with a relative relaxation of internal restrictions on travel, relocation, entry, and settlement (for both nationals and foreigners) in China (Chan 2013; de Bruijn, van Dijk, and Foeken 2001; Wu and Webber 2004; Wang and Li 2006). As a consequence of this, Guangzhou (and the Pearl River Delta region) have become points of convergence for foreigners (mostly Africans and, to a lesser extent, Middle Easterners) and “internal migrants” looking for opportunities to fulfil urban, modern, and transnational aspirations (see Pieke 2012; Pun 2005).

A widely shared perception amongst both foreigners and Chinese nationals in the city is that Guangzhou is not only a place where everything can be bought, sold, and produced (i.e. a “factory”) but also a place where ideas, dreams, and aspirations can be kick-started and/or articulated. “In the past, people used to say that all roads lead to Rome. Nowadays, all roads lead to Guangzhou,” a Ugandan man told me in the early days of my fieldwork. Arguably, at least in the imaginations of many individuals attempting to advance their futures from positions/emplacements in the city, Guangzhou has moved beyond the mere “world’s factory” trope and is increasingly and effectively being imagined as what documentary producer Christiane

Badgley (2014) calls a “dream factory” – a place to explore talents and opportunities and to pursue aspirations.

As a dream factory (or “land of opportunities”), Guangzhou is a site of intense interaction between domestic and foreign “floating populations.” These interactions have gradually resulted in the emergence of highly visible multi-ethnic social spaces and in the articulation of several incipient but thriving economies in the city in which foreign and “local” subjects interact with varying degrees of intensity: i.e. catering, transportation, and entertainment, along with informal exchange markets and certain “illegal” activities (see Castillo 2014; Bodomo and Ma 2012; Mathews and Yang 2012). The emergence of these spaces and economies has heightened local anxieties over population control (see Lan 2014). Historically, Chinese anxieties over population control have translated into increased surveillance and control of (“floating”) ethnic minorities. Similarly, the increased presence of Africans in the city (which has been widely documented by Chinese media) has led to stricter regulations and tougher implementation of policies concerning foreign abode, as noted by Lan (2014).

This “dream factory” is no playground. As I have argued elsewhere, as a “group” or a “minority” Africans have been inserted into China’s complex system of population control (Castillo 2015). Indeed, the difficulties that many of them face in Southern China, such as structural and legal impediments, problems renewing visas, immobility due to overstaying, police harassment, and the impossibility of permanent residence – issues thoroughly noted in extant literature – bear a striking resemblance to the difficulties experienced by China’s internal migrants: economic and social vulnerability and exclusion, lack of belonging, harassment, curtailed residential rights, and impaired mobilities (Castillo 2015). Hence, throughout this article, it should be kept in mind that the pursuit of aspirations in Guangzhou is markedly informed by conditions of precarity and liminality.

The musicians whose stories I follow in this article have been trying to build their artistic careers, families, and futures within the highly transient spaces and informal economies mentioned above. And it is in these spaces, underscored by the narrative transition from the “world’s factory” to a “dream factory”/“land of opportunities,” that transnational aspirations meet domestic urban aspirations.

## Guangzhou's African Music Scene

Guangzhou's night scene is a heterogeneous space where myriad aspirations intersect. Accordingly, the stories and trajectories of the individuals I met in the music scene are multifarious. There are those who were musicians for many years prior to their arrival in China. Others claim to have discovered their passion for music and other artistic pursuits after arriving in the country. Most of them are not only musicians; they perform a number of roles and juggle a variety of responsibilities (i.e. fatherhood, study, and family businesses). While the most prevalent cases are those of individuals balancing music and trade, not all musicians "do business by day and take the stage by night," as Mu reported (2013). A number of the individuals I met prioritise their artistic careers and devote most of their time (and sometimes money) to find a way to break through. Take, for instance, Dibaocha: he agreed to participate in my research project under the proviso that I understood that he was a musician, and that while he was involved in several other activities in the city, his main drive was an artistic one. Dibaocha's main concern was about being depicted as an "immigrant" struggling in China. "I came to China to break into the Chinese markets with my music," he pointed out and repeatedly asked me to respect that.

Moreover, it is important to note that while most musicians in Guangzhou's African music scene share certain (albeit differentiated) degrees of mobility, they aspire to become more mobile. In their narratives of movement, the ability to move transnationally is equated with enhanced opportunities to fulfil their aspirations and attain a "good life." Staying put (or immobile), on the other hand, is seen as a marker of failure and a waste of talent. Indeed, there are two threads weaving the narratives of the musicians in this article together: The first is the use of personal (artistic) talent to unlock what are imagined as endless "transnational possibilities." The second is the use of China as the place from which to enhance those possibilities and thus expand "spaces of mobility." In the case of African musicians in Guangzhou, these spaces of mobility tend to be imagined as smooth routes connecting Africa and Asia, and are often conflated with the ability (or desire) to break free from social and institutional constraints imposed by nation-states upon human movement. This "breaking free" is, in turn, seen as an essential step in the becoming "global" (subjects) of musicians. The ability to move transnationally

at will can be seen, then, as both a tool for success and a marker of success. “To be able to be here [Asia], and there [Africa], and everywhere, is to be on top of things,” as one of the musicians puts it.

## Landscapes of Aspiration

These aspirations to “break free” from institutional constraints, and to “break into” the Asian and African markets, are both simultaneously enhanced and constrained by certain conjunctural and site-specific histories, policies, imaginations, and narratives. These conjunctural and site-specific elements structure what I call the “landscapes of aspiration” amongst Africans in Guangzhou’s music scene. These landscapes extend across different scales (i.e. personal, material, urban, regional, national, transnational) and are, unsurprisingly, conditioned by multifarious factors.

From the strengthening of certain African economies and the awakening of African middle classes, to the post-WTO liberalisation of policies regulating foreign mobility in China and the recent rapprochement between African countries and China, macro-level factors provide a canvas for these landscapes. At the meso level, China’s institutional (state-level) restrictions on transnational mobility (i.e. stringent visa policies), along with Guangzhou’s local regulations and practices (i.e. police harassment), constitute systemic hurdles that complicate “breaking free” from institutional constraints. Likewise, the specificity (and size) of China’s music industry and the rare incorporation of foreigners into Chinese-language mainstream media make “breaking into” (the markets) also difficult. Finally, at the micro level, the precarity and liminality reflected in the vulnerable legal status of many individuals, and their relative social marginalisation, complicate the panorama. In short, landscapes of aspiration in the African music scene are not easy to navigate. However, as mentioned earlier, as navigational devices, aspirations often lead individuals to overcome and subvert difficult living conditions.

In the next section, I mainly remain on the personal micro level, and from there I attempt to establish connections to the abovementioned factors at wider scales. Important to note here is that in these landscapes of aspiration, China is imagined as a “platform,” rather than a “destination,” as I will show.

## “A singer is a singer is a singer...”

*My mama use to tell street life is strong  
for you to make it you got to be ruff and tuff  
I never stop hustling never stop singing  
never stop trying to make good living*

*I believe I believe I believe I believe  
I will make it someday  
I believe I believe I believe I believe  
I will make it one day.*

Fragment of song “I Believe” (2012)  
by Dibaocha

When you are born, your destiny is already there waiting for you. One thing is what your parents want you to do and the other is what you actually came here to do. I came here to be a singer.  
(Dibaocha)

Dibaocha told me the above during our first formal interview, explaining how it was difficult for his parents to accept that he would not become a priest – a common expectation amongst Christian Igbo families in Imo State in southeastern Nigeria, where Dibaocha was born.

From an early age, Dibaocha’s passions led him to explore his artistic drives. He dropped out of high school and found a job as a freelance songwriter for radio stations in Lagos. He kept doing that for a few years, hoping that someone would discover him as a singer. While the freelancing was enough to keep him afloat, he soon realised that he was not on the right path to affording the lifestyle that he desired. At that time (the very beginning of the 2000s), word of mouth had it that Nigerians were making it big in China and coming back to set themselves up in Nigeria. As a “breakthrough” did not seem to be on the horizon, Dibaocha found himself contemplating the possibility of restarting his life in that China he had heard of – hoping to be “discovered” there.

However, when he finally made it to China in 2006, he realised that things were not as easy as he had imagined. His first reality check came when he realised that casual employment for foreigners in China is almost non-existent. Jobless, but with money he had from Nigeria, he enrolled in a language school, hoping that learning Chinese

would open doors. Before long, he came to recognise that there was not yet a way for him to start making a living from music. As a last option, and only to survive, Dibaocha started trading whatever he could find, just as most of his acquaintances in the city did back then.

Not long after that, in 2007, Dibaocha travelled to Beijing as part of his early economic engagement in China. Through some of his contacts in the capital, Dibaocha met Cherrish, a woman from the northern province of Hebei. After maintaining a long-distance relationship for several months, Dibaocha finally convinced Cherrish to relocate to Guangzhou, and in mid-2008, they got married. After their wedding, Cherrish and Dibaocha decided to focus on trade. Mixing his entrepreneurialism and her connections and knowledge, they opened both retail and online stores selling hair, wigs, ornaments, and children's clothes to a mainly African clientele.

A couple of years into their marriage, business started to gradually improve, and by mid-2010 Dibaocha felt that he was finally getting "on top of things." Using some of the profits from his trading activities, and with Cherrish's encouragement, he reignited his musical aspirations. By late 2011, he had finalised the production of his (self-funded) album *It's Real*, an album entirely written/imagined in Guangzhou, produced in Lagos, and mixed/mastered by a Congolese producer in China. With his new album in hand, Dibaocha felt that it was time to break into both the Chinese and West African markets. The Nigerian side was relatively easy. At that time, Dibaocha still had contacts working in radio and was familiar with the distribution channels – so, with little effort, he got some radio play in Nigeria. The Chinese side proved challenging, however. Dibaocha sent copies of his album to practically all record companies in the country and even flew to Beijing to personally hand out his promo copies. At that time, he believed that to be the way to break through. Interestingly, the way he became relatively known in China came in an unexpected form. As he walked from company to company, Dibaocha spent some time handing out his promo CDs to young people in the street. One of them, a university student, uploaded the single "I Feel Good" to Weibo and the post was "re-weiboed" several times. Soon after, Chinese media contacted Dibaocha, and a couple of journalistic articles were written about his artistic aspirations in China – Western media followed suit and some short radio/TV snippets about his life in China were produced.

Encouraged by his incipient but increasing popularity, in early 2013 Dibaocha took the decision to stop waiting to be “discovered” and to do what he could to break into the Chinese market on his own. His solo attempt to break through took off simultaneously in several directions. Having realised that if he was going to make it in China, he needed to sing in Chinese (similar to what Beijing-based Nigerian and Liberian artists, Hao Ge and Hao Di do [see Wang 2011]), he began writing songs in Chinese and looking to organise collaborations with “local” Chinese artists. Altogether, Dibaocha has written over 100 songs, and almost half of them were written in Guangzhou. He even wrote a song for the Beijing Olympics back in 2008, but it was never produced. Some of Dibaocha’s songs, as he explained, talk about “socialisation” in China and the discrimination he has experienced on the streets. Dibaocha said that he has a great respect for Chinese culture, but emphasised that “the way China treats foreigners needs to improve.” Some of his lyrics are an attempt to promote change in that direction. He also said that changes in the ways the Chinese government deals with foreigners would be conducive to moving the country forward.

Chinese have to understand that the future success of this country is very linked to people coming from abroad. We foreigners are contributing to the success of this nation. I’d like to push these ideas through my music. Anyone that brings benefit to your land must surely be well treated and [be able to likewise] benefit.  
(Dibaocha)

He also started promoting his music locally amongst Africans. Since early 2013, he has organised more than a dozen individual shows in the city’s main clubs. Dibaocha explained that while there are many talented African musicians in Guangzhou, the lack of venues and cultural centres impacts negatively on the showcasing of their talents and on the promotion of African culture in general. Over the last two years, in order to promote and showcase African culture, Dibaocha has organised a couple of “pan-African” shows. He contends that his artistic pursuit in China is not only about him, but about opening doors for all Africans in China. Dibaocha is aware of the difficulties of breaking into the Chinese market and quotes the lack of audience openness to foreign styles as the most complex challenge. However, he still aspires to (and works toward) “making it big” in China, as he

put it. Interestingly, he sees China as a gateway to other Asian markets such as South Korea, Japan, and Singapore.

From late 2013 onwards, as his artistic engagements and endeavours made him a central figure in Guangzhou's African music scene, Dibaocha took to "the promotion of African culture in general," as he explained. He started collaborating with African music promoters across China and with Chinese entertainment entrepreneurs in organising shows that bring African singers directly from West and Central Africa, and from other Chinese cities, to showcase their music (in Guangzhou) in front of Chinese and African audiences (although some Chinese attend these shows, Africans tend to be the majority in the audience). When asked about becoming a "big fish" in the city's entertainment scene, Dibaocha replied that while some people might think of him as one of the main emerging figures, the only thing he is doing in Guangzhou is making his dream come true.

My dream is to make it in China. I don't give a shit about America. Everybody thinks that because I'm a Nigerian man, I want to go to the US. No, no, this is another time. I'm for making it big in Asia and in Africa. I'm not interested in what people were interested in before. The world has changed, and America doesn't move me. (Dibaocha)

The central position that Dibaocha had carved out for himself in Guangzhou's music and cultural scenes has coincided with a revival in the media's and academic interest in "Africans in China." During the six months in which I followed Dibaocha, I witnessed how some of his efforts appeared to be paying off. Documentary filmmakers and journalists from the United States, Denmark, England, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, along with photographers from Germany and Slovenia, and a couple of other researchers, all contacted Dibaocha during that time. The sheer number of people contacting him was unprecedented. He received so many requests to film his performances that he was forced to assign each performance to a specific media team. At one point, flooded with requests but seeing little benefit or return, he even considered charging media fees for interviews – as some highly mediated Africans in the city do. Indeed, 2013–2014 seemed to be bringing a breakthrough in Dibaocha's career and marked the height of his romance with international media. Before long, though, he began to resent some of the ways in which he was being treated and represented. He felt that media atten-

tion was not translating into a breakthrough in Asia and that the media teams were only using his image to tell their stories about “Africans in China,” which he perceived as of little or no benefit to his career. “After all, the Chinese dream might not break [happen] for me,” he told me once.

Maybe I should go somewhere else in Asia, or go back to Africa. I need to keep moving and trying to fulfil this dream, for the sake of my children. (Dibaocha)

During the time I spent with Dibaocha, he spoke many times about the dilemma between his dream and his family. He felt that he needed to succeed as an artist, in order to leave a legacy for his children. Yet, at the same time, he worried that his urge to succeed could take him away from his children – either because of leaving China to seek better opportunities, or because of failing to be “a proper father to them” by not realising his dreams. “This place is not my home. I’m just trying to make my dream come true,” he acknowledged. “The only thing that keeps me here and gives me energy is that, thank god, I have a wonderful and very supportive family.”

## Aspirations and Family-Making

Most of the time, Dibaocha described the relationship with his Chinese family as harmonious. “Cherrish’s family really welcomed me, especially after they realised that I was an artist,” he told me, explaining that every time he visits his wife’s hometown – near Zhangjiakou in Hebei Province – he is treated as a celebrity. He also claimed that he felt more comfortable there than in Guangzhou.

There are many family gatherings there and the town’s authorities are always inviting me out for lunch. They think that I’m a big star and treat me accordingly. But, that’s because they don’t see many foreign faces around there. (Dibaocha)

In the last couple of years, however, Dibaocha’s expenditures around trying to make his dream come true have created certain frictions. According to Dibaocha, while Cherrish is generally supportive of his decisions, she sees his drive as a double-edged sword. On one hand, she admires his perseverance and sees it as a very important attribute in a man. On the other hand, she worries that his unbending determination to realise his dream could jeopardise their children’s futures

(especially if it remains unfulfilled). Dibaocha's perseverance/stubbornness in pursuing his artistic dreams – and the financial investment it requires – have also strained his relationship with his mother-in-law. While she was initially very welcoming about her daughter's marriage, she has since grown disaffected. The most contentious issue, according to Dibaocha, is a cultural one: the family's requirement that he buy property in China. He and his mother-in-law strongly disagree on this point. He contends that at this stage of his/their life, what he needs to do is invest in his career, not in buying property in a place where he does not belong. However, his mother-in-law believes that a man who does not provide a house for his wife and children is not a good man. "They need to understand what is really important for me," he said. "I cannot fail. I'm sure I'll make it big here, and after that I might consider buying property, but not necessarily in China."

## Multi-Tasking While on the Move: Serious Entrepreneurialism

Dibaocha's life in Guangzhou is multifaceted. Not only is he a musician, an event organiser, a father, and a husband, but his more "stable" status, stemming from his marriage to Cherrish, along with his fluent Mandarin and straightforward personality, have made of him an important mediator between authorities and Africans in the city. During his years in China, he has negotiated several times with the authorities on behalf of detained overstayers of distinct nationalities. Because of this, he now holds the title of "volunteer translator," and his contact number and photograph are posted on the walls of several police stations around the city.

Moreover, his relative fame within certain Nigerian and other African communities has encouraged him to attempt to become a more important voice amongst Africans in the city. In early 2014, he decided that he was getting into "politics." One evening during my fieldwork, Dibaocha called me to cancel our dinner plans at the last minute: the reason he gave was that a "very important meeting" was to take place that night. When I inquired further into the nature of the meeting, Dibaocha told me that he was going to a political meeting. After the meeting, he sent me a Whatsapp message informing me of his intention to run for president of the Nigerian community of-

fice in the upcoming elections. A second message came with the following text:

Fellow Nigerians: join hands to support the way forward Dibaocha. It has been my concern to see a new Nigerian community where equity, justice, discipline, transparency and accountability will become our logo. We need a leader who can speak freely the language of the land we live in. Let's say no to "personal community" and vote for "general community." VOTE DIBAOCHA FOR PRESIDENT 2014! (Transcription from Whatsapp communication, 21 April 2014)

Clearly, Dibaocha is aware that his linguistic skills, along with his social position (a spouse residence permit), represent "capital that not many other Nigerians in the city have," as he put it. Through the use of these skills and position, along with his entrepreneurial drives, Dibaocha has managed to become an important figure. The possibility of him becoming a top community representative evinces how the mobilisation of the capital he claims to have (i.e. knowledge, connections) could improve his social mobility and thus broaden his opportunities. While sometimes Dibaocha seemed uncertain about his future, one thing in his personality always came across as certain: whether in the music scene or in the micro-politics of African community offices in Guangzhou, he believes that the key to his success is himself – his artistic or political persona.

Finally, I contend that as the story of Dibaocha shows (of which these pages are only an abbreviated version), if attention is put upon aspirations (and the associated entrepreneurial drives, community engagements, life entanglements, and mobilities), the widespread labels of "trader" and/or "immigrant" come across as partial and flat representations of the lives of individuals in this case study. I am not arguing that Dibaocha is only a musician and not a trader. He is both of those things and many more. Perhaps one day he may even become a politician, or a filmmaker, as he has recently hinted.

## Becoming a Musician (among Other Things) in China: Manivoo

During my fieldwork, I heard several times that there were some emerging African singers who had started their careers in China. I managed to get a few contacts, but most of them were in cities such

as Wuhan, Beijing, or Shanghai. Eventually though, through a Tanzanian promoter in Hong Kong and a Ugandan singer in Wuhan, I got in touch with Manivoo (28) – a young Ugandan who decided to become a singer after arriving in China, and who is very active in different segments of Guangzhou's entertainment scene.

"I've always been moving," was one of the first things Manivoo told me. "Before coming to Guangzhou, I was in Pretoria, and before that, in Kampala." When I asked him what had brought him from Pretoria (where he was residing temporarily) to Guangzhou, he said that he had wanted to go to a place where he could become something different, and that Africa and the "West" did not offer him that:

At that time, I didn't know anything about China, but I thought that if I worked hard, this country could be the place I was looking for. So, I went online and searched for "China's richest city," and the first result was: "Guangzhou." (Manivoo)

As he had read that people were doing business in the city, his first idea was to start a career as a trader in China.

Nonetheless, his parents were not very supportive of his early entrepreneurial drives and pressured him to continue his education. Manivoo was convinced that China was the place to be, however. So, in order to link his parents' advice with his own interests and aspirations, he came up with the proposal of moving to China to study Mandarin. "Many people in Africa speak French and many others speak English, but who speaks Chinese? Very few do." Using this argument, he convinced his parents that learning Mandarin would guarantee increased educational, professional, and economic opportunities in his future. And, as he was determined to go to China, his parents had no choice but to accept. In 2011, with economic support from his family, he left Pretoria for Guangzhou.

Not long after arriving in the city, however, Manivoo started modifying his plans. While he kept studying the language, his focus shifted to other activities.

When I arrived, I discovered that there were many opportunities. Studying Chinese was not enough, so I looked for something else. I got in touch with people in the entertainment business and started doing jobs for them. (Manivoo)

In those early days, most of the "entertainment" jobs he was offered required him to don African tribal clothing and play the drums for

Chinese audiences. Manivoo told me that while wearing tribal clothes did not upset him, he was looking for something else, and soon moved out of drumming. Through the connections he established there, however, he started working occasionally as a model, alongside foreigners from all over the world. At some point during the modelling, one of the promoters asked if he was capable of rapping, and although he had never rapped in public before, he took up the challenge. This exposure, along with the animated reactions he got from Chinese audiences, gave him the confidence to rap more often during those particular events.

During Manivoo's first year in the city, his interpersonal skills and connections with people in the entertainment scene led him to become an agent/promoter for African models and musicians. And, as he was spending a lot of time around African and Chinese singers and DJs, he learnt from them. "I learnt the most from the Chinese DJs," he said:

Their technical skills are very good, but they lack emotion and rhythm. So, as soon as I became good enough, I [overtook] my teachers [in terms of skill] and got some good contracts. Suddenly, I was making money from something I had always loved – music. (Manivoo)

As Manivoo began rapping and DJing more frequently, he started musing seriously about becoming a musician:

I have been writing songs and singing since I was a child, but in Africa I never really got the chance to look into that passion. I realised here that this could be the place to do that. (Manivoo)

Eventually, Manivoo made the necessary connections to start rapping in more formal music shows (rather than just modelling events), and by early 2013, he had managed to become financially independent from the wages earned through his musical endeavours.

## Changing Plans

Before coming to China, becoming a musician was only a latent aspiration for Manivoo, but by his second year in Guangzhou, his artistic aspirations had switched from being a "plan B or C in life, to plan A," as he put it. Manivoo's parents, however, were not very pleased with his change in plans. So, in order to appease them, Manivoo enrolled in a computer science degree at a university in Guangzhou.

“I’m only studying as a plan B, in case things don’t work out. It’s only for the papers,” he told me. “My family don’t want me to sing, but this is my passion. I always knew it, but in China I got convinced and it’s happening,” he added.

Everything I’m doing now is aimed at getting to a position from where I can move forward with my artistic career. This is the most important thing for me at the moment. I know that I’m on my way to make it. I have travelled to so many places to do shows: Shanghai, Macau, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Tianjin. I have met people I never imagined I could meet. It is all like a dream that came to me, but it’s real. It’s happening all around me. (Manivoo)

Encouraged by the connections and mobility he gained in Guangzhou, Manivoo is in the process of transforming his artistic aspirations into a more serious endeavour. Last time I spoke to him, he told me that he was writing songs and looking for collaborations with Chinese artists and other African artists (not only in Guangzhou). He was also looking for a producer for his first formal music video. As with many other musicians in the city, making a music video (and uploading it to Youku.com – a video platform) is seen as a crucial step in the path of success in China. Manivoo is convinced that he will make it in China. “I’m patient. I’m going slowly. In China, I’ve come to realise what I have. It’s a hobby, but it’s also a talent and I want to make good use of it.”

However, if success eludes him, he has other plans:

One of my main dreams is to be able to help people. I don’t only want to become a celebrity for the sake of becoming a celebrity. I’ve seen my parents helping people and I want to live that life too.

“It’s a good life,” he told me, explaining that his father had political connections in Uganda that he could use if he goes back:

Whenever I go back there, I will come with the experiences and knowledge I gained in China: languages, a degree, and my music. In the future, I could easily become a member of the Parliament. See, this whole thing is not only about singing. Singing connects people, and singing in China is and will be the way for me to get where I want. My biggest example is Wyclef Jean, who could have become president of Haiti after being a singer. I could do something like that starting from China. My mother once told me that although I was the little one, I would bring the biggest things for

the family, and I have stuck to that. I know it will happen.  
(Manivoo)

Manivoo is confident that his experiences and the connections he has made in China will guide him to get where he wants in life: to live a “good life” (similar to that of his parents). As with many other musicians in Guangzhou, Manivoo sees China as a platform from which he can structure this imagined future. However, while Manivoo tests out the possible paths in China, he also knows that there are many exits. Not only is he studying for a degree in computer science (something that by itself would ensure working opportunities back in Kampala), he has his parents’ political connections. In a way, Manivoo’s emplacement stands in stark contrast to that of Dibaocha. While Manivoo is still juggling several possible futures, Dibaocha cannot afford a failure – he has to make it in China, because he lacks the exits (mobilities) that Manivoo enjoys. Other than their distinct emplacements, there is also a fifteen-year age gap separating Manivoo and Dibaocha, and mobilities are, indeed, to a great extent determined by age!

## The Paradox of Aspirational Mobilities: To Move or Not to Move

While the aspirations of the musicians portrayed in this article are to some extent similar (in that they relate to artistic success), their individual (dis)positions and abilities to achieve them are not. Each individual has different capacities (and opportunities) to make their dreams or aspirations materialise. In the end, the extent to which they do so depends, in part, on their personal skills, connections, and knowledge, and in part on their distinct degrees of mobility. In his analysis on the “capacity to aspire” as a “cultural capacity,” Appadurai contends that while aspirations about the good life exist in all societies, the capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed, and those better off have a higher potential to fulfil their aspirations (Appadurai 2004: 68).

As with most of the “more settled” and “semi-settled” Africans I met in Guangzhou (see Castillo 2014), the individuals that I met in the music scene did not leave their countries to escape dire conditions, nor did they move abroad only to explore economic opportunities. Each one took the decision to move transnationally in order to

improve their lifestyle, culturally and/or socially, and each one has used or thought of China as a platform from which to explore their potential. Prior to arriving in Guangzhou, each of these individuals had their own ideas about success and making it in China, but, and perhaps more importantly, they already knew (to varying degrees) how to mobilise certain connections and resources to increase their chances of fulfilling their aspirations.

In Appadurai's logic, while these subjects are not the "rich and powerful" back in Nigeria or Uganda, their "middle-class" origins allowed them a higher capacity to aspire (a capacity which does not necessarily equate with a capacity to fulfil). Put another way, while each individual's knowledge of the relationship between aspirations and outcomes is still evolving, these individuals have had experiences that have taught them how to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general opportunities and options (Appadurai 2004: 68). It is these experiences that have been used to bolster their transnational aspirations and lives – as evidenced in the case of Dibaocha using trade to restart his career, or Manivoo's decision to make music his "plan A."

Moreover, aspirations are also reconfigured by transnational journeys. While individuals in Guangzhou's African music scene may have long aspired to become musicians, their journeys and their experiences of other places have opened up new possibilities – some of them more immediately achievable than others. As the stories in this article show, the initial ideas some musicians had about mobility (moving to China) tended to be conflated with opportunities to be "discovered" or to "become something different" (becoming through mobility/movement). However, as soon as they found themselves on the move, and headed somewhat in the direction of what they perceive as artistic success in China, they felt the need to become more mobile. In this sense, mobility appears to produce a paradox: for individuals that aspire to be transnationally mobile, attaining a certain degree of mobility leads to a desire/requirement for heightened mobility. So, although individuals may already be mobile to some degree, enhanced opportunities to realise their dreams are conflated with an even higher degree of mobility. As Uteng (2006) suggests, being mobile is a real and genuine opportunity. However, being more mobile brings more opportunities and thus is a requirement for someone looking for transnational artistic success; failing to become more

mobile (to expand one's own spaces of mobility) increases the chances of failure.

Take Dibaocha's (im)mobilities, for instance. Although he considers himself privileged to be able to move between Nigeria and China at will (a mobility that has produced genuine opportunities for him), he feels trapped by the obstacles (immobilities) that his Nigerian passport generates – so, while he can move in and out of China at will, he can go only to Africa. Most other Asian destinations he is interested in exploring artistically require visas for Nigerians, and he has been systematically rejected from entering places like Hong Kong and Macau, for instance. Dibaocha has a heightened awareness of the complex connection between success and mobility. While he knows that his partial immobility hampers his artistic pursuits, he hopes that by breaking fully into the Chinese market, other spaces across Asia will finally open for him – and his partial immobility would, in that case, fade. Hence, mobility can be thought of as a capacity/capability (that can be acquired through efforts) intrinsic to the materialisation of aspirations (Kronlid 2008). In this way, being mobile is both a requirement and an opportunity to “become something else” – and to “make it big” in China.

The paradox of mobility becomes clearer when the desire to move (to fulfil aspirations) leads individuals away from certain positions to which they once aspired and to jeopardise what they have achieved. Dibaocha's perseverance/stubbornness to pursue his (so-far unfulfilled) dream, for instance, could potentially lead him away from the social and familial positions that he not only dreamed of, but also carved out for himself in Guangzhou. So, while aspirations used as “navigational devices” generally guide those on the transnational move to ride the currents of global capitalism, these devices do not preclude possible shipwrecks. Dibaocha, for one, sometimes sees his aspirations as a burden:

My problem is that I can never give up. Pursuing my dream is something I will do here or anywhere until I see this life no more. Unfortunately, I ended up in entertainment – a very difficult industry. It has cost me a lot of wasted years and large sums of money, and I have not yet achieved what I want. But I know that something will come. (Dibaocha)

During the last few months of my fieldwork, a frustrated Dibaocha hinted many times that going back to Nigeria, to pursue his dream

there, was becoming a possibility. When I asked him about his children and wife, he explained that his main concern was his family, but that if he went to Nigeria, they would not follow. In March 2015, misinformed by his university about the renewal of his documents, Manivoo overstayed his student visa by five days. Unfortunately, he was detained for two weeks due to this, after which he was forced to pay for a ticket back to Uganda (there is no official deportation in China). Once in Kampala, he applied for a new visa. In June, he was notified that his visa application was rejected. Last time we texted through WeChat, he told me that getting back to China would not be easy, but that he was still hopeful: "It won't be soon, though," he said. Dibaocha's and Manivoo's stories show that even when individuals have more developed capacities to mobilise resources towards the fulfilment of their aspirations, the precarity and liminality conditioning individual attempts to build futures from transnational spaces are still difficult to overcome.

## Conclusion: China as a Platform and a "Dream Factory"?

Arguably, as the stories in this article show, China – at least in the imaginations of some foreigners – is in the process of moving beyond the trope of the "world's factory" (understood as a place for the exclusive exploration of economic opportunities) and becoming a space where individuals attempt to pursue their dreams and aspirations. And, as I pointed out before, these aspirations are not only about economic advancement, but also about building a better life (artistically, culturally, and even politically, as we have seen). Hence, within the logic of transnational mobility, China has increasingly been imagined as a platform (rather than a destination) – a platform of "hope" and "the future." This is true not only for its own diasporic subjects, as Chow (2011) suggests when discussing the "return" of diasporic Chinese who attempt to "make it big" in the country's cultural industries, but also for the many foreigners who attempt to kick-start their careers in (or through) China. So for many individuals, China is now seen as an important landmark in global landscapes of aspiration and, perhaps more importantly, as a gateway to many possible futures – futures that, as noted by the musicians, cannot happen

in Africa (or the United States). This begs the following question: Will China become the “dream factory” that produces those futures?

By bringing the analysis of aspirations to the fore, and highlighting the individual entanglements involved in fulfilling those aspirations, this article has aimed to do three things.

First, the article has sought to widen the lens through which African presence in Guangzhou can be analysed, by moving beyond the influences of economic discourse. While this article focuses solely on the case studies of musicians, this kind of analysis could easily be extended to other realms of African presence in Guangzhou. The subsequent stories that might emerge could unveil other rationales for African presence in China that, in tandem with trading activities, would build a more comprehensive narrative about what Africans are doing in China and, more importantly, the future prospects for the continued presence of Africans in the country.

The second aim of this article was to problematise the centrality of the “traders” label in the narratives of Africans in Guangzhou. This was done in view of the argument made by van Meeteren, Engbersen, and van San (2009) that by not taking aspirations into consideration, researchers often end up imposing simplistic labels on individuals on the move (“migrants,” if you will). My particular contention is not that trade is not important, but rather that the discursively articulated centrality of trade blurs other rationales behind transnational movement. So, based on the importance placed by the individuals I met in Guangzhou on their aspirations as rationales fuelling their transnational journeys, I have attempted to “repatriate” – to use Appadurai’s (2004) term – issues of agency, emotion, and aspiration from under the shadow of economic narratives.

The third aim of this article was to explore the lives and imagined trajectories of these musicians in order to provide an ethnographic account of how the promising, but risky, geographies of their “landscapes of aspiration” have stretched across new, distinct, and distant territories and to concurrently offer insight into the affective and emotional dimensions associated with the transnational mobilities that inform African presence in China.

Finally, as with many other cases of transnational mobility, it is not enough to simply say that African presence in China is a consequence of how modern societies are “on the move” (Lash and Urry 1994) or of how transnational traders seek to profit from globalisa-

tion. To more thoroughly understand what Africans are doing in Guangzhou, and to make a more comprehensive assessment of the major transformations that have led them to China, it is essential to explore the landscapes of aspiration.

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# 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