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# African Logistics Agents and Middlemen as Cultural Brokers in Guangzhou

Gordon MATHEWS

**Abstract:** This article begins by asking how African traders learn to adjust to the foreign world of Guangzhou, China, and suggests that African logistics agents and middlemen serve as cultural brokers for these traders. After defining “cultural broker” and discussing why these brokers are not usually Chinese, it explores this role as played by ten logistics agents/middlemen from Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As logistics agents, these people help their customers in practically adjusting to Chinese life, and as middlemen they serve to grease the wheels of commerce between African customers and Chinese suppliers. This is despite their own ambivalent views of China as a place to live. They play an essential role in enabling harmonious relations between Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou, even though they see themselves not as cultural brokers but simply as businessmen.

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**Keywords:** China, Guangzhou, Africans in China, cultural brokers, logistics agents, middlemen

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## Africans in Guangzhou

Three decades ago, Guangzhou – the capital of Guangdong Province and the hub of the Pearl River Delta, sometimes proclaimed “the world’s factory” – was relatively impoverished and almost exclusively Chinese (see Ikels 1996 for a portrait of Guangzhou in the 1980s, all but unrecognizable now). Today it is bursting with brand-name stores and foreigners of a multitude of nationalities. Some of these foreigners are corporate employees, working for companies known worldwide; others are African and Middle Eastern traders, working with small groups of confederates to buy goods from Chinese factories and send these goods back to their home countries by container or air freight. They are engaged in what I have labelled low-end globalization, or globalization from below, defined as

the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, often semi-legal or illegal transactions, often associated with “the developing world”, but in fact apparent across the globe. (Mathews, Ribeiro, and Vega 2012: 1)

Foremost among these traders of low-end globalization are the some 20,000 sub-Saharan African traders in Guangzhou, although estimates of their number vary (Haugen 2012: 5; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009: 704–709; Castillo 2013). They began arriving in southern China in the early 2000s, coming from virtually every country in sub-Saharan Africa. They have an important economic impact on their home and neighbouring countries: They bring the goods of globalization to Africa. They also have at least a small impact on the economy of China, even if this often goes unrecognized by Chinese commentators (Cheng 2011: 567).

Many scholars have written about these traders in various contexts. Lyons, Brown, and Li (2012) have discussed these traders in terms of China’s opening up of its economy over the different stages of its development. Bodomo (2010, 2012) has examined African traders in Guangzhou as “an emerging bridge for Chinese–African relations”, although he provides little evidence for the actual emergence of such a bridge. Zhang (2008) looks at ethnic enclaves in Guangzhou. Lan (2014) considers the multilevel, contradictory responses by the Chinese government to the presence of Africans in Guangzhou. Haugen (2012, 2013) perceptively examines the situation of Nigerians illegally living in Guangzhou, in their “second state of immobility”,

and examines their religious life in an underground church. All these writings make significant contributions, but as is the case for any new phenomenon, many gaps in understanding remain, particularly in terms of how Africans negotiate their lives and livelihoods on a day-to-day and month-to-month basis in China; the ethnographic understanding of these traders' lives and livelihoods remains thin in many areas.

This paper<sup>1</sup> is rooted in a key question that intrigued me during the initial months of a year of full-time research among African traders in Guangzhou from 2013 to 2014. 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? How do they “learn the ropes”? The answer, I have found, lies largely in the African logistics agents and middlemen who, unlike most traders, are long-term residents of Guangzhou. These logistics agents/middlemen are the cultural brokers of Guangzhou, as I describe in detail in this paper: Their roles are essential in facilitating a more or less harmonious Chinese–African co-existence in Guangzhou. In this paper, I explore these questions: How do African logistics agents and middlemen in Guangzhou play the role of cultural broker? Why do they play this role more than do Chinese? What motivates these cultural brokers to play this role? And what might this role mean for the future of Africans in Guangzhou? Before proceeding, let me examine the meaning of the term “cultural broker”.

## Cultural Brokers

A cultural broker has been characterized as “a person who facilitates the border crossing of another person or group of people from one

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culture to another culture” (Michie 2003); cultural brokering has been defined as “the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change” (Jezewski and Sotnik 2001: 21). The role of cultural broker has occasionally appeared in the writings of anthropologists over the decades, with Geertz (1960: 230) writing of the Javanese *kijaji*, or Muslim teacher, as a cultural broker seeking to “combine the role of traditional religious scholar with that of the nationalist politician” in Indonesia, Adams (1970) discussing cultural brokers and power brokers in career mobility in Guatemala, and later, Szasz discussing cultural brokers in the United States “between Indian and white worlds” in a fascinating edited collection of the same name (1994). If the concept of cultural broker has been of only occasional interest in anthropology, it is a matter of great interest in health care (see, for example, National Health Service Corps 2004) and education (Michie 2003), as well as among some economists (Graham 2011). This is because, unlike the theoretical world of much contemporary anthropology, health care and education professionals need to deal directly and practically with cultural differences in their work: They must serve as cultural brokers, and help to educate other cultural brokers, in order to properly do their work.

In an age of globalization, the role of cultural broker has become important as never before. Until recently, a journey between societies across the globe was a long process, but today an African trader can get on a plane in Lagos or Nairobi and arrive in China in less than 24 hours, without having the slightest idea about the society in which he or she has just arrived. I have spoken with traders who told me that when they first arrived in China, they assumed that the Chinese eat nothing but dogs, and that all Chinese people could fly through the air delivering kung fu kicks, like Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan. Because many of these traders are in China for a brief period, they need to learn very quickly how China works. The people they turn to for this quick instruction are typically the logistics agents with whom they may have been in contact before coming to Guangzhou, through personal referrals, and then texts and phone calls. In some cases these logistics agents will pick them up at the airport; they may also arrange for hotels, or allow their customers to stay at their own apartments. Beyond this, logistics agents are the source of advice that may determine the success or failure of these traders’ sojourns in China.

Not all logistics agents are cultural brokers; some, mostly Chinese but also some Africans, eschew this function and restrict their interactions with customers to a minimum. However, most agents are cultural brokers, including the ten logistics agents who appear in this article. They take on this role not because they are civic-minded (although most are), but because their business depends upon their playing this role, which enables them to maintain and gain customers. As one Kenyan logistics agent, weary after answering phone call after phone call from customers seeking advice as to their business in China, said to me,

I don't like to have to always answer the phone at every hour of the day or night. But this is my job. If I didn't do this, my clients might go somewhere else.

There are others aside from logistics agents who also sometimes play this role of practical and cultural advice-givers among Africans in Guangzhou. There are successful traders who are looked up to as exemplars by many of their fellow traders from their home country and ethnic group. But while these people may be admired and envied, they generally are not cultural brokers; while they know much about the business they are engaged in, they are sometimes surprisingly ignorant about China and Chinese life – they are, after all, only visitors. There are also spiritual leaders and ministers who play this role. The Chinese imam of the central mosque has been lauded by some African Muslims as a giver of advice, and this is even more the case for a number of African Christian ministers. If their churches are small, these ministers may also be businesspeople, and can give advice on a range of issues concerning foreigners in China. In most cases, however, these ministers confine their advice to matters of religious and moral teachings; while they are deeply revered, they are not generally sought after for advice on making a life and living in China. It is, by and large, logistics agents/economic middlemen who are left to fulfil the role of cultural broker.

The logistics agents/economic middlemen/cultural brokers I discuss have lived in China for anywhere from one to twelve years. Of the ten discussed in this article, only three are fluent speakers of Mandarin Chinese, and only one is a fluent speaker of Cantonese, the native language of Guangdong Province. However, because brokers typically employ Chinese staff, who can help with issues of language (these Chinese staff, typically English-speaking young women, are

worthy of an article in their own right), and because English has become more widely spoken in Guangdong Province over the past few years (factories and offices typically employ English speakers), language is not a crucial barrier. The majority of the logistics agents I discuss in this paper are not bicultural and do not fully understand China and Chinese life. But given the lack of bicultural cultural brokers between Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou, these logistics agents are the only people able to fulfil this role.

## Why Chinese Are Not Cultural Brokers

One might expect that Chinese nationals would play the dominant role of cultural broker for Africans in Guangzhou since, after all, it is their own society that they would be introducing to foreigners. Sometimes they do play this role – for example, the young women mentioned above – but generally they do not. On the level of official ground-level contacts between Chinese and Africans, mutual understanding is minimal. There are occasional events in Guangzhou meant to promote Chinese–African links, but these tend to be in Chinese and for Chinese. To take just one example, at one event in March 2014 seeking to celebrate Chinese–African relations, Chinese was the only language spoken; the lone African in attendance was pushed to the front and commandeered before TV cameras, feeling as if he were a hostage, as he told me later. Such events have no relation to the overwhelming majority of Africans in Guangzhou, who would never think of attending such an event; in my interviews with some 150 Africans in China, only a handful report having Chinese friends (although how a “friend” is defined remains ambiguous in such enquiries). Considering the number of Africans in southern China, one would expect to see more obvious linkages of Chinese with Africans in China, with Chinese serving as cultural brokers, but these are hard to find. Why?

One reason is the tenuous nature of much African residence in China. The majority of traders are in China for only a brief period, having business or tourist visas for 14 or 30 days, visas that may or may not be extendable. Because their stays are so brief, their socio-cultural impact is negligible; they are not present in China long enough to establish lasting interpersonal ties, although some may, over time, build up long-term business relations with Chinese suppli-

ers. Those Africans who stay longer may be asylum seekers, several hundred of whom are present in Guangzhou (see Lin 2013). A much larger number of Africans, particularly Nigerian Igbo but others as well, have become visa overstayers, and thus are illegal residents of China and of Guangzhou. These overstayers are typically quite active in business, but their socio-cultural impact is minimal, since their visa status forces them to keep a low profile (Yang 2011, 2012; Haugen 2012). The number of long-term legal African residents of Guangzhou is a tiny fraction of the total number of Africans in Guangzhou at any given time.

A second reason for this lack of linkages is racism against Africans within Chinese society, as discussed by a range of commentators (see Sautman 1994; Zhao 2010; Cheng 2011 on Chinese views of Africans, and Sautman and Yan 2009 on African views of Chinese). This (sometimes quasi-) racism ranges from ignorance (I saw an old Chinese man come into a Guangzhou restaurant and begin to vigorously rub the skin of an African man to see if his skin pigmentation would come off) to apparent insults (黑鬼, *hākgwái* (Cant.), *heigui*, “black ghost”, is often used towards Africans, although it is often intended by the speaker to be a casual term of reference rather than an overt term of derision), to racial stereotyping (“Africans are uncivilized and stink!” I have heard from Chinese shopkeepers). Racism is something that many Africans engage in vis-à-vis Chinese as well. There seems, all in all, to be not much racism on the ground in Guangzhou – certainly business disputes happen, but most African traders do not directly attribute these to racism. Nonetheless, racism remains a potential factor in the lack of socio-cultural bridges between Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou.

A third reason for the lack of linkages is the gap that many Chinese perceive between themselves and foreigners. Scholars (for example, Smith 1990: 11) have often discussed Chinese national identity as being based on ethnicity as opposed to civic loyalty, with the latter typified by countries such as Brazil, Canada and the United States, and the former by East Asian societies such as Japan, Korea and China. Unlike Japan and Korea historically, national identity has been cultural as well as ethnic in China, in that over history various non-Han peoples have been assimilated into Han-Chineseness (Wu 1994: 151; see also Tu 1994; Mathews, Ma, and Lui 2008: 4–9); nonetheless, it has always been a long and difficult process for non-Chinese to



become Chinese. The recent wave of foreigners in Guangzhou, particularly Africans, may represent a bridge too far – can an African ever become Chinese? The tentative answer at present seems to be no.

Despite this, however, there are some 20,000 Africans in Guangzhou who need to be able to bridge at least some socio-cultural chasms to be able to survive in Chinese society. This is an acutely practical matter. Where, to cite just a few of the most common questions newcomers ask, do you find Ghanaian (or Kenyan, or Senegalese, or Congolese) food in Guangzhou? How do you rent an apartment? How do you source goods from Chinese suppliers in a way that you won't get cheated? When do you need to report your residence status to Chinese police? This is also a matter of long-term cultural understanding: How should you behave towards Chinese police? How can you most efficiently renew your visa? How, on a long-term basis, can you avoid getting cheated in your business dealings with Chinese? How can you make Chinese friends? What do you need to understand before you become romantically involved with a Chinese person?

Chinese are generally of little help to Africans in answering these kinds of questions. This is most obviously because of the language barrier, with Africans most often speaking English, Portuguese, French, Arabic or Swahili to communicate with a wide range of people, but only rarely speaking Chinese. The level of English spoken by Chinese interacting with Africans over the past ten years has markedly improved, but nonetheless Chinese is still essential for anything more than routine daily interactions. But this is not only a matter of language, but also because of the cultural barrier described above: the attitude that China is for Chinese, and that foreigners, particularly Africans, should not be given any “special treatment”. A Chinese NGO I know of seeks to help Africans in Guangzhou and provides Chinese language instruction. But it is mistrusted by most Africans, not least because one of its core members has been observed assisting Guangzhou police in their pursuit of Africans with expired visas. Many Africans refuse to be involved in a place that they see as intimately linked to the Chinese government. Of course, many Africans are not illegal, and many indeed seek to learn Chinese, and this organization aids them in this quest. But this organization, like other Chinese organizations in Guangzhou, is unsuited to provide any practical advice to Africans: Its staff do not know enough to

begin to be able to answer the questions posed above; this, they feel, is beyond their mandate.

The people who most serve to bridge this gap are African logistics agents in Guangzhou, who also serve as economic middlemen and in effect as cultural middlemen between Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou. The long-term residence in China of this particular group enables them to serve as cultural brokers, particularly to people of their own ethnicity and nationality. Even if they have no intrinsic desire to serve as cultural brokers, they are more or less forced to do so because their customers demand it; they must play this role in order to keep and gain customers.

## Interviews

This article is based on a year of intensive research in Guangzhou, during which I interviewed some 200 African traders and Chinese merchants and suppliers. I focus on ten cargo handlers/economic middlemen/cultural brokers whom I interviewed for extended sessions over many hours month after month: two from Nigeria, two from Ghana, two from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and four from Kenya. I have spoken to most of these people numerous times since September 2012, and even more often since September 2013, when I lived most of each week in Guangzhou; some of these people I see two or three times a week or more, and I talk with them and hang out in their offices hour after hour. For this reason – following the standard methodological practices of my discipline of anthropology – I do not specify exact dates of interviews: Interviews quoted from took place between September 2013 and April 2014. Where I offer quotations, I have recorded the people I interviewed verbatim and transcribed what they said; where I do not offer such quotations, I later recorded in my own words what they said, and base my writing on the transcription of these notes.

I have decided not to differentiate between these ten people and not to simply ascribe them pseudonyms. This is because all ten of these people are well known in their ethnic communities, and all have said things that would embarrass them were they to be publicly identified with such statements. Even if their real names are hidden, if they could be identified through a detail of their business or biography, this would be unacceptable, not least because some of these

people ship copy goods, which is illegal. Because I have interviewed multiple logistics agents/middlemen/cultural brokers from different countries, I am able to identify my interviewees by country while giving them plausible deniability as to any particular statement. This strategy conforms to standard anthropological procedure: Anthropology seeks to protect the identities of those who are interviewed from any harm (see American Anthropological Association 2014). I discuss at length in this article these people's roles as logistics agents and as economic middlemen, and their views of China, along with their religious beliefs, which are essential to their lives. Let me now explore what I have found.

## Logistics Agents

There are some Africans with long-term visas – obtained through good fortune, connections and/or marriage to a Chinese citizen – who can legally stay in China on an extended basis; many use their social and cultural capital to occupy niches as logistics agents and facilitators of China–Africa trade (Le Bail 2009: 14–17). Their job is to send their customers' goods by air or container ship from China to various African airports or seaports, such as Mombasa, Eldoret, Lagos or Matadi; they generally do not directly deal with logistics in Africa but only in getting the goods to African ports. There are perhaps 200 African logistics agents in Guangzhou, some with prominently displayed offices and signboards, and others that are more or less hidden away in the higher floors of office buildings. Almost as a rule they work with Chinese logistics companies, since the latter book a large volume of containers worldwide and thus can get cheaper rates than can African logistics agents working on their own. Also, Chinese logistics companies can provide expertise in getting goods past Chinese customs, legally or illegally. The African logistics agents' job also may involve the inspection of goods, to ensure their quality for the customer, and also, crucially for this paper's argument, the ongoing care of customers. Most of these logistics agents work as either partners or employees of logistics companies with offices in cities such as Lagos, Nairobi and Dubai; some also work with Chinese partners, who need the African logistics agent for his or her contacts and experience in Africa. Most are men: While some 30 per

cent of traders in Guangzhou are female, African logistics agents are overwhelmingly male, including all of those portrayed in this article.

One such man – a Somali Kenyan, as are a disproportionate number of the East African logistics specialists in Guangzhou – sends his customers' goods, largely textiles, on the basis of trust, with negotiations done on a face-to-face basis, without any contracts ever being signed.

If I cheated someone, lawyers and contracts would be irrelevant. But my reputation would be ruined. People would call my friends back home and say, "That guy in Guangzhou is a crook!"

The goods he transports are largely legal, but are very much under-declared on customs forms, often specified as having no more than half their actual value. This is done in order to minimize the duties that must be paid, and is done by almost all of the logistics agents discussed in this article. For this reason, these goods mark a significant undervaluation of official China–Africa trade figures. This man's business, typifying low-end globalization, is defined by the personal relationships he builds with his customers – they need to trust him on a long-term basis, or else his logistics business cannot succeed. This trust is manifested in the care he shows for his customers, in providing services from a space to sleep and Somali-style meals at his apartment, to consultations over visas, to visits to medical clinics – a significant part of his day is spent arranging such services. When he is at his office he is often sought after for advice by his customers, who may never have been outside Kenya before, and have only a minimal understanding of the Chinese world they are now in. Once, a customer came to this agent's apartment and fell asleep in his bed. I accompanied the agent as he searched for a cheap hotel room for the night, as he was unwilling to disturb his customer.

Many of his customers believe that Chinese suppliers are always out to cheat them. His view is:

Traders think that suppliers cheat more than they really do [...]. There are only a few bad apples. By and large, those suppliers are honest, decent people.

As part of his work as a logistics agent, he is occasionally on the telephone with Chinese suppliers, mediating trade disputes. I have heard him doing this several times in English – he speaks only a few words of Chinese. When he feels that his customer is in the wrong, he has

no hesitancy in saying so, as he reported to me concerning one recent customer seeking a reprieve on payments: “I told him, ‘You agreed to pay the full deposit three months ago, and so now you must pay it!’” It seems clear that he is held in high repute by both sides as a fair judge in these disputes.

This logistics agent uses his office as a place to “meet and greet”; his customers use it as a clearing house for information. A critical role played by logistics agents as cultural brokers concerns their offices, places where their customers gather and hang out for hours on end, using the internet and chatting. These offices are typically gathering points for traders of a common ethnicity: Somali Kenyans go to Somali Kenyan offices, Nigerian Igbo go to Nigerian Igbo offices, and so on, with some ethnic variation, but not much. The ten logistics agents in this article are small-scale, typically sending anywhere from five to twenty containers of goods per month for their customers. I know other logistics agents in Guangzhou who send hundreds of containers each month. The latter’s offices, characterized by high-end globalization, are heavily routinized, and offer none of the extra services provided by the logistics agents/cultural brokers described in this article. When I asked the Egyptian CEO of one large freight-forwarding company whether his customers, mostly Middle Easterners, could hang out in his office, he was indignant: “Of course not! They would interfere with our work!” Most of the men profiled in this article, as specialists in low-end globalization, would never offer such a response. For these men, everything is personal – these relationships enable them to play the role that they do. Cultural brokerage is dependent on business scale: It is a marketing necessity for those whose scale of business is small, as is the case for every sub-Saharan African logistics agent I know, but may be deemed unnecessary by those whose scale of business is large.

Another logistics specialist, a Kenyan who has lived in Guangzhou for the past three years, was sent by his company to pursue the Africans-in-China business. He regularly advises Kenyans on how they should behave in China, even on occasion through mass media in East Africa. He recounted this advice to me at length:

If Kenyans seek to come to China, you have to warn them – some will come with Kenyan currency, thinking it’s international. You can’t change Kenyan currency in China! Another important thing is that they must declare the money they’re coming in with. You

cannot leave China with anything more than 5,000 [US] dollars. If it's detected in scanning, they'll make you pay 10 per cent of it. Also, you need to be careful about fake money. An African woman takes a cab to the airport, and gives the driver 100 yuan – the money she gives him is real, but he replaces it with fake money [...]. Also, never pay more than a 30 per cent deposit. The supplier might find it easier to keep the 50 per cent than to produce anything for you. Under 30 per cent, it's to his benefit to make the goods for you. The Chinese want to pick fights, especially when you bargain; they will provoke you, and if you lose your temper and hit them, the law takes its course and you are deported; you may lose your deposit. I advise my customers not to allow their tempers to take over from their reasoning. Chinese may call you names, abuse you. It happens. Ignore it [...].

The perception of Kenyans towards China before they get here is really different from what they actually encounter once they're here. Many of them don't think they can get any food other than snakes and dog meat. That's what they've heard in Kenya! When they get here, they find that they can even eat Kenyan ugali here. Also, the Western media have created the perception that there is an autocracy here, that people are always spied on, that there is a great fear of government – that's also not true. They find people with liberties and freedoms, to an extent – not what they've read. If people don't like China, it's because of the pain of the language, and the fact that people are very materialistic – money comes before everything else, and you always need to be careful about getting cheated, receiving goods different from what you've ordered. They only think “How much can I get out of this customer today?” But you also have to be impressed with China. The infrastructure, the town planning. The government can provide for a billion people, with a rail network, roads, recreational facilities, parks – things that are lacking in Africa. All the time I've stayed here, I've not experienced a single electricity blackout. Yes, I want Kenya to become like China!

Some logistics specialists I know are visa overstayers, particularly among Nigerian Igbo, making their very presence in Guangzhou illegal. One overstaying logistics agent, a man who has managed to remain in Guangzhou for five years without getting caught, recounted: “In China, you must be very careful about whatever you are doing. The police can grab you at any moment”. He compared his life to that of a gazelle at a waterhole infested with crocodiles, “just like on Discovery Channel”. This man serves as an official peacemaker in

the Nigerian community, helping to solve business conflicts between Nigerians, and also, on occasion, between Nigerians and Chinese. He previously was able to arrange air freight and container transportation from his office, since these services do not require showing one's passport and papers. However, this changed after an extended police crackdown on overstayers beginning in the autumn of 2013 – his role as a cultural broker is curtailed because of the threat of police, and he can no longer work regularly in his office because of the danger, leaving it to his Chinese girlfriend. He now conducts his business and his cultural brokering from his telephone at home, otherwise remaining invisible. Because he remains a respected member of the community, his peacemaking and cultural brokering continue, albeit at a diminished level.

As earlier noted, logistics agents typically hire young Chinese women to aid them in their work, with one major task of these employees being to serve as interpreters and intermediaries. The question, for some, becomes one of how much these intermediaries can be trusted. “Whose side will she be on?” This interviewee continued as follows:

I used to have a staff [member], when I quarrelled with a Chinese supplier, she would side with the Chinese because I was black. They started talking in Chinese, but I have a pen recorder that they didn't know about. Later, I asked my African friend to translate: He told me they were saying, “This guy is black and this isn't his country. Keep his money!” You can't have a person like that working for you in your office! But the Chinese woman now working for me, I recorded her and took it back and was told, “Oh, she's fighting for you.” My trust in her started from there.

Another logistics agent told a story of how several of his Chinese employees conspired to siphon off his customers for their own side business; he caught them after months of suspicion and fired them. Still another agent, more trusting, has given his Chinese employee an African name, and includes her in every business decision “to make her feel like a partner” and thereby ensure her loyalty. For these cargo agents, their dealings with Chinese subordinates are at the forefront of their role as cultural brokers, but also reveal the agents' limitations: They are dependent upon their Chinese employees for crucial aspects of cultural brokering.

The advice these cultural brokers give is sometimes of considerable legal significance. A Kenyan logistics expert told me this story:

A trader I know bought a bottle of Clear, a shampoo made by Unilever, and asked a Chinese factory to make him 6,000 bottles to sell in Somalia. He didn't understand that he couldn't do that; he never knew about the concept of trademark. His goods were confiscated in Hong Kong, and he was shocked. He called me with his problem, and I told him that he'd have to disappear or else he'd definitely be going to jail.

This advice – even if, in this case, it involves evading the law – embodies a highly important cultural lesson: The way things are done at home is not the way things are done in China, or in this case, Hong Kong. Sometimes this advice involves breaking the law. Another logistics agent showed me the text-message correspondence he had been having with a customer who sought to send copy shoes from China to Africa bearing the labels of Nike and Adidas. She enquired about sending a container-load, and he advised her to send the copies in smaller allotments in several different containers, because the chances of getting the copy goods safely out of China and into Africa would be far higher. As he later admitted to me,

We don't ship brand names, because they are likely to be copies. Or rather, technically we don't do it, but we will. We have the brand names we won't ship if they're coming from China: Chanel, Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Hugo Boss, Nike [...]. Don't buy it, but yes, if you bring it, we will still ship it, and there will generally be no problem.

This man's knowledge of how to get copy goods through Chinese customs and into his own home country involves sophisticated extra-legal cultural brokering. He knows Chinese who have connections with Chinese customs officials who will accept bribes, and those are the people he works through. However, because so few containers are inspected, he usually need not pursue this option, and can send his goods well hidden within containers with a "99 per cent chance" of not being caught, he tells me. This is knowledge more or less shared by every interviewee in this paper.



## Middlemen

All logistics agents I know have customers who decide not to travel from their home countries to China, and who would prefer to send their money to someone whom they trust and who will handle their business for a commission. Many also have customers who lack the inclination to figure out the optimal sourcing for the goods they seek, and ask logistics agents to do this, again for a commission; some also have customers who have money but do not know what to buy. For this reason, the logistics agents discussed in this paper are also middlemen and sourcers.

Logistics agents deal with Chinese suppliers in the transport of goods from factories to their warehouses, and thus have a connection to Chinese suppliers that they can leverage further. Various Chinese middlemen wait at the airport and in the lobbies of more expensive hotels for Africans traders who have money. As one trader told me,

They'll do absolutely everything for you, including following you to the toilet and wiping your rear end, until they have your deposit; then you'll never hear from them again.

This is certainly not always the case, but it does illustrate the difficulties of trusting personal and cultural strangers. Middlemen of a trader's own cultural background, vouched for by the trader's friends, serve an essential role in making this business possible. Just as not all logistics agents are middlemen, not all middlemen are logistics agents. Indeed, most African traders with experience in China dream of becoming middlemen, and if acquaintances from their home countries come to Guangzhou, they may be able to act out this dream on occasion. But logistics agents are in a particularly advantageous position to play this role, because they have built up trust with their customers and can often earn a significant portion of their income as middlemen.

My interviewees typically receive many enquiries from prospective traders but most come to naught. As a Kenyan said,

Someone called about buying a juice-making machine but had no idea of its capacity; another called about buying plastic bags, but couldn't specify the size he wanted. I get two or three enquiries a day, but a serious one maybe once a week, or once a month [...]. Ninety-nine per cent of these enquiries will not go through; they're not serious.

Once a deal seems plausible, commission becomes the issue. As a Nigerian agent told me,

What's an appropriate commission? It depends on the kinds of goods you're sourcing. If it's heavy machinery, you might charge 10 per cent. It's not something that you can go to one place and make your order – you may need to visit factories in other Chinese provinces. Yes, you pay your own expenses from the 10 per cent. For other commissions, it may be 3 per cent, 5 per cent. No, there's no contract – it's all about trust. You reach an agreement, but at the end of the day, the trader might bargain it down a little: You think, "Maybe I can do away with 2 or 1 per cent." The larger the quantity, the lower the commission.

The exact calculation of commissions varies among different nationalities and among different individual middlemen. By a Congolese agent's account, it is difficult to charge for one's services: Customers have come through connections, as friends of friends or relatives, making it difficult for middlemen to request payment for their services. If a middleman can arrange to obtain commissions from both the Chinese factory and the African customer, this is ideal (and is boasted about by a few of the middlemen I know) but atypical; more often, a commission comes from only one side, typically the customer, or, when agreements are reneged, from neither side. Virtually all traders seek to be middlemen; by the same token, experienced traders seek not to have to go through a middleman. The 3 to 5 per cent commission a middleman can typically make may seem like remarkably easy money to an entrepreneur who is in a position to connect an African trader with a Chinese factory, but this commission may be seen as an unnecessary drain on profits to a trader who seeks to deal directly with the factory on his or her own. Everyone I spoke with has an array of stories about being spurned by customers and factory owners after the first visit to a factory, and also of themselves managing to evade the middleman. A Congolese man described to me how he got around having to use a Chinese middleman: He spied the factory logo in the background of a poster, photographed it, and thereby got the factory phone number. He then called on the factory on his own; at first, the factory would not deal with him, but after he slipped 500 USD to an employee, the middleman was forgotten. On the other hand, a Ghanaian middleman spoke of once being spurned:

I introduced a West African customer to the factory, to see its quality. While we were loading the container, I saw her brother go to the Chinese manager and I saw them exchanging telephone numbers. They're probably doing it for future business. We've brought a customer to the factory – they have to respect our introduction, because I've signed a contract with the customer; I've spent a lot of time designing their product with them, and checking out factories with them. Now he will call the factory in the future and get a cheaper price. But what he doesn't realize is that we have signed a contract with the factory for a certain quality. When they then got products of an inferior quality, then they turn around and say that Chinese products are no good.

In a Nigerian middleman's words:

Without someone to do the inspection of goods, traders may end up losing their money. They go back to Africa and then request directly to the Chinese factory, "Give me 200,000 pieces." The Chinese then go for the lower quality; or you say you want black and blue, and they give you beige and pink: Everything they have that they can't sell. Then they'll say, "We're sorry! It's a warehouse mistake. Can you bring it back?" But if you're in Africa, there's no way you can bring it back! If you're the middleman, you have the responsibility to check the sizes, the quality, the quantity. But if there's no middleman, no one will do this.

As these comments indicate, a conscientious middleman is essential to an African trader. A conscientious middleman does not simply take the customer's money and check on the Ali Baba website to find a Chinese factory. Rather, he uses his Chinese and African connections to vet suppliers, visits factories to see the quality of their production and later carefully checks the factory's delivered goods to see if they meet the customer's specifications. He is, like the logistics agents discussed in the last section, a paid cultural broker. As a Nigerian logistics agent/middleman explains:

Chinese suppliers like to rely on customers more than on you, because they know that you are here to give them trouble if anything goes wrong. They prefer a customer from afar. Yes, the customer needs us but the factory needs us, too – customers don't know where to find their goods, and factories don't know where to find customers. Most of the factories, with a better understanding of business, don't want to intrude. They know they need us.

Most African middlemen I know do not use Chinese middlemen counterparts, but sometimes this may happen. The African introduces African customers to Chinese suppliers through the Chinese middleman; the Chinese finds African customers through the African middleman. Sometimes Chinese and African middlemen are in competition over customers, but sometimes they work together. A Congolese middleman told me how he got together with a Chinese middleman to moderate the price they were asking of the customer, the former having said the following to the latter:

The price you're giving is too high. I want a little bit; you want a little bit; let's both make sure that the price isn't beyond what the customer will pay.

The Chinese middleman agreed, and they compromised on a price that they felt was fair to all three of them. A bane of African traders in China is the many layers of middlemen that may appear. On the other hand, without middlemen, African traders without extensive experience can very easily be taken advantage of. A good middleman uses his knowledge of Chinese factories and production and his own legwork to ensure that China–Africa deals proceed smoothly, with both sides satisfied. This is an essential service in reducing African–Chinese friction. A middleman trusted by both the Chinese supplier and the African customer is both an essential cultural broker and also an enabler of globalization.

## Cultural Brokers' Lives in China and in Religion

Among the ten logistics agents/middlemen discussed in this paper, the Congolese seem most fully adjusted to life in China, at least linguistically. A Nigerian, Ghanaian or Kenyan cultural broker can function in English, while a person from the DRC, speaking French rather than English as a native language, may be more or less forced to learn Chinese – although, the Congolese portrayed in this paper also speak English. The Nigerians, Ghanaians and Kenyans all have extensive knowledge of Chinese factories and of practical aspects of Chinese life that their customers need, but of the seven who do not speak much Chinese, five rely primarily on Chinese employees and two on Chinese girlfriends or wives for linguistic help as needed. They can indeed serve as cultural brokers without knowing Chinese, but only if

they have Chinese helpers whom they can depend upon when the need arises.

The two Congolese cultural brokers may seem the most obvious examples of cross-cultural citizens among these ten men, but while both would rather live in China than in the DRC, still their dream is to go and live in America or Europe. “China is a good place to make a living, but not to make a life”, one told me. A Ghanaian cultural broker sought to live in Hong Kong in the future; a Kenyan cultural broker who maintains an apartment in Hong Kong says that when he crosses the border to Hong Kong, he feels like he has come home. Three other Kenyans say they are in China only for business, and seek to return to Kenya to live once they have enough money. The two Nigerians both say that due to their status as overstayers China could not ever feel like home, much as they like aspects of life in China. These cultural brokers’ attitudes towards China are coloured by their visa status, with five relatively secure and five not: Clearly you cannot feel at home in a country that might expel you at any time. However, none of these men have hard and fast assurances regarding their visa status, and this prevents any of them from feeling as if they are “black Chinese”: They cannot afford to become too secure in their adopted country. Another factor shaping their attitudes towards China is romantic relations. One of these men has a Chinese wife and children with her (something which helps in gaining long-term residence status in China, but does not assure it); two others have long-term Chinese girlfriends. Many of the others, particularly the Kenyans, have wives and children back in Kenya or in other countries.

These different factors play out in a given individual’s mind in shaping his or her attitude towards China, but ultimately these individual views are idiosyncratic. A Ghanaian had this to say when I asked him if China could be home:

No, there’s nothing that could convince me that China could be home in the future. Definitely not. It’s just the little things we take for granted. For example, the warehouse today – they gave us a call demanding that we pay rent early, thinking that we’re running away. Typical Chinese: Money is more important than anything, than human relations. No, I don’t have Chinese friends. Well, I have one – an acquaintance: I’ve invited him for a meal [...]. I don’t speak Chinese. I should. I’m in a society where I take for

granted that someone speaks English. But I'm in their country, so I should learn Chinese!

He complained of Chinese money-mindedness blocking the possibility of friendship, but then admitted that his lack of ability to speak Chinese may also be a factor. One Congolese man who speaks fluent Chinese has a particularly conflicted relationship with China. He appears totally at home in China in his fluent and fluid joking with Chinese, and has a Chinese name that he uses, even in his bank signature. He also had a long-time Chinese girlfriend who, several years ago, took him home to meet her parents, who were monumentally displeased at having an African as a potential son-in-law. Under pressure from her parents, she broke up with him; he has remained single ever since. He said that he sometimes feels China is his home, but he is embittered by his experiences with racism. As he said, "That term the Chinese always use – *wai guo peng you* (外国朋友, "foreign friend") – the emphasis is always on 'foreign' more than on 'friend'. He felt that the ethnic wall between Chinese and non-Chinese was so high that it could never be overcome – he laughed bitterly when I asked him if he felt there could ever be a Chinese Barack Obama: "No, no, it's impossible. It will never happen". Others had more sanguine views in response to the question of a future Chinese Obama: Several felt that it might indeed eventually happen, although it might take several generations. But all had complex individual views of China, views that changed not only from person to person, but also from week to week. Falling in love with a Chinese woman or being cheated by a Chinese supplier might drastically change one's view of life in China.

The Nigerian cultural brokers, as visa overstayers, also had obviously conflicted relationships with China. During the course of my research, one such man decided that he had had enough of being an overstayer: He sent back to Nigeria the considerable amount of money he had managed to earn, bade numerous goodbyes to his friends and customers, and turned himself in to police. There, he paid a 10,000 CNY fine (without being imprisoned), received a temporary permit to leave China, bought his plane ticket, and departed. He had this to say about his future role as cultural broker between Nigeria and China:

If, back in Lagos, a young person asks me if he should go to China, I'll say to him, don't go. If you have a little money, start a business in Nigeria. I stayed nine years in China – they refused to give me a visa. So why should we come here? [...] Yes, I'm going

to miss China: I'll miss my friends; I'll miss my business partners. Will I suggest my children to go to China? No. I've worked hard for them so that they won't have to go to China.

This man felt deeply relieved to be going home, where he sought to marry and start a family; but in other conversations, he insisted that he would be returning to China. If he can get a passport under a different name, then the five-year ban imposed by China on his return to the country can be evaded.

In general, these people had widely varying senses of linkage to their home countries. Several of the Kenyans regularly visited home, in Nairobi or Mombasa, and felt unambiguously that Kenya was home. Several Somali Kenyans, on the other hand, believed that the Somali home they dreamed of could not be returned to, for it was too unsafe. These men had families overseas, but were global citizens not because they wanted to be, but because the political situation at home had left them little choice. Somewhat similarly, the Congolese tended to believe that going home to live was not a serious option, as did the Nigerians, despite the above cultural broker's words: Returning to Nigeria was what they had to do more than what they wanted to do. Although each of these cultural brokers waxed eloquently on occasion about his desire to rebuild his home country into a developed country like China, the majority did not see their own practical future in their home countries.

For almost all of these men, religion played a major part in their lives, and was the moral basis for their service as cultural brokers. A Kenyan's office was a hotbed of social activity and discussion, but this was always punctuated by Islamic prayer several times a day. In the midst of a conversation, he would excuse himself and go pray in a corner on a prayer rug, as would every trader in the office, as a matter of routine but also deep piety. Another Muslim Kenyan said that while he often did business with Christians – they too are “people of the Book”, he said – a major trouble he had with Chinese was that they did not believe in religion: “We believe in God, but they only believe in gold”. He wondered how he could trust anyone who did not believe in God, and felt that “Chinese cheating” stemmed from that lack of belief. He felt that while Africans, too, sometimes cheated (for example, by receiving goods on credit and never paying), their religious belief, particularly in Islam, made them morally superior to Chinese.

Most of the East African cultural brokers I know are Muslim, while most of the Central and West Africans are Christian. One Nigerian cultural broker is remarkably successful in business, but his real interest is in Christianity. He tithes 10 per cent of his earnings to his underground church, and his phone ring tone consists of preachers conveying the Word of the Lord. One of his frustrations is that the Chinese government prohibits Chinese from attending the underground Christian church he attends, apparently because it has foreign funding and may thus be subversive; Chinese visitors, except in very rare cases, are politely escorted out by the church's Nigerian staff, for fear that the Chinese government may raid and shut down the church, as it has done in the past (Haugen 2013).

The role of these cultural brokers is to make African traders in Africa more knowledgeable and secure in a foreign, Chinese world. However, although they are all to at least some extent financially successful, they lead more or less insecure lives, as we have seen, in terms of their visa status and sometimes their personal lives. Religious belief seems to provide them with a moral anchor. It also gives those Africans they do business with a strong moral basis for trusting them. How much these people actually base their lives in religion varies. But for most of the cultural brokers portrayed in this article, their religious belief is absolutely essential as a moral basis for their lives.

## Conclusion: Cultural Brokers in Changing Guangzhou

This article has examined ten African logistics agents and middlemen who serve as cultural brokers in southern China, as intermediaries between Africans largely of their own ethnicity and Chinese. These logistics agents/middlemen serve as cultural brokers because their business has made it necessary for them to help their customers practically and culturally adjust to China. Not all logistics agents become successful middlemen, and not all logistics agents/middlemen become cultural brokers, but those in this paper have – their role as logistics specialists and middlemen enables them, and indeed all but compels them, to serve as cultural brokers.

The concept of cultural broker has been only intermittently used in anthropology, but it is, I have argued, an essential concept for anthropological analysis. In an age of globalization, people are increas-



ingly thrust into parts of the world of which they may know little: It is cultural brokers who provide them an anchor of cultural knowledge. This is particularly true within the world of low-end globalization, where there are few formal institutional structures – everything is based on trust and human relations rather than contracts and laws, and cultural brokers are brokers exactly because they have acquired such trust.

Despite their roles as cultural brokers between Africa and China, these people often have ambivalent feelings towards China as a place to make a living and a life. In the end it is their religious belief that seems to provide an anchor for many of them, and that also enables their customers to trust them as cultural brokers – a religious faith that most Chinese do not have, a fact that disconcerts some of the African brokers. I discussed earlier China's sense of ethnic belonging as opposed to civic belonging. Although there have been some recent moves towards inclusiveness of non-ethnic Chinese residents, such as the recent granting of permanent residence to a few foreigners married to Chinese citizens, China and Guangzhou seem undecided as to whether long-term residents of China such as many of the people profiled in this paper will ever come to be seen as Chinese rather than as foreigners (Lan 2014). Ultimately, these cultural brokers' ambivalence towards China mirrors China's ambivalence towards foreigners, and perhaps particularly towards Africans. And yet, despite such ambivalence, it seems clear that these people play a crucial cultural role in enabling a greater sense of linkage and closeness between Africans and China.

The situation in Guangzhou has been changing over the years. As a Congolese cultural broker explained to me,

When I first came to Guangzhou ten years ago, even going to the market and explaining what you're looking for was very hard. Compared to 2006/2007 it has changed greatly. Yes, my Chinese became better, but also the Chinese got better at English. Before, when you went to the market and spoke English, they'd say, *ting bu dong, ting bu dong* (听不懂, 听不懂, I don't understand), or they'd say "No English!" Now many Chinese can speak English, and French, Portuguese – many! Attitudes are changing, too. Before, when they looked at you, they didn't want to come near: They didn't know how to communicate with you. After business, there was no topic to discuss with you. But now, they want to know

about your personal life, about your country's culture, how people are living in Africa.

A Nigerian said, "Yes, China is changing. Now, there are hundreds of Chinese–African babies". But despite these new residents, Guangzhou's African population may not last for long. Chinese companies seek to supplant the African middleman in southern China by placing their own factories and agents in African and other countries. As a Kenyan told me,

Chinese companies now have offices in Dubai. There's no way you can compete with them – they cut out the middlemen. Yes, they are basically after my job. I hear that in Uganda, the Chinese embassy is telling Africans who apply for visas, "Why do you need to go to China when you can get anything from suppliers in Dubai, or even in Africa? Just let us know what you want, and suppliers will bring it to you". The Chinese always have an advantage in this game.

It thus may be that the future for these African logistics agents and middlemen is limited. For now, though, as I have demonstrated in this paper, they introduce their African clients into the practicalities of life in China through their work as logistics agents, and enable the smooth flow of trade between Chinese factories and their African customers through their work as middlemen. They may reject the label "cultural broker" – one Kenyan man exclaimed "I'm only trying to make a living!" when I described the term to him. But they are indeed cultural brokers par excellence.

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