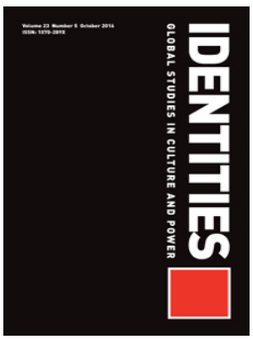

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A 'Wild West' of trade? African women and men and the gendering of globalisation from below in Guangzhou

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Based on fieldwork in Guangzhou, this paper documents the activities of a group of African women traders, highlighting their role in constituting globalisation from below or a counterhegemonic globalisation that emanates from China. It further builds on previous studies on women and development to show how neoliberal economic changes in Africa since the 1980s have forced African men into the traditionally feminine role of (informal) traders between Africa and China. Struggles for economic power between African women and men traders and representations of gender in such struggles as well as the construction of a hyper-masculine discourse in the Guangzhou context are analysed in discussing how women and men are engaged in a continual process of 'making gender make sense' outside of Africa.

Keywords: African women; China; gender; globalisation from below; Guangzhou; masculinity

Introduction

During a conversation with a South African woman, the waving hands of my Somali informant from Kenya, Atoofah,[1] caught my attention. It was late December 2013, and these women were the last of the foreign traders stocking up before China's spring festival holiday, when all factories would be closed. Today Atoofah would show me her day at the 'workshop of the world'. Like others before and after her, China's globalisation, the availability of affordable goods and strengthened China-Africa links have brought Africans from Cameroon, the two Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda, among other countries, to the wholesale trade centres or markets in Guangzhou. Her day begins when the markets open, typically 10 o'clock. Alighting the bus, we first stopped at a bank that would be used to pay the deposits for orders that she had made. Weaving through the shops, she stopped to look and ask for prices in Cantonese that she had acquired in Hong Kong and sat with the Chinese suppliers she needed to pay. Today, she also wanted to speak with a long-time supplier, who had informed Atoofah that a trader from Kenya had inquired about her orders. It is common to inquire which designs are popular among traders from specific countries, but unusual to ask for details of individual

purchases. Atoofah and her supplier agreed that the inquiring person had wanted to copy her clothing designs.

The presence of Africans in China has gained increasing research interests (e.g. Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007; Bodomo 2010; Le Bail 2009; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Haugen 2012). The research deals primarily with African men, whose overseas migration has been attributed to declining employment opportunities, restrictive immigration policies in developed countries and China's globalisation since its market reforms in 1978. Highlighting the presence of African women like Atoofah, my study aims to contribute to expanding this literature. My objective is not only to rethink the predominance of men traders in the 'Africans in China' discourse. That the masculine representation needs to be empirically problematised rather than assumed is intimated in a Hong Kong freight-logistics provider's disclosure that his company deals with many East Africans and the gender ratio is 50:50 (2 December 2013). A procurement agent with clients mostly from Ghana echoes this, stating that his African clients are '50:50 women and men' (6 January 2014), while a logistics agent shares that Somali women are dominant among his clients trading in readymade garments (6 April 2014). A 'shopping agent' from Sierra Leone insists that the figure differs when one considers that more women travel to Guangzhou for business than men; she gives the ratio of 60:40 (18 May 2015). Although no statistical data are available, a rough estimate based on observation of Africans in Guangzhou would place the number at probably 25:75 or 30:70 women to men. The number fluctuates and varies between long- and short-term traders. The smaller number of women traders staying in Guangzhou, however, is reflected in African men's disparagement of their role in trade in various ways that seems to have influenced how scholars have portrayed Africans in China. The marginalisation of women in the scholarship deracinates African women's history in trade and roles in developing postcolonial economic connections. At the same time, it normalises men's displacement of a traditionally female role.

Trade is a part of society replete with gendered ideologies that reflect a historically and culturally defined structure of relationships and obligations that delineate women and men's roles (Afonja 1981, 305; Mintz 1971, 247; Overå 2007, 544; Robertson 1984, 639). In certain African contexts, women and men's spheres of production were complementary and separate, giving each a degree of autonomy. For women, the household and family structured much of their work, requiring them to negotiate their time between contributing their labour to family farms, fetching water and collecting wood, growing and processing food and caring for children and engaging in market activities. These influenced the kinds of commodities they sold, including farm products and goods destined for household consumption (Afonja 1981, 311; Chalfin 2001, 210–211; Spring 2009, 19). Although the geography of women's trade was typically local, social networks often mediated it: women developed partnerships with other women to extend the spaces of trade (Chalfin 2000, 995). In contrast, where men could be said to have historically engaged in trade, they dominated international markets and

high-value commodities that reflected their access to resources like capital, land and time (Desai 2009, 379; Kiteme 1992, 138; Overå 2007, 544; Perry 2005, 211; Spring 2009, 19). They typically controlled production and exchange of commercial crops or manufactured goods that required relatively large amounts of capital and earned higher profits. That is, socially determined sex role differentiation that permeated through the sphere of reproduction also influenced the organisation of trade, rendering a gendered division in entrepreneurial activities.

Guangzhou provides a lens from which to observe how this gendered division is changing, specifically with African women increasingly participating in international markets and men in small-scale, informal entrepreneurial activities, also labelled as the 'shadow' or 'underground economy' (Ribeiro 2012, 223) and 'System D' (Neuwirth 2013). Atoofah's day described above reveals that the kind of transcontinental trade that she and other Africans (women and men) are engaged in in Guangzhou is highly competitive and risky. Rapidly changing fashion trends, fluctuating currency exchanges and run-ins with local police when visas have expired magnify an already precarious situation. After being refused the use of her United Nations asylum document (obtained during the Ebola pandemic) to continue renting an apartment in Guangzhou, a Liberian becomes an over stayer and refers to herself as an 'illegal trader' (19 May 2015). Shanshan Lan (2014, 5) discusses the issue of legality/illegality, pointing out that Nigerians and 'Africans from other countries are also confronted with visa renewal problems, to varying degrees'. Other causes for run-ins with local authorities for a significant number of Africans include involvement 'in semi-legal or illegal business activities in China, such as tax evasion, operating shops without a license, trading counterfeit goods, unauthorized money exchange, using forged documents, and so on' (Lan 2014, 5; see Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2014). The potential profits make it worthwhile to continue back-and-forth travel or to stay in China for a longer term (Haugen 2012, 12). The amounts of capital that they deal in, according to one freight-logistics provider who also transfers money for clients, are small compared with multinational or transnational corporations that are the focus of studies on globalisation (17 November 2014). Atoofah and others I have encountered are 'traders [and businesspeople] carrying goods on themselves or shipping by containers', an attribute of what Mathews (2011, 13) calls 'low-end globalization' in his study of the traders from Asia and Africa at Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions. Others have referred to such alternative circuits of globalisation elsewhere as 'globalisation from below'. It means that 'the activities involved "defy the economic establishment everywhere on the local, regional, international and transnational levels" ' (Ribeiro 2009, 313). Guangzhou is one place of globalisation from below where African women and men's trade activities meet.

This 'from below' view is a productive analytical framework that has helped to shed light on the efforts of Africans to make a living or achieve upwards mobility in the context of China and a capitalist world economy. It shifts the

focus of globalisation towards ordinary citizens, away from corporations and multilateral institutions. While scholars like Milgram (2012) and Gauthier (2012) have demonstrated the role of women in 'globalisation from below', respectively, in the Philippines and Mexico, African women in China, as already mentioned, have received little attention. That more African men stay in China for longer periods of time is one explanation for this (see Haugen 2012). It suggests that globalisation from below primarily involves those who could remain in the destination country for an extended time and rely on personal networks to move capital and goods. Women, who are more often engaged in back-and-forth travel, inevitably fall out of the frame. While the presence of African women in Guangzhou needs to be addressed, it is better understood through analysing how gender is being (re)produced among Africans in globalisation from below so, that the role of men in traditionally feminine role of traders between Africa and China goes unquestioned. I aim to show that the highly competitive and risky environment that African women and men experience in China has facilitated the displacement of women and construction of a hyper-masculinity that 'construes entrepreneurship as a masculine activity, most appropriate for fashioning self-made men' (Nagar et al. 2002, 268). 'Globalisation from below' is, therefore, also a social phenomenon, involving peoples who transgress, contest and redefine various cultural norms and boundaries.

Subsequent sections address these by drawing from studies that focus on women and trade over time in several African countries and discussing the experiences of a group of African women in Guangzhou. The literature on gender is vast, so I briefly highlight a particular moment of economic liberalisation that has contributed to the transformation of a gendered division of labour that typically associates internal distributive activities with work that women do in African societies. I further demonstrate that the spatial extension of women's market activities – that, according to Mintz (1971, 248), had included carrying needed produce, bulking produce and breaking bulk, processing produce and serving as credit sources for clients – and overrepresentation of African men in globalisation from below are historically produced phenomena. A deeper understanding of the masculine representation of globalisation from below in Guangzhou opens the space to reflect on how African men have become disempowered against the backdrop of liberalisation in Africa and how the incorporation of some of them into the traditionally feminine role of traders has re-gendered the notion of entrepreneurship. The emergence of a hyper-masculine discourse among Africans in Guangzhou, I point out, owes much to these men's displacement of a traditionally female role.

Women and trade

Bauer, a scholar of West African economy writes: 'Africans frequently do not regard trade as an occupation (especially when carried on by dependents), and would not refer to it as such. They regard it as part of existence and not as a

distinct occupation' (1963, 11). In that context, 'dependents' refer to wives and trade is part of everyday reproductive work. While Bauer leaves this gendered statement unproblematised, later scholars make explicit that trade is regarded as work that women do alongside with agricultural labour (Robertson 1984, 639). Women have a long history of trade in West Africa that could be traced from at least the sixteenth century. Robertson and others reveal the dominance of women, especially, in Ghana (Chalfin 2000; Grier 1992; Nypan 1960). In the instance of Nigeria, Chuku (1999) provides details of three Igbo women, who were petty traders-turned-international merchants in the late nineteenth century. This finds resonance in Sylvanus's (2013, 69) research among the Togolese women who controlled the textile trade during the colonial period up until the 1990s. Mintz (1971, 249) notes that the *Darkaroise* women traders in Senegal and Yoruba in Nigeria have been crucial intermediaries, linking the subsistence and commercial economies. Women's participation in distributive activity in eastern and southern Africa is a more recent phenomenon (Afonja 1981; Bujra 1975; Desai 2009; Kiteme 1992).

The case studies of African women and division of labour, that reflects a historically and culturally defined structure of relationships in African societies, suggest that gender is both contextual and contingent. In particular, the literature on the economic liberalisation period exposes discontinuities in women and men's lives. In fact, women have received the most attention in studies focusing on the impact of neoliberal economic changes on developing countries (Flynn and Kofman 2004). While aiming to reduce inflation, increase the rate of growth of exports and increase productivity and efficiency by deregulating markets and reducing public expenditure, among other things, the programs and loans of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank generated unemployment, poverty and debt across Africa. Against this backdrop, research began to draw attention to the impacts of reforms that directly affected women. The literature shows that already-poor women in Africa became more vulnerable, as governments eliminated food subsidies and abandoned responsibility for health care to the private sector. Women are represented as victims of macro-structural changes.

The research correcting the marginalisation of women in global migration studies responded to such representation of passive, victimised women. Attention was given to the expansion of labour migration among women from developing countries vis-à-vis rising demands in the developed core and semi-peripheral countries for new sources of low-waged labour in the care/service and sex/entertainment industries. Sassen (2003) points out that the structural adjustment economy precipitated mass unemployment of men as well as women and indebted developing countries. The growing number of women in alternative global circuits of work is linked to this. Women are actually available resources that governments have harnessed to secure revenue for servicing debts. Women's critical role is encapsulated in Sassen's notion of 'feminization of survival', whereby the livelihood of families, profit of

capitalists and debt servicing of governments are all 'realized on the backs of women' (Sassen 2003, 55).

Whether women are victims or agents, both constructions overlook how moments of change/crisis and adaptation/negotiation in women and men's roles continue to maintain and reconstruct gender. Perry (2005) addresses this through her study of Wolof men, who were small farmers in rural Senegal. They were catapulted into a 'crisis of masculinity' when their ability to procure inputs essential to cultivating cash crops was lost after the elimination of earlier state programs and import substitutions. Their role as breadwinners was undermined, weakening their control over women's labour. As farms became unproductive and with the support of micro-loans, more women began to trade, augmenting the ever-expanding informal economy. According to Perry, the emergence of a moral discourse that inculpated women in a growing tide of social decay reflected the men's heightened sense of powerlessness and fear of women's freedom (Perry 2005, 216). On the other hand, the conjugal contract was pivotal for women in their negotiations with men: it enabled them to participate in income-generating activities and to reaffirm patriarchy. Gender roles substantially changed, but the façade of patriarchy remained.

In another instance where neoliberal economic changes engendered mass unemployment for men, Overå (2007) shows the mutability of masculinity by questioning what happens when men take on an activity that has been linked with women's reproductive work. Seeing in it an opportunity to make profit, some of them entered into the food and second-hand clothing trade in the streets; their informalisation situated them in competition with women. In this milieu, '[o]ne male strategy is to recreate previously female dominated areas within service provision as new "male" niches' (Overå 2007, 558). That is, informal economic activities come to be construed as ideal masculine activities. Another strategy involves migrating elsewhere to escape 'the norms of the local gender ideology' (Overå 2007, 559), where trade could be viewed as a low status activity when undertaken by men. These strategies suggest that gender discourse continually shapes the entrepreneurial landscape in Africa.

'Africans in China'

In the Trade Law Center's (2013) synopsis, total trade between China and a number of African countries increased by 26% from 1995 to 2012; export from China to Africa rose by 23%. The primary exports were manufactured products, including transport equipment, textiles and clothing, machinery, footwear and plastics; these constituted 13% of China's export to Africa. While the figures are disaggregated into countries and specific types of commodities, they miss entire arenas of activities and actors like the African traders who are in China. In the Guangzhou context, Yang (2011, 4) reports that the individual African traders, who started to have a noticeable presence there from the mid-2000s onwards, have primarily been involved in buying 'clothes and T-shirts' and shipping them

to Africa. These traders in her study are largely Nigerian men, who are based in Sanyuanli. African women also contribute to China's trade figures. My informants indicate that while East African (e.g. Kenyan, Tanzania and Ugandan) women have a larger presence in Guangzhou, those from West African countries (e.g. Nigeria, Mali and Senegal) dominate trading in women's clothes and accessories. On a larger scale, according to Desai (2009, 377), 60–70% of cross-border traders are women and their trade constitutes 25–30% of global trade. Yang and Desai's claims suggest that one needs to ask whose trade, transnational corporations or small-scale transcontinental traders, matters in global trade statistics.

Since its economic reforms in the late 1970s and entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001, China has become the world's workshop for high- and low-end (i.e. cheap and counterfeit) manufactured products (Mathews 2011). Although sourcing different kinds of products, a few African women and men report that they travel to Guangzhou to find the best price for 'first world' quality goods or that China is good for businesses at home. The number of Africans in Guangzhou that has been quoted in several places ranges from 15,000 to 20,000 (Le Bail 2009, 6; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009, 709; Bodomo 2010, 689). Until October 2014, the Vice Mayor of Guangzhou announced that there are approximately 16,000 Africans – of which 4092 are residents and 11,933 are temporarily – in the city (裘萍 and 冯宙锋 2014). While official statistics on the size of this population has been unavailable until recently, the figures cited among scholars reflect the incompleteness of the data.

Against this backdrop, Bodomo (2010, 699) provides a survey that begins to delineate the characteristics of this population, showing that most Africans regard their occupation as 'businessmen' (87%) and 'traders' (9%), while the remaining 4% are described as 'artists', 'education service officers', 'housewives' and 'lecturers'. Although Bodomo does not indicate if the categories were self-selected or how each is defined, what is relevant in this context is his inclusion of African women that is missing in the population statistics. The category of 'housewives' exposes the implicit masculine assumption of the other categories of occupation. While it seems that men are predominant in Xiaobei and Sanyuanli[2] – two places in Guangzhou where Africans are engaged in business – African women are present, weaving in and out of the high volume of people in the streets and shops. Among them are short-term traders, shopkeepers (practically non-existent now), middlepersons (agents/brokers/consultants), hairdressers, (peddling) food vendors, waitresses, sex workers, students and wives and mothers. As such, the location of African women in Bodomo's survey only in a reproductive role needs to be scrutinised.

Just as a student could also be a food peddler like Reine from Ivory Coast, who sells yoghurt, Tammy's narrative shows that 'housewives' could also be full-time shopkeepers. When her husband first travelled to China in 2007, he returned with car spare parts that were copies that could not be sold in Ghana. One month later, he asked Tammy to travel to China with him. She explains: he recognises her abilities

to learn languages quickly and to communicate with the Holy Spirit that allows her to guide him towards things that are bound to be successful (2 January 2014). Through the contacts she made after their arrival, Tammy and her husband found two provinces for sourcing parts. When her husband returned to Ghana with the goods, she remained in China to further learn what each factory specialised in. After the birth of their first child, they decided that she would stay full-time in Guangzhou. Rather than staying at home to care for her child, Tammy started to learn about the markets and opened a shop selling women's clothes. Although a self-identified housewife (and mother of two children now), she is an intermediary between her husband and the factories (and the Holy Spirit) as well as a shopkeeper. She is an exemplar of why social categories require further probing to comprehend their nuances and to discover other activities that women do. Tammy's stay in Guangzhou, rather than in Ghana, further complicates the notion of 'staying behind' as gender roles are changing at home and at work (see Hoang and Yeoh 2011).

In another example, Atoofah, the mother of five children, views herself as a trader among other Somali traders. She has been trading for over 15 years, beginning in Karachi and Dubai while in Somalia. Her trading activities halted in Uganda and resumed after resettlement in Kenya with her husband, a Somali with Kenyan citizenship. Turkey, Indonesia, India, Hong Kong and Bangkok are places where she has sourced women's clothes to wholesale at home or found new designs to manufacture in Guangzhou. She explains that with one business card for a hotel and another for a supplier, she headed to Guangzhou in 2007. Unlike Tammy, Atoofah's husband manages the shop in Kenya while she makes the 30-hour back-and-forth flight at least five times a year to source goods because she is the one with the eye for identifying good 'clothes for ladies, big ladies, small ladies' (30 May 2013). Her stays in Guangzhou vary from 15 to 20 days to 1 month. Others similar to her include Mama G, a 50-plus-year-old trader from Nigeria, who started travelling to China in 2005. She brings samples to Guangzhou and has them made under her brand name that she sells at a market in Abuja. She considered sourcing from elsewhere in China when her son started studying in the country, but Guangzhou remains the cheaper place for her business. She explains that frequent travelling enables her to change fashion quickly and stay ahead of customers' rapidly changing demands, especially because her brand is expensive by local standards (6 January 2014). Among the 'traders', there are also women who trade part-time like Aaida, a Nigerian with an Irish passport. She accumulates vacation time from a salary job to travel three times a year (11 January 2014). She works part-time as an assisted-living nurse in order to support two school-aged children. Aaida began travelling to Guangzhou in 2011 to buy products for children that she sells to parents at her children's school. Similar to Atoofah, who relies on her sister, Aaida turns to friends to care for her children when she travels.

Not all Africans refer to themselves as 'traders'. As a Sierra Leonean man explains: a 'trader' sells in an open market and a 'businessman' is involved in

other things (17 March 2014). Ms C, from Zambia, makes the distinction along the line of scale (23 March 2014). From her view, Ms M's and her businesses are high medium scale, so they are 'businesswomen'. They each have several businesses in Lusaka: Ms M has one shop selling tiles, another sporting goods and a third toys and a restaurant; Ms C has one shop selling building materials, another clothes and a third security cameras. Ms M had left a career in journalism in 1992 and started in regional cross-border trade because she 'wanted the luxuries in life' and had just become a mother (1 December 2014). She describes the early days of travelling and carrying goods back to Zambia on long-distance buses and sharing accommodations with other women. When she started going to Johannesburg in 1995, three-quarters of the passengers on the bus were women who were also trading. Her account of cross-border trade is, as Desai (2009, 380) observes, 'regional, hard, arduous, and open to many risks and harassments', requiring these women to create networks to help facilitate their border crossings. Building on her experiences and network, Ms M has become an elite businesswoman who sources globally, travelling to places like Japan, America, Hong Kong, Dubai and China (23 March 2014). The self-identified businesswomen also have part-timers like Mariam, a 50-year-old Comorian woman. She uses her two annual vacations to travel to China. Mariam has a shop selling building materials and furniture and works full-time load-shedding aircrafts at the airport in Comoros (27 November 2013). She started working at the airport in 1990 and sourcing in Dubai in 1993 before turning to Guangzhou in 2010, when she left her husband with three daughters. She obtained a bank loan of €20,000 to restart her business after stopping for a year due to illness. The types of goods that these women source puts them in competition with African men, who dominate in selling these higher-profit goods. As another Kikuyu businesswoman from Kenya conveys, even when they are business partners, the men would try to undermine them (5 May 2014). This was her experience in the electrical business, when her company supplied street light fixtures for the city.

The above categories of 'occupation' include those who stay in China for longer periods of time. 'Shopkeeper' is one identity that long-term traders assume. This group sometimes relies on local partners to lease shops to save cost and time dealing with China's regulations. Tammy, the Ghanaian 'housewife' is one example. Another is Viv, who had a shop in Uganda and traded in Dubai, Ethiopia and Thailand. The importance of the shop is reflected in the efforts she made to secure it. On the day I met her at an African church service, she talked about having to leave one shop after the property-owner raised the rent, and she had no business partner to share the cost (5 May 2013). Although a sister in Uganda provided the money for another shop, Viv still needed someone with an identification document to sign the lease. Someone eventually offered up the necessary document for her to rent the new shop. However, most of Viv's business actually entails taking orders over mobile phones and going to markets to buy and ship goods to family in Uganda and African customers elsewhere.

Indeed, she also occupies the position of intermediary. While her shop has been closed due to stricter enforcement of the requirements to stay and work in China and frequent police raids in late 2013, she continues in the latter role that is dominated by men, as Yang's (2012) study indicates.

However, there are other women who are full-time intermediaries like Faiza and Yafiah, who assist clients with 'completing supply chains'. They do market research prior to the clients' arrival, accompany them to meet Chinese suppliers and manufacturers and inspect the products before they are loaded into containers. Yafiah left Sierra Leone to learn Mandarin in Nanjing in 1996 before she enrolled at a university in Shanghai (26 April 2014). Having studied and worked as an English teacher in Shanghai for 14 years, she moved to Guangzhou in 2013 to change career. With insufficient capital to start up her own shipping business, her fluency in Mandarin enables her to partner with a local Chinese to enter that sector. But, following the dwindling number of Sierra Leoneans and business declining since the Ebola pandemic, Yafiah now describes herself as 'just a shopping agent for African countries' (19 May 2015). Faiza, on the other hand, has been in Guangzhou for nearly 7 years only because it is her 'office' (23 November 2013). She tolerates it because the opportunities in Guangzhou offer more money and stability than in Kenya (20 April 2014). Having finished high school, Faiza moved to Nairobi in 1997 from a 'slum' in Kenya for work. She explains that she started buying handbags from downtown to sell at work. With some savings, she began crossing the border to Uganda to buy women's undergarments to sell. A friend's invitation to replace her as an English teacher brought Faiza to Guangzhou in 2006. Upon arrival, the position was filled. Rather than returning home, a Kenyan man offered to teach her about trade in China. She says that at that time African women without teaching credentials, but were looking for opportunities overseas, preferred the teaching jobs. That stopped after 2008 when more Americans and Europeans came to dominate it. This change, combined with the increasing number of Africans trading in Guangzhou, influenced women's shift towards trade in larger numbers. It has augmented competition for intermediaries like Faiza, as more freight-forwarding companies, dominated by men with more resources, have moved from Dubai to Guangzhou and started offering sourcing services.

The breadth of these women's experiences suggests a need to take a historical and global view of African women traders if they are to be treated as economic subjects in the development of Sub-Saharan Africa. They are parts of a well-informed and -connected global circuit of entrepreneurs that include intermediaries and freight-forwarders. While some women might be new traders in globalisation from below, others have over a decade of experience and have precedents to draw upon. As Sylvanus (2013, 68) notes in her study, while a new group of self-made women traders have grown from Chinese manufacturing, the ones who have dominated trade longest 'come from families of traders and had mothers who had worked in the market as retailers or wholesalers of cloth or other commodities'. Among my informants, Aaida's mother was a trader in Nigeria,

Faiza's had done the Kenya Uganda trade route before her and Atoofah's traded in Somalia before settling in America. Others like Ms M had aunts who traded regionally and offered guidance. Furthermore, many of these women have local, regional and international trading experiences prior to Guangzhou. Their narratives reveal that their trade circuits extended with the accumulation of capital or opening of new markets. These women, along with a growing group of women entrepreneurs in Africa, have been trading, deal with different amounts of capital, travel near and far and stay away from home for different lengths of time (Spring 2009). While the number of African women traders have seemingly increased in Guangzhou, a freight-logistics provider remarks that he has not observed the number of women traders changing much among Somalis – they have always been predominant – but among young men, who are inheriting their mothers' trades (9 January and 6 April 2014). Coinciding with economic liberalisation, the prolonged civil war in Somalia diminished employment opportunities for men and led many to immigrate. Some men have entered into the traditionally feminine role of traders between Africa and China. As such, the increased number of African men trading in the same goods as women in globalisation from below is a phenomenon that needs problematising.

Freeman's (2001) urge to rethink the gender of globalisation extends to globalisation from below. This entails focusing on the relations between women and men who are marginalised under global capitalism. In the instance of Guangzhou, one informant remarks that '[women and men] are in competition, big one, not small one' (30 May 2013); and another 'we are all trading' and 'same same' (20 May 2013). Both women's statements do not contradict, but reveal that ascribed gender boundaries are contestable and blurry. They further suggest that not only men are transgressing gender divisions by entering into trade that is typically linked with women's reproductive activities but also women by equating themselves with men. They are doing so not just by directly competing with men, but some are also trading in higher-value commodities like building materials and car spare parts that men dominate because these require more resources. So, in the context of globalisation from below in Guangzhou, how is gender being reconstructed to valorise women's predominance in the informal economy (i.e. local) and yet obscure their rising numbers in globalisation from below (i.e. global)? Moreover, how does it normalise 'entrepreneurship as a masculine activity, most appropriate for fashioning self-made men' (Nagar et al. 2002, 268)? While the phenomenon of Africans in China is important to understanding the development of globalisation from below, gender provides deeper insight to the spaces, scales and subjects of this phenomenon.

Masculinising trade

Although a physical fight initiated by a Cameroonian woman with a Nigerian man at his shop when he refused to pay her for the goods that she had helped him buy could be viewed as a conflict between nationalities, it was her refusal of

being disrespected by the man (17 May 2013). Another Cameroonian woman supported her action to stand up to the man while Viv, whose shop where this was debated, disagreed. In Viv's view, the women should not act like a man. She insists that the woman could have spoken nicely to the man to work out something, so that he would bring her the money. This is how women should conduct business, Viv maintains. Here, one woman challenges the disrespect shown to her by an African man who is a shopkeeper in Guangzhou, while another proposes that women could achieve more by maintaining a semblance of patriarchy. In another conversation, Atoofah remarks that generally the relationship with men is a symbiotic one, but only if they do not also trade in women's clothes. She describes how men who are also selling women's clothes in Kenya have been to her shop, copied her designs and travelled to Guangzhou to have them made to sell in Kenya. To be ahead of the competition, she travels frequently like Mama G to Guangzhou and also Bangkok to search for new designs. Furthermore, Atoofah always changes her 'shipping name/mark' (used to indicate the owner of the goods when they arrived at the shipping warehouse). In a situation of overcrowding in a traditionally recognised women's economic activity, strategies to keep prices low and offer quality goods to customers are crucial. The strategies and debate about how women should conduct business suggest that African women are engaged in the process of (re)defining gender in their entrepreneurial landscape and claiming their space in it.

While women find ways to cope with the presence of men in bottom-up globalisation, moral discourses that circulate among African men shape the impression of the presence of African women in Guangzhou. A Somali man's conversation with a woman trader provides one example: from his view, the bad behaviour of boys in a community that is characterised as 'ghetto-like' in Kenya is the result of mothers travelling for trade (7 April 2014). That is, women traders are irresponsible mothers. Defending herself, she insisted that the environment influences the behaviour of children, which justifies her stay in a suburb where there are better schools; this choice makes her a good mother. The fact is women who are full-time traders spend half of their time away from home. Both married women and single mothers rely on family and friends or hired nannies for childcare. However, men who are full-time traders spend just as much time away from home and rely on stay-at-home wives to care for the family. The same responsibility of child-rearing is not placed on them.

Another discourse that circulates in Guangzhou is that majority of the African women are prostitutes – figures given range from 20–40% to 80% (21 April 2014). Although there are African women who are prostitutes, the numbers are unverifiable (18 April 2014). Discourse associating African women traders with prostitution is not uncommon in Africa, where it gained prominence when men's economic subjectivity came into crisis. Perry (2005, 216) observes this in rural Senegal: 'Men link economic liberalization and market activity to sexual liberty and immorality'. In Southern Africa, Desai (2009, 383) notes, 'Traders are accused of being prostitutes, servicing the truckers they encounter in their border

crossing; they are stigmatized as victims of rape …'. These ideas, including that they are 'witches', diminish women's entrepreneurial skills and ability to comprehend economy. The reiteration among Africans that the women who stay in Guangzhou are housewives contributes to the disparagement of the 'immoral' African women and upliftment of the good wife-cum-mother image of African women.

Even in explanations that aim to reveal them as economic subjects, women are implicitly construed as inexperienced. As a self-identified Ghanaian procurement manager tells me, his women customers have a lot of money and usually do not know what they want, but they mostly buy clothes or washing powder, tissue paper and other household goods; an exception is one South African who sources car parts (26 April 2013; 6 January 2014). African men, he says, know what they want and mostly focus on machinery. A Kenyan, whose business is to help African customers source goods in Guangzhou, derides the idea that women would source such high-value goods, saying that the only spare parts that they could source would be wheels for bicycles (14 April 2014). He is clearly being facetious, but it reflects a disdain for women traders.

Gender is constructed through differentiation. Understanding this helps us to begin to consider the ways in which femininity and masculinity are construed in a specific place of globalisation from below. A music album, *Ife Neme Na China* (*Things that Happen in China*), highlighted in Haugen's (2012) study of Nigerian men's experience with 'a second state of immobility' captures the elements that inform a hyper-masculine or macho construction of place and identity. This album forms part of a general trend of Africans' self-publishing music in the hopes of breaking into the industry in China. Composed in Guangzhou, descriptions of 'police harassment, imprisonment, forced repatriation, casual sexual relations with Chinese girls [*sic*], economic difficulties and betrayal by family in Nigeria' permeate through the album (Haugen 2012, 8). These threats are not just experienced, but are utilised to mobilise a new masculinity in a 'China [that] is very difficult/China [that] is very hard'.[3] The song unequivocally addresses Nigerian men: calling them 'brother', it warns them to 'have to be alert' and 'know how to retreat from fuck-up (trouble)' as well as expresses camaraderie by noting that 'what we are doing in this China is not easy'. Its conclusion celebrates a muscular masculinity among them because '[o]nly hard people will stay here'. The subsequent lines declare: 'And if it is too hard for you/zou ba [Chinese: "go!"] to the country you came from'! There is a sense of triumph, not just victimisation in the emergent discourse of hardship. Stories of Chinese people who are unscrupulous cheats contribute to the unique responsibility for African men to persevere. Other risks involving the fickle nature of market trends, currency exchanges and customs officials, identified by Mathews and Yang (2012), seemingly exacerbate the already-hard condition favourable for imagining masculinity.

All these risks, to draw from Mathews and Yang, constitute the challenges with 'doing the business of low-end globalization in China, the "wild west" of

contemporary capitalism' (Mathews and Yang 2012, 110). They are not alone in their description: the South African founder of an international advisory and procurement firm in Beijing also refers to China being 'the wild west' (11 December 2013). It draws on ideas of conquest, expansion, persistence and survival by 'real men' in the process of settling the American frontier. The 'many things happening in China', as the song illuminates, enable African men to rework their masculinity in a post-structural adjustment period of diminished economic opportunities. Mosher and Tomkins's (1988, 64) explanation of the ideology of 'hyper-masculinity' best reflects this: it is 'a system of ideas forming a world view that chauvinistically exalts male dominance by assuming masculinity, virility, and physicality to be the ideal essence of real men who are adversarial warriors competing for scarce resources … in a dangerous world' – for example, a 'wild west' in China. Such imaginary of China merges effortlessly with extant masculinities in Africa to form a new sense of self (Epprecht 2005). The real and constructed world of hardship, risks and sex excludes 'not-real-men' and women, but also defines how putative 'real men' should behave and share. That the emergence of a hyper-masculine discourse in Guangzhou owes much to the male displacement of a traditionally female role becomes obfuscated. 'I am a man' is what a Sierra Leonean man repeats during our conversation. For him, it means being able to survive on taking orders and shipping them to African customers elsewhere and occasional basketball contracts, to budget money and to withstand challenges that are numerous (17 March 2014).

As Morrel (1998, 609) indicates, there are multiple masculinities alongside a hegemonic one; they must all be 'understood within a social context and as something that is constantly produced and contested'. For the African men in Guangzhou, their activities and short- or long-term stay take on a particular meaning that they alone could take up and triumph. The group of men I have encountered self-identify as 'agent', 'businessman', 'CEO', 'designer' or 'procurement manager'. These categories are distinctions that reflect their roles as professionals, who have expertise and are embedded in global economic circuits. They view themselves as men providing specialised services that require knowledge of specific markets and skills to broker deals. These distinctions further suggest that certain African men do not view their role in globalisation from below in the same manner as women. The moral discourses on African women and identity claims in China, as Perry (2005) argues in her study, contribute towards restoring power and privilege to men, whose governments could no longer provide full employment for all citizens since the 1980s. A focus on African women alone would not necessarily show how gender discourses and claims have normalised the increased presence of African men in globalisation from below in China.

Conclusion

That December day ended with Atoofah feeling satisfied after having the face-to-face conversation with her long-time supplier, who assured Atoofah that she had refused to share any information with the inquiring trader. This supplier reveals that Atoofah is not only one of her longest customers but has also purchased large quantities of goods from her. It is in her interest to protect her customer's profit-making advantages. As Atoofah indicates, in her line of trade, having a 'good eye' to identify new fashion gives her one competitive advantage. Other advantages include having business strategies that are intimately linked with her experiences and being able to travel to different markets across the globe. While she socialises with other Somalis at the freight-forwarding office in Xiaobei at the end of the day, Atoofah often sources goods alone and stays in accommodations where there are few Somalis from Kenya. These, she tells me, allow her to stay out of gossip and focus on her business in Guangzhou.

Women like Atoofah, who have been actively participating in globalisation from below in China for over 5 years and have a history of trade, have been obscured in the growing literature on Africans in China. They may be latecomers to China compared with men, but they have a global presence. Indeed, my informants who arrived in Guangzhou between 2005 and 2007 recall the number of Africans being small and women few. Most agree that the numbers mushroomed after 2008. Along with that, the presence of Africans and their interrelations with Chinese people gained research interests. My focus on the different categories of African women and the reconstruction of gender in Guangzhou, a pivotal site of globalisation from below, contributes to the growing literature. In the article, I emphasise the changing social relations among Africans that had started in Africa, where neoliberal economic changes have forced women into the global labour market or to seek alternative types of work. During this process more women have entered the informal economy that is no longer restricted to local and regional cross-border markets. The itinerary of the African women traders and businesswomen discussed in this article shows that African women are intimately linked to the world economy. At the same time, men have also been forced into the traditionally feminine role of small-scale traders in an informal economy. This phenomenon has not yet been problematised; and, it is important to do so, as it allows for a deeper understanding of how gender ideology continues to influence spaces, scales and subjects in a specific context. That is, we could observe the possibilities for being women and men that constantly changing politico-economic currents produce.

My article not only highlights the presence of African women in a discourse dominated by African men largely because it was previously men who stay in Guangzhou long-term and were, thus, easier to access for research purpose. But, it also begins to problematise the prominence of these men in globalisation from below in China, rather than accepting it as a typical phenomenon. Studies on globalisation from below elsewhere suggest

that women maintain a crucial role in informal economies that are expanding in number and scope. In the China context, I give examples of struggles between women and men to define a global entrepreneurial landscape in Guangzhou. China's globalisation has made available a large market for cheap and counterfeit products that has attracted entrepreneurs, women and men, from diverse backgrounds. Struggles for economic power and the representations of gender in the struggles discussed in this article are indications of how women and men are engaged in the process of 'making gender make sense' when the boundaries of gender norms are seemingly being blurred. And, as it further points out, the emergence of a hyper-masculine discourse in Guangzhou owes much to the male displacement of a traditionally female role. An analytical focus that remains on Africans who stay in Guangzhou – and less on the dynamics of women whose frequent back-and-forth travel is oftentimes linked to gender roles at home – reinforces the construction of entrepreneurship in globalisation from below in China as a masculine activity for 'hard' men.

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Notes

1. People's names are pseudonyms.
2. Located in two different districts, Xiaobei is predominantly Muslims from Africa, China and the Middle East, who speak a variety of African and Arabic languages, French and little English. Although it has undergone dramatic change since 2011, Sanyuanli has Africans who are mostly Christian from West Africa and speak (pidgin) English.
3. Haugen had shared the rest of the lyrics that are not in the article (26 January 2015).

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