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# An African Enclave in China: The Making of a New Transnational Urban Space

Zhigang Li, Laurence J. C. Ma, and Desheng Xue<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The paper, by three geographers, including a noted U.S.-based senior specialist on China's urban and human realm, presents the first known academic study of the country's African migrants. The authors examine the emergence of a new African community (primarily traders from West Africa) in the Xiaobei urban district of Guangzhou City, arguing that Xiaobei is not only a space for transacting transnational business but also a place of sojourn where African migrants struggle to make a living without local integration or assimilation. As a "non-state" gateway for burgeoning economic linkages between China and Africa, Xiaobei's spontaneous place-making is strengthened by the aspiring efforts of local entrepreneurs, at the same time that this new transnational space is challenged by an invisible wall between Africans and local residents due to cultural and social differences. The paper notes the impacts of globalization, which appears to be adding a new dimension (ethnicity) to the pattern of residential segregation of Chinese cities. Empirical evidence is provided by a series of surveys conducted by the authors since 2006 and particularly three in 2008. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: F220, F230, J150, J610, O180. 5 figures, 2 tables, 81 references. Key words: transnational urban space, residential segregation, African traders, ethnicity, Guangzhou, Xiaobei.

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## INTRODUCTION

China, once an isolated socialist country, is today the "world's factory," selling products labeled "Made in China" across the entire planet. After three decades of market reform and an open-door economic policy, the country has successfully embraced the global economy, especially following its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. China's globalization has been manifest in unprecedented growth of imports and exports (e.g., see Chou et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2009) and—less prominently to those outside the country—an influx of foreign visitors and migrants into its cities. Between 2000 and 2007, for instance, visitors to China numbered 131.7 million, with the majority coming from Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the United States (China Statistical Bureau, 2008). Some traders and businessmen, initially arriving for short-term visits, have become long-term residents. In

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2008, for instance, Shanghai registered 152,104 long-term resident foreigners and issued 604 permanent residence cards (*Shanghai Statistical Yearbook*, 2009).

For the first time since 1949, the rise of international migrant communities—or the so-called *guoji shequ* (international community) and *waiguoren shequ* (foreigner community)—has become a significant visual, spatial, and social phenomenon in Chinese cities, particularly those located in the prosperous eastern coastal regions. For example, Wangjing, a large-scale commodity housing estate in Beijing, has become a South Korean enclave with more than 60,000 South Koreans, making it the largest South Korean community in China. Similarly, in Shanghai the areas of Gubei (Puxi District) and Huamu (Pudong New District) have become well-known enclaves of international migrants.<sup>2</sup>

Foreign communities were nonexistent in Chinese cities during the first three decades after the 1949 revolution, but since the 1978 economic reforms have reappeared not only in such large cities as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenyang, but also in smaller cities such as Suzhou, Yiwu, and Dongguan. They demonstrate that China has become a major new destination for international immigration. However, little is known about the sociospatial implications of this new phenomenon, the socioeconomic profile of the migrants, and whether the enclaves ultimately will integrate into the local society. Particularly, within the context of the lingering legacy of China's state authoritarianism embedded in a burgeoning market society, what will be the response of the Chinese state at the national and local levels? All these questions remain to be probed.

Three major forces underlie the transformation of Chinese cities, namely market reform, globalization, and migration (Logan, 2001; Ma and Wu, 2005). Although the former two dimensions have been extensively studied (e.g., Wu et al., 2006; Wu 2007), investigation of the latter, and particularly international migration, is by no means complete (see, however, Wu and Webber, 2004; Lin and Tse, 2005); for example, very little is known about African migrants in China. To help fill this gap in the literature, this paper will explore the emergence of an African community in Guangzhou as an example of the making of a new transnational urban space. This study will offer an empirical context for illuminating how this new global logic is grafted onto the constellations of authoritarian politics and cultural ethics in China. Together with international migrants from North America, Europe, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, Africans in China have helped diversify China's homogeneous pre-reform urban population, which consisted almost exclusively of a single ethnicity and skin color. The presence of foreign groups in Chinese cities has led to a significant heterogenization of urban space, changing the earlier well-organized but uniform and drab socialist space (with a relatively low level of social and economic inequality) into a more diversified and colorful (albeit more unequal and segmented) urban space.

The paper is organized as follows. First, the literature on sociospatial restructuring will be explored to provide a research context. Interactions between global and local areas will be examined to theorize the transformation of social spaces under globalization. After that, we focus on post-reform China to understand the transition of social spaces/communities under the impacts of marketization and globalization. As a major trading center of China for at least two millennia and the city with the largest concentration of African migrants, Guangzhou (formerly Canton) will be taken as a representative case. In particular, the focus is on the urban district of Xiaobei, a busy commercial area in Guangzhou where African migrants are

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<sup>2</sup>Huamu, for instance, houses about 5,800 individuals comprising the entrepreneurial elite from a variety of foreign countries (Dai, 2007).

heavily concentrated. Using data obtained through field surveys, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews from 2006 to 2008, we present a profile of this transnational space that has become part of the global African diaspora, examine the relationship between African migrants and local residents, and elucidate the intricate interactions between global and local factors. Lastly, discussions and conclusions will be advanced, the implication of this specific transnational space addressed, and the future of the African enclave in Guangzhou discussed.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In the last two decades of the 20th century, revolutionary improvement in communication and transportation technologies, along with the globalization of production, led to a new "borderless" world. This new era of globalization has witnessed the collapse of space and time, with increasing global flows of ideas, technology, capital, and people, as cities everywhere have become more diversified and complex than at any time in the past. There are rising concerns among urban scholars about the fragmentation of urban space, as evidenced in the extensive literature on the "dual city" (Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991) and "divided cities" (Fainstein et al., 1992). In particular, the impacts of globalization on the sociospatial restructuring of cities have been hotly debated (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000; Walks, 2001). For instance, Sassen, Hamnett, and many others have disputed whether a polarized sociospatial structure has appeared in global cities (Hamnett and Cross, 1998; Hill and Kim, 2000; Hamnett, 2001; Sassen, 2001). Through case studies, Marcuse and van Kempen (2000) question whether there is "A New Space?" for globalizing cities. Although the answer is no, the extent of urban transformation is unprecedented and fortified spatial units such as "gated communities," "ghettos," "enclaves," and "citadels" are identified (Marcuse, 1997).

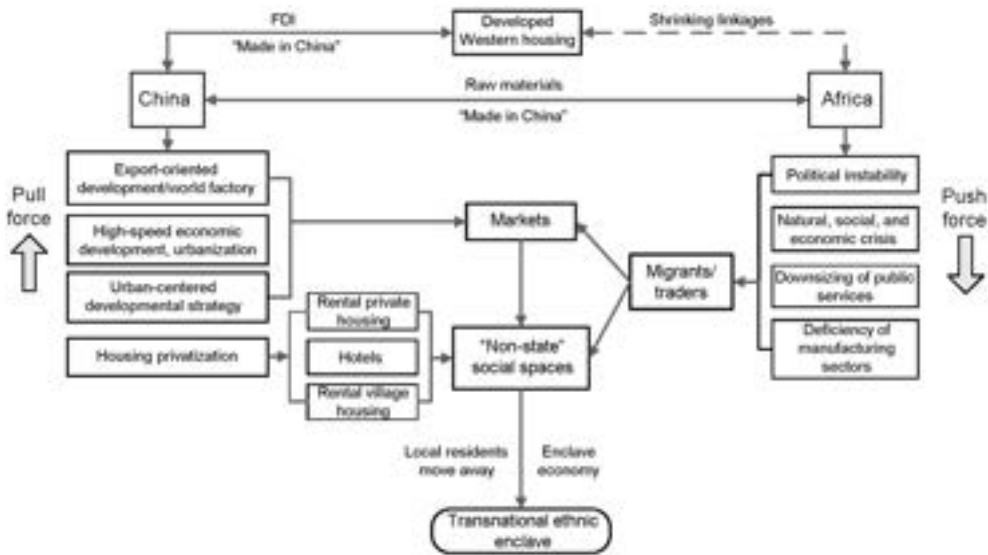
In the same vein, whereas the socialist city presents a unique pattern of sociospatial differentiation (French and Hamilton, 1979; Dangschat and Blasius, 1987), the post-socialist cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the former Soviet Union, and China have also experienced a "great transformation" (Wu, 2008). The dimension of socio-economic status is replacing institutional factors such as party membership as the major determinant of residential status (Daniell and Struyk, 1994; Pickvance, 1994; Zhou and Logan, 1996; Logan et al., 1999). Soaring individualism, the rebirth of property rights, and the revitalization of a housing market have jointly produced a (re)stratified residential landscape on the monotonous socialist relics (Feng et al., 2007, 2008; Fleischer 2007). The result, however, is enlarged social disparities exacerbated by spatial segregation and a convergence in spatial form toward their counterparts in the West (e.g., see Hu and Kaplan, 2001).

A key force shaping the patterns of globalization and urban restructuring is the rising number of transnational migrants. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that there are about 96 million transnational migrant workers, immigrants, and members of their families worldwide, and the growth of the world's immigrant population has more than doubled between 1960 and 1990 (Hewison and Young, 2006). Grassroots cross-border activities and their transnational space represent a new outcome of such "globalization from below" that is manifest widely in the cities of many developed countries (Portes, 1996; Guarnizo and Smith, 1998; Schiller and Fouron, 1998). However, the emergence of such ethnic enclaves in the developing world is a very recent phenomenon that has not attracted much scholarly attention. By crossing national borders, international migrants everywhere seek to realize entrepreneurial opportunities afforded by geographically variable comparative economic advantages and commercial policies, their adjustment often facilitated by culturally linked support networks existing within ethnic enclaves.

Although the disadvantages of ethnic segregation and concentration have been noted (Shevky and Bell, 1955; Wilson, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1988, 1989), transnational migrant enclaves demonstrate the benefits to be derived from ethnic concentration. In contrast to traditional studies that focus on the marginalization of unskilled or semiskilled immigrant labor in ethnically segregated areas, recent works shed light upon the growing number of skilled managerial personnel, professionals, and entrepreneurs to be found in immigrant enclaves (Lin and Tse, 2005; Miera, 2008). These business-oriented global migrants have created different kinds of urban space in different parts of the world. Li (2006), for instance, highlighted a shift of Chinese immigrant communities “from urban enclave to ethnic suburb” in Pacific Rim cities. In the suburbs of North American cities such as Richmond in Vancouver, new “ethnoburbs” have been formed by migrants of the “over-class” rather than the “under-class,” producing a new type of ethnic settlement (*ibid.*). Studies like these show the need to recognize and analyze diverse flows of transnational migrants, who may produce different types of transnational spaces.

Transnational migration began in response to capitalist flexible accumulation and its need for transnational functionaries (Nonini and Ong, 1997; Ong, 1999). The notion of transnational space extends our understanding of sociospatial restructuring from the prevailing paradigm of macroscopic discourses such as the “capitalist city,” “socialist city,” “global city,” “world city,” “dual city,” and “divide city” to the microscopic level to examine the complicated (re)constitution of places under globalization. Its literature, however, is preoccupied with migration to the global north (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004; Li, 2006). Few empirical studies have been conducted in the globalizing cities of the transitional economies. As one of the fastest-growing and most powerful economies in the world, China is undergoing remarkable economic, social, and spatial transformation affected significantly by both internal and external migration flows (Song and Timberlake, 1996; Solinger, 1999; Shen et al., 2002; Zhou and Ma, 2003; Wu, 2005; Fan, 2008). After 1978, China shifted its development strategy from a domestic-oriented socialist economy to an export-oriented economy. An assemblage of new neoliberal approaches (e.g., privatization, welfare retrenchment, and entrepreneurialism) has pushed the old socialist ideology aside in favor of marketization, and a relatively stable political and social setting has been sustained, enabling China’s transformation into a world factory. In due course, housing privatization in tandem with newly emerging housing markets have provided migrants opportunities to access various “non-state spaces” in cities (e.g., Ma and Xiang, 1998; Wu, 2001a, 2001b; Wu et al., 2006; Wu, 2007). Not only have commodity housing communities appeared, but also internal migrant enclaves (Wang et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2003; Zheng et al., 2009) and international neighborhoods (Dai, 2007). Thus the rise of transnational space has been driven both by China’s political-economic transition as well as the accumulation of global capital in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (as conceptualized in Fig. 1).

Since the 1970s, a large number of Africans have migrated to foreign countries as a result of political instability, military coup d’états, ethnic conflicts, and tribal wars on the African continent. Natural disasters and serious social and economic crises in various African countries have further prompted outmigration. The forces that have pushed many Africans abroad include large-scale famines, increasing balance of payment deficits, dwindling foreign exchange revenues, sluggish or negative growth of national income, high rates of inflation, degeneration of the physical environment, and rising unemployment. Since the 1980s, structural adjustment programs undertaken as a condition for receiving loans from major world financial institutions such as the IMF or World Bank have brought on additional difficulties for the economies of various African countries, especially Ghana, Zambia,



**Fig. 1.** Formation of a transnational African enclave in post-reform China.

Tanzania, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, resulting in currency devaluations and downsizing of the public service sector especially education, health care, and welfare. Pushed by these factors, African migrants and traders have been actively seeking a better life around the world, first in developed regions such as the United States, Canada, and Western Europe in the 1960s, then in Southeast and East Asia, and after 2000 in China.

It is by no means unusual for international migrants to transform spaces within globalizing cities into enclaves when seeking markets and products (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2002). The emergence of minority communities in China, which is ethnically dominated by the Han Chinese who account for about 94 percent of the country's total population, has tended to arouse the curiosity of local residents; the arrival of thousands of African migrants represents a new urban phenomenon. Whereas China has always had a limited number of African students and diplomatic personnel who come to study and work for a limited period of time, never before in Chinese history has any Chinese city seen African migrants in any significant number. The rise of African enclaves in China is just one small part of China's "great transformation" (Wu, 2007), but has nonetheless rendered urban China socially and spatially more heterogeneous and multicultural. Whereas most foreign enclaves in Chinese cities have co-existed with local communities without any serious problems, conflicts involving African and local residents have arisen, which raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the African communities in urban China. What are the relationships between Africans and local communities? Will these migrants experience the same marginalization or segregation as their counterparts in the U.S., or, can they integrate successfully into the local society?

The fact that transnational social space is a quite new phenomenon only recently attracting the attention of researchers (e.g., Kim, 2003; Wu and Webber, 2004; Ma and Wu, 2005; Wu et al., 2006; Wu, 2007; Zhang, 2008) will require adjustments on the part of those

wishing to study it in Chinese cities. Most sociospatial studies of urban China have utilized census data covering the entire city, and therefore tend to overlook the rich sociospatial diversity apparent at finer scales of analysis (Li and Wu, 2006). In order to reveal the profiles, dynamics, interactive patterns, and the resultant responses of this new transnational space in urban China, Xiaobei, an African enclave in the city of Guangzhou, is empirically examined below.

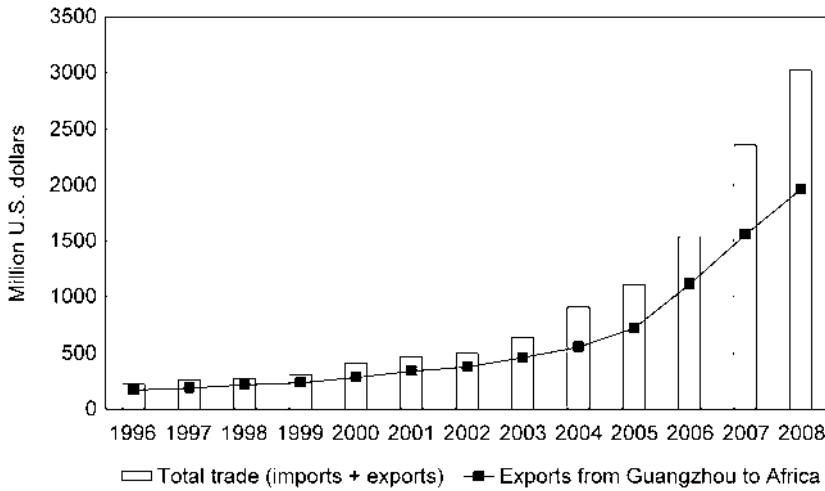
### TRANSNATIONAL ETHNIC ENCLAVES IN GUANGZHOU

Over the past two millennia, Guangzhou has been one of China's most important foreign trade cities, and dominated its foreign trade from the 17th to the mid-19th century. After 1949, Guangzhou regained its status as the leading city for foreign trade; in addition to the advantage it enjoys due to proximity to both Hong Kong and Macao and its central location in the Pearl River Delta (PRD), Guangzhou is home to hundreds of overseas-funded enterprises. Initiated as early as 1957, the Chinese Export Commodities Fair has been held every year in Guangzhou for over 50 years, attracting hundreds of thousands of foreign merchants and entrepreneurs each year. After China joined the WTO in 2001, the number of foreign business visitors has greatly increased.

Although all of China's major cities underwent rapid social, cultural, and physical change as the country's manufacturing and exports surged over the last three decades, Guangzhou, with a current population exceeding 10 million, is a special case. It differs from other globalizing Chinese cities such as Shanghai in that its history of foreign trade is much longer. At Xiguan, a community in Liwan District, for example, wholesale markets selling goods such as shoes, clothes, teas, and medicines have existed since the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). At the end of 2005, a total of 904 wholesale markets functioned in Guangzhou, with a yearly trade volume of 98.3 billion yuan (or renminbi) (Wang et al., 2006). Official statistics indicate that 70 percent of Guangzhou's wholesale trade volume comes from sales of consumer goods such as garments, shoes, caps, bags, and computers (*Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook*, 2008). In addition to its accessible location on the southern coast of China (and proximity to Hong Kong, a major global city of Asia), Guangzhou is one of the first cities in Chinese history through which Islam was introduced to China. As early as the Tang and Song dynasties from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries A.D., so-called *fanke* (foreign guests) from the Arab world and their *fanfang* (foreign residential quarters) already appeared in the city, making Guangzhou one of the major Muslim centres of the world at that time (Ma, 2006).

Guangzhou's trade with Africa increased from less than \$500 million in 1996 to slightly more than \$3 billion in 2008 (Fig. 2). Exports increased tenfold over this period, from about \$165 million to almost \$2 billion, and consisted primarily of four types of products: cell-phones and batteries, motorcycles, garments and clothing accessories, and steel products (Table 1, compiled by the authors from *Guangzhou*, 2003–2008). These booming economic connections created abundant opportunities for African migrant entrepreneurs. As a consequence, temporary as well as permanent African migrants active in trading small-scale manufactured goods (to and from Africa) began to form new communities in Guangzhou.

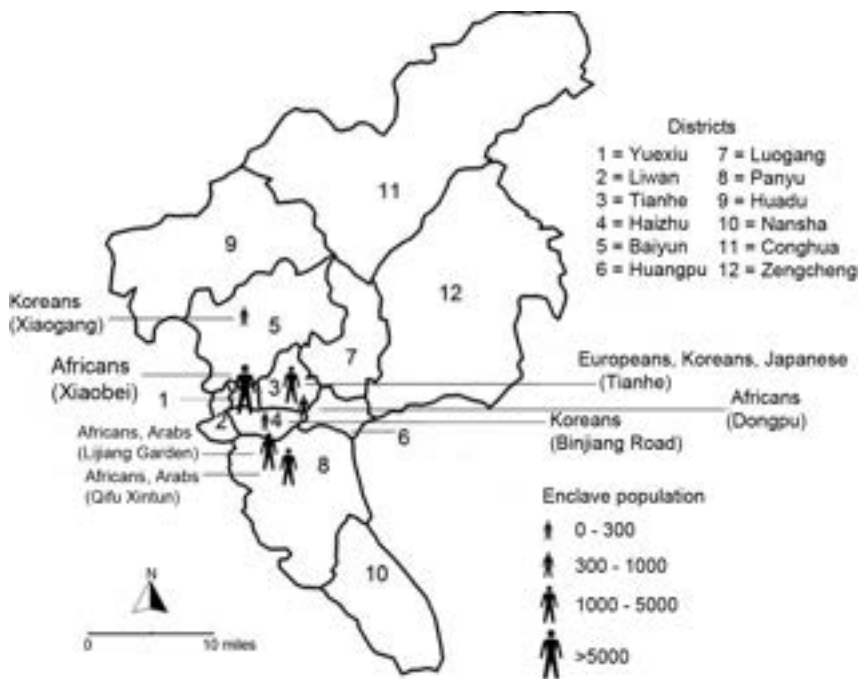
The city of Guangzhou lacks official statistics for permanent or temporary foreign residents, but data on the number of foreigners staying overnight in the city are available (Table 2). In 2007, it totaled ca. 2.23 million, and from 2000 to 2007 the number of Africans staying overnight increased from 6,300 to 60,400, an annual rate of growth of 38 percent, which exceeds that of any other world region. The foreigners in Guangzhou have been using two



**Fig. 2.** Guangzhou's foreign trade (exports to + imports from) with Africa, as well as exports to Africa, 1996–2008, in million dollars. *Source:* Data for 1996–2007 were calculated by the authors from *Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook* (1997–2008), while data for 2008 are from the website of Guangzhou Customs [<http://guangzhou.customs.gov.cn>].

**Table 1.** Major Products Exported from Guangzhou to Africa, 2002–2007 (in million dollars)

Product group	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Motorcycles	–	–	5,250	7,785	16,748	25,680
Cellphones and batteries	11,812	14,146	15,135	16,569	23,319	24,311
Garments and clothing accessories	2,311	3,005	3,639	6,038	7,743	10,481
Steel products	97	150	183	1,256	5,851	4,153
New pneumatic rubber tires	517	673	1,081	923	1,620	3,543
Textile yarn, fabrics, and related	889	1,131	1,198	1,763	2,183	3,541
Furniture and parts	301	454	1,051	1,509	2,059	2,694
Plastic articles	803	881	758	1,032	1,428	2,677
Bicycles	473	546	731	679	694	2,223
Travel items, handbags, and related containers	1,071	885	789	842	1,462	2,005
Electric fans	706	1,000	585	896	1,098	1,332
Loudspeakers	103	309	889	1,230	1,032	1,304
Footwear	1,179	955	955	955	926	1,139
Lamps and lighting fittings	880	990	985	1,176	1,143	1,138
Household cookware and tableware (stainless steel)	149	188	136	303	594	1,112
Data processing machines and parts	18	143	260	965	1,624	1,001



**Fig. 3.** Map of the 11 urban districts of Guangzhou, showing the locations of various transnational spaces, including the five major enclaves noted in the text.

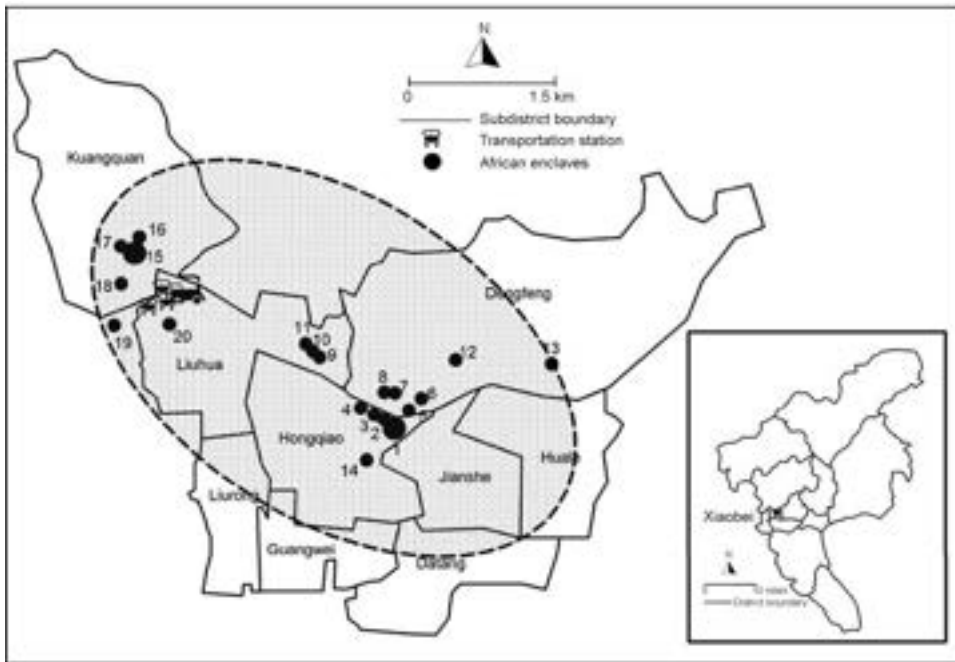
**Table 2.** Foreigners Staying Overnight in Guangzhou, 2000–2007, in thousands

Year	Africa	Asia	Europe	America	Oceania	Others	Total
2000	6.3	337.4	127.2	97.1	20.5	495.6	1084.3
2001	8.6	380.8	126.0	112.0	30.6	445.5	1103.8
2002	16.1	510.4	142.1	134.0	28.1	457.6	1288.6
2003	14.6	409.9	103.8	99.8	22.0	366.7	1016.9
2004	20.1	578.7	168.3	130.0	33.7	458.7	1389.6
2005	31.7	630.4	223.9	159.0	42.3	679.2	1766.5
2006	46.2	771.2	264.9	182.7	56.3	813.1	2075.4
2007	60.4	721.0	279.8	167.4	53.9	949.1	2231.6
Annual growth rate, pct.	38	11	12	8	15	10	11

Sources: Compiled by authors from *Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook*, 2001–2008.

types of housing, namely urban apartment complexes and high-end single-family houses situated in newly planned residential compounds.

Although foreign residents can be found almost in every district of Guangzhou, five main clusters exist, namely Sanyuanli, Huanshidong, Tianhebei, Ersha Island, and Dashi. Except for Dashi, the clusters are either adjacent to major marketplaces or located in downtown areas (Fig. 3). In addition, housing for and trading firms run by foreigners are scattered



**Fig. 4.** Xiaobei, a new transnational space in Guangzhou. Key to numbers on map: 1 = Tianxiu Mansion; 2 = Guolong Mansion; 3 = Xiushan Mansion; 4 = Taochi Mansion; 5 = Dengfeng Hotel; 6 = New Dengfen Hotel; 7 = Baohan Hotel; 8 = Dengyue Hotel; 9 = Yongyi Mansion; 10 = Hengjing Dmansion; 11 = Hengsheng Mansion; 12 = Lihu Garden; 13 = Taojing Garden; 14 = Taishan Mansion; 15 = Canaan Trading Center; 16 = Tangqi Export Clothing Center; 17 = Tianen Export Trading Center; 18 = Xiushan Center; 19 = Wantong Mansion; 20 = Guangzhou Liquan Hotel.

widely across the city. In just two decades, thousands of international migrants have moved into Guangzhou and enriched its socioeconomic and ethnic landscapes.

### THE AFRICAN TRANSNATIONAL SPACE IN XIAOBEI: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

#### Research Design

Our study area, Xiaobei, is located in Guangzhou's Yuexiu District, a busy commercial area, and serves as the focal point of trade and residence for the African community in Guangzhou. A large number of high-rise apartments can be found in Xiaobei and in the surrounding areas. One such building, the Tianxiu Mansion, was chosen as a residence by the first major African trader to move to the city from Hong Kong in the early 1990s. It is remarkable how this early pioneering migrant's choice of location for work and residence subsequently led to the formation of a significant transnational space for Africans in Guangzhou.

More specifically, many African migrants now can be found in the Tianxiu Building, as well as in the Xiushan, Taochi, and Guolong "mansions" (Fig. 4), the lower floors of

which are typically occupied by shops and the upper floors by apartments. The rise of Xiaobei as a transnational urban space for traders is attributable mainly to its location, which is only 3.5 km away from the Guangzhou Railway Station, and less than five km in linear distance to the Liuhua Fair Center, a major commercial node of the city. Also, a number of wholesale markets are concentrated in the surrounding area, such as the Zhanxi Watch Wholesale Market, as well as the Liuhua Clothing Wholesale and Baima Clothing Wholesale markets—a locational advantage that makes Xiaobei a suitable site for both trading and shipping. Together with trading centers such as the Canaan Wholesale Trading and the Tangqi Export Clothing centers along Guangyuanxi Road in the north, the entire region along the Inner Circle Subway Line where Xiaobei is located has become a major transnational space in Guangzhou.

To gain a better understanding of how African migrants have worked and lived in Xiaobei and how local Chinese residents, officials, and scholars view them, we conducted semi-structured but in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and field observations from 2006 through 2008. The questionnaire surveys were mainly conducted from January to May 2006, with a preliminary investigation involving 80 English-language questionnaires and yielding 52 returns, of which 43 were accepted as usable. Although this was not a large sample, the information gathered did provide a basic understanding of the conditions of African migrants in Guangzhou. For instance, our field work revealed that a large proportion of African traders came from Francophone countries. Thus in March 2007, a series of semi-structured interviews of African traders was carried out in a coffee shop in the Tianxiu Building by our team members, who could speak both French and English. In all, 46 Africans were interviewed, providing information about economic and housing conditions, social networks, and relevant experiences and histories of transnational behaviors.

Finally, three additional surveys were conducted in 2008. Thus, in the evening of May 30, 2008, four senior members of the African communities in Guangzhou originating from Guinea, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Ghana were interviewed (in English) at Xiaobei's Yongyi Building and questioned about the size and composition of African communities in Guangzhou, relations between Africans and locals, and the future of African communities. In June 2008, a survey was conducted "on the street" along Xiaobei Road, asking willing local residents and traders to fill out a standard questionnaire regarding their views of the Africans; 90 locals responded. Finally, an official from the Department of Public Security of Guangdong Province, a scholar from the Guangzhou Social Science Academy, and four local Chinese traders were interviewed in October 2008. In summary, our ethnographic field work yielded some very useful information that allowed us to construct a fairly comprehensive sociospatial profile of the African migrants in Guangzhou.

### **African Traders in Xiaobei**

With increasing numbers of African migrants congregating in Xiaobei, an African ethnic enclave centered on the Tianxiu Building has become increasingly conspicuous since 1998 (Fig. 5). The Tianxiu Building is within 30 minutes' walk from the Guangzhou Railway station. The first four floors of that 36-story building are used for shops and the remaining floors (with 600 units) for offices and residential apartments inhabited by African and Middle Eastern traders. On an average day, the Tianxiu Building houses about 700 residents, although during the Chinese Export Commodities Fair the number of African migrants in the building is higher.



**Fig. 5.** Typical images of the Xiaobei landscape. The two lowermost figures depict the Xiushan (lower left) and Tianxiu (lower right) mansions. Photographs by authors during the period through 2008.

The precise number of African migrants in Guangzhou is unknown, but there is general agreement among the migrants, local Chinese residents, officials, and scholars that there are between 15,000 and 20,000 Africans in the city. They come from a variety of countries in Africa, and include people speaking French, English, Arabic, and Portuguese. The largest group comes from West Africa, including the Francophone countries of Guinea (Conakry), Benin, Mali, Senegal, and Cote d'Ivoire, followed by traders from the English-speaking

countries of Nigeria and Ghana. Among the interviewees, roughly 70 percent were male and 30 percent female. It is known that African countries hold quite diverse attitudes toward the role of women in the economy (Brown, 2006). On the one hand, in countries such as Ghana women dominate market trading and thus over 90 percent of Ghanaian businesses in Guangzhou are run by females. On the other hand, for Moslems such as Tanzanians, women play a more subservient role. Because the Africans in the Tianxiu Building are mainly Muslims from Mali, Nigeria, and Kenya, few females appeared in the sample. Although African traders of Xiaobei appear to have a median age of about 30, only a few bring their spouses and children to Guangzhou.

Religion plays an important role in building close personal and business networks among the traders. During Ramadan, for example, African traders who have rented spacious offices share them with friends for worship, and as many as a hundred or more people may be found in such gatherings. But most African Muslims worship in local mosques, especially the well-known Huaisheng Mosque constructed during the Tang Dynasty (618–907A.D), which has always attracted a large number of foreign worshippers.

The majority of African traders travel frequently between Guangzhou and Africa. Interviewee No. 1, from Uganda, comes and stays for about 10 days in Guangzhou every two months. Interviewee No. 16, from Mali has visited the city every two or three months over the last decade. Most African migrants in Guangzhou are short-term sojourners, suggesting that their communities are always in a state of flux.<sup>3</sup> The majority of traders come repeatedly for short visits to restock their merchandise for export. Such visits usually last for approximately one week if the trader is only buying but can last up to a month if he/she has additional business and/or wishes to supervise shipping.<sup>4</sup> A small number of Africans have established shipping agencies or other services and thus tend to stay for longer periods.

I have a factory that manufactures sportswear in my country [Nigeria] and started coming here to buy about 10 years ago. I come frequently and stay for about 30 days each time so that I can order goods from the factories here. We cannot compete on quality with the Chinese because we do not have industrial sewing machines. So I sell the imports—they are my “A” grade stock—and manufacture imitations in my workshop. The quality is not as good, so they are my “B” grade stock and poorer people buy them. (Interviewee No. 40, a Nigerian trader)

Textiles, shoes, cosmetics, and electronic products constitute the bulk of African migrants' exports to Africa.<sup>5</sup> Interviewees indicated that they buy and ship the goods to their own countries or to neighboring areas, and then sell them through their networks of local traders. Quite a few claim that their goods are sold in almost all West African countries. Interviewee No. 3, for example, sells goods to the entire sub-Saharan region of Africa, and Interviewee No. 10 sells products not only to Senegal, but also to Spain and Italy. Such

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<sup>3</sup>Thirty-four percent of the sampled respondents lived in Guangzhou for one to three years, 5 percent for three to five years, and only 2 percent for more than five years.

<sup>4</sup>Most African traders come to China on an “L” (tourist) visa 4 to 12 times a year and stay for one to four weeks each time to select and ship goods.

<sup>5</sup>Readers should note that the commodity structure of these exports organized by migrants will not necessarily coincide with the broader pattern of exports from Guangzhou to Africa based on official trade statistics and depicted in Table 1.

positive views of the African migrants' transnational experience are typically expressed by those who have done relatively well in Guangzhou.

. . . I like Guangzhou. It is very free here. In Europe, people always consider Africans to be poor and always asking for help, while people here do not. We get respect here and people treat us just as businessmen, without prejudice. (Interviewee No. 27)

Most of the migrants have African friends or relatives in Guangzhou, and often hire Chinese agents and translators. Few, however, have close contacts with local Chinese residents. As short-term sojourners, they tend to live in hotels, and it is quite common that several traders share a single room to save rent. Whereas a few Africans have become quite wealthy, most are simply small traders and some are very poor. As some African traders described,

. . . They don't even have 100 dollars in their pockets, and could hardly pay for hotel bills in the first few days when they first arrived in Guangzhou . . . (Interviewee No. 22)

. . . Unlike those who have money in their pocket for a two-week stay, we Africans start from nothing . . . In order to have the money for meals tomorrow, we have to work immediately when we arrive in Guangzhou . . . (Interviewee No. 25).

As noted above, some African traders have established shipping companies in Guangzhou. Malian traders, for instance, have opened nine "cargoes" in the city since 2000, each typically employing 5 to 10 workers.<sup>6</sup> Large shipments may require between 20 and 50 TEU shipping containers, the contents of each valued at \$15,000 to \$100,000, depending on the type of goods. Quite a few traders ship one to two containers four to six times a year. Exporters often have contacts with local institutions such as police stations for visa applications, the Industrial and Commercial Bureau for tax issues, and Guangzhou Customs for export matters.

As in other migrant communities, African migrants in Guangzhou tend to work cooperatively to resolve pressing problems. Most of the African communities in Guangzhou are country-based, each with a respected community leader, known as a "president," whose main function is to assist newly arrived countrymen.

. . . The leader is selected by the community. He is kind to all people. My community is a kind of special. A lot of people did not go to school, so that 60 percent of the people traveling abroad are illiterate. It is a handicap. When I came in 2003, I found a lot of people had no guidance from anyone. I decided to get them together to resolve their problems, and it succeeded. There were about one hundred people here unknown to the embassy, and I took them to register at the embassy . . . I think they needed help. Sometimes they would wait for me at two or three o'clock in the morning, and I helped them. (Interview with a Nigerian leader)

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<sup>6</sup>The largest, however, had a staff of as many as 30 Chinese workers.

Some communities are organized to the point that members may possess identification cards showing their membership status. They may undertake fund-raising efforts to help members or others in need, or hold events that tend to strengthen intra-group social ties.<sup>7</sup> Such activities suggest the presence of social cohesiveness and a collective spirit among Guangzhou's African communities.

For the African migrants in Guangzhou, Xiaobei is not only a space for transnational business transaction, but also a place of sojourning where migrants struggle without knowledge of the Chinese language. They select goods for export by visiting local factories and wholesalers and work in small showrooms/offices that are often shared by more than one firm in order to save rent. Business is conducted by body language, hand gestures, and use of calculators without much verbal communication. Because of vast differences in language, culture, physical appearance, and living habits, African migrants have had little interaction with the local Chinese other than business contacts. For many migrants, their main objective in coming to Guangzhou is to make money, and most plan to return to their homelands after they have achieved their financial goals. Consequently, most do not view Xiaobei as an option for long-term settlement. Their personal activity space in the city is extremely limited, consisting of the buildings where they work, the factories/firms where they select their goods and conduct business, the church or mosque where they worship, and the crammed rooms in which they sleep.

. . . [t]hey came to Guangzhou because they heard it is very cheap here, but when they come, they found it is not that cheap . . . In most cases, they return [to Africa] . . . only 10 to 15 percent can succeed in Guangzhou. (Interview with a Ghanaian community leader)

### Local Responses

The emergence of Xiaobei as a leading transnational urban space for African traders in Guangzhou is largely a consequence of spontaneous efforts made by the migrants themselves. However, local Chinese business enterprises also have facilitated trade with the African countries, taking steps to improve the business environment for themselves and for the newly arriving African traders. For example, multi-language posters and information brochures have been printed and agents who can speak English and French hired by local Chinese firms. Also, African-styled restaurants and foods have become available. Moreover, the Chinese have provided a wide range of services such as visa application and travel ticket bureaus, merchandise packaging, and international telephone facilities, and even medical services. Such efforts made by local individuals, shops, and companies have played a significant role in creating an efficient Africanized milieu for business. Interactions between African traders and local entrepreneurs have been active and mutually beneficial, adding a new dimension to transnational migration based on trade that had never existed in China in the past or in the African countries. Such efforts are essentially spontaneous, without

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<sup>7</sup>A Malian community, for instance, has been collecting 50 yuan per month from each member to sustain a collective fund for assistance (interview with a Malian leader), and during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, migrants from Guinea residing in Guangzhou donated a total of 73,000 yuan to help the victims (interview with a Guinean leader). Cameroonians, with a population of about 1,500 in the city, get together once every two months in a rented hall or restaurant "to have fun" (interview with a Cameroonian leader).

involvement of any government or large multi-national corporations. As such, it is a form of *de facto* “transnationalism from below” (Smith, 2001).

Whereas the owners of commercial buildings where the migrants congregate and the landlords who rent them sleeping rooms welcome the African migrants because they have brought them good rental income, local residents tend to dislike and even try to avoid the migrants for various reasons. Many local residents, especially children, are offended by the migrants’ body odor, which they claim is often mixed with strong perfumes. Local businessmen complain about the Africans’ penny-pinching hard bargaining for discount prices, taxi drivers dislike their insistent haggling over fares, whereas others frown on the migrants’ lack of concern for proper trash disposal and on the loud weekend music played deep into the late hours. On the other hand, some African traders have complained about Chinese businesses that have sold them goods of poor quality and about the ways the local police have treated them. “Before 2003, local people respected Africans, now they don’t . . .” (interview with a local Nigerian leader). Because of the lack of common language to communicate and strong social, physical, and behavioral differences, neither the Xiaobei Chinese nor the Africans have the desire to integrate socially and spatially. As one Western writer who visited Xiaobei has observed, “The mistrust [between the locals and African migrants] is mutual” (Osnos, 2009). Thus within a largely positive trading environment, the lack of harmonious social relations and cultural understanding on the part of both sides is a serious problem that threatens to disrupt the long-term stability and even sustainability of the transnational urban space for African traders in the enclave in Guangzhou.

This mutual dislike seems to have become worse with time. Many of the African traders in Guangzhou are illegal migrants. As their number increases, the local government has become increasingly concerned and tough steps have been taken to control the rising numbers of overstayers and criminals. The absence of a government agency dealing with illegal aliens has contributed to the rising numbers of illegal African migrants in the city. Local news media often report on the African migrants, but such reports typically emphasize the negative aspects such as illegal immigration, questionable business practices, and drug and AIDs problems (Ke and Du, 2007). Local police often attribute the city’s rising crime rates to African migrants’ use of drugs and other offenses.

. . . Africans disappeared soon after they crossed the border . . . they have no intention of going back to Africa, some even throw their passports away right after getting off the plane . . . (*Guangzhou Daily*, December 13, 2007, B6).

Now the number of Guangzhou’s Africans is increasing at an annual rate of 30 or 40 percent, and they are concentrated at several sites. The cases of robberies and drug use have also increased, and these problems will get worse soon. (Interview with an official of the Guangdong Province Import and Export Management Office)

After 2008, as the many problems of overstays and crimes have become increasingly serious, local police and immigration officials have intensified the hunt for illegal migrants. However, the raids are inconsistently and unsystematically carried out, amounting to little more than a “hide-and-seek” game for the migrants. Accordingly, the state has restricted the number of long-term “F” visas (about six months) to Africans, and visa-renewal applications have been turned down more frequently than before.

The global financial and oil crises of 2008 also significantly impacted the African migrants in Guangzhou, with many experiencing a decline in profits. Exchange rate

fluctuations also have become a significant problem. As one trader noted, “the drop in the Euro has meant that profits have fallen, for example, from 12 to 7 million CFA francs”; another pointed out that “the currency value can drop between the arrival of goods and payment for the order.” A third trader said, “I have to change into U.S. dollars and then into Chinese RMB, losing out every time. Using another currency would not help.”

Lack of confidence in trading and difficulties in communicating with the Chinese trading partners have meant that, for many African migrants, their presence in Guangzhou is largely a business necessity, i.e., a way to make a living. Due to the problems discussed above, life in Xiaobei, especially for young African bachelors, is not particularly attractive. With increased immigration control, a worsening trading environment, and declining optimism on the part of the African migrants/traders, the future of Xiaobei as a transnational space is uncertain.

### CONCLUSIONS

At the turn of the present century, the restructuring of the global economic space as the “space of flows” has brought about divergent patterns and processes of population mobility across the world. While international migration and transnationalism have been examined extensively, scholarly attention has been focused largely on the transnational movements of population between nations of the cores and the peripheries, with little attention paid to China either as a developing country or an important center of global production. The arrival of African migrants in China is a very recent phenomenon that has not been examined. Our study attempts to make a modest contribution to the meager literature on transnational flows of people and goods between China and Africa and on African migrants’ place-making processes in Guangzhou.

This paper has sought to empirically investigate the processes of transnational place-making by African migrants/traders in Xiaobei, Guangzhou. Unlike in many other countries where large numbers of underclass individuals, exiles, and refugees may be found in a receiving country’s immigration stock, transnational Africans in Guangzhou are found to be either traders or entrepreneurs who, working together spontaneously with their Chinese counterparts, have added a new and highly conspicuous ethnic dimension to the hitherto homogenous Chinese ethnic landscape. Whereas the appearance of African ethnicity in Guangzhou has not resulted in any serious racial or social confrontations in China, business and social relations between the African traders and the local Chinese, including the local police, are by no means harmonious. The emergence of this transnational urban enclave has been a result of a number of push and pull forces operating as part of the process of globalization from below. Equally important has been the willingness of local Chinese businesses to accommodate the migrants in exchange for commercial opportunities with African countries. It is remarkable that, until recently, the Chinese state at the local level was not directly involved in the emergence of Xiaobei as a transnational space for the African migrants, leaving these migrants, the local people, and market forces to shape the spatial and socioeconomic patterns of the urban ethnic enclave in Xiaobei, where tiny ethnic shops selling leather goods, fake name-brand products, bright African clothing and electronic goods cramp the stores.

It should be noted that the emergence of transnational spaces that Africans occupy in Guangzhou has not caused local Chinese to abandon the area. On the contrary, a number of African firms have provided jobs to local Chinese, which tends to contribute to the stability of Xiaobei as a transnational urban space for African migrants. However, being highly

visible and different from the locals in language and life style, African migrants in Xiaobei have attracted a great deal of attention from the news media. A recent newspaper report has dubbed Xiaobei a “chocolate city” (Pan et al., 2008), an apt metaphor for the African enclave that effectively captures local residents’ visual image of the African transnational community.

Increased recent efforts by the police to root out illegal African migrants, coupled with rising rent in the city, have prompted some African migrants to move from Guangzhou to surrounding areas such as Foshan City, where it is safer and less expensive to live. As African migrants originally came to Xiaobei for economic reasons, without much desire to settle on a long-term basis, and as the history of African migration to Guangzhou is less than two decades old, it is difficult to speculate on the future of African settlements in the city. At this stage, it would seem that the future of such transnational urban spaces in China is uncertain at best. A primary concern of the Chinese state is social stability, and public demonstrations in the enclave against the police, such as a July 15, 2009 incident in which hundreds of Africans protested in front of a Guangzhou police station demanding justice after a harsh crackdown on illegal migrants, certainly are not taken lightly by local and even national authorities, and may influence future state policies toward international migrants. One Western journalist (Pomfret, 2009) has already observed that the large number of Africans in Guangzhou has become a headache for local authorities. Judging from the difficulties that African migrants experience in obtaining visas and visa extensions, the problem of overstaying is likely to continue or even worsen.

Other factors that may affect the future of African migrants in Guangzhou include the extent to which cultural understanding, mutual tolerance, and acceptance can be achieved among both Africans and the Chinese, and whether Chinese goods will remain competitive in Africa (e.g., vis-à-vis those manufactured in other East and South Asian countries). If this competitiveness wanes, African traders may well stop coming. As China becomes more globalized and increasing numbers of foreign migrants arrive in the country, more scholarly work is needed to see how they have impacted Chinese society and how they are changing their own lives and those of their families. Such studies can also contribute to the literature on international migration. As for Xiaobei, more research is needed to ascertain the size of the migrant community and the nature and level of social and spatial segregation. Work is needed as well to reveal the internal diversities among the African migrants in terms of religion, language, socioeconomic background, and country of origin. Finally, equally important are studies that would reveal the internal dynamics of the migrants’ social networks in China and in their home countries, as social networks often function as the linchpin holding all facets of migration together.

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