Africans in Guangzhou: A cultural analysis of transnationality amongst Africans on the move

Roberto Carlos CASTILLO BAUTISTA

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AFRICANS IN GUANGZHOU:
A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSNATIONALITY
AMONGST AFRICANS ON THE MOVE

by
CASTILLO BAUTISTA Roberto Carlos

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies

Lingnan University

2014
ABSTRACT

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a cultural analysis of transnationality amongst Africans on the move

by

CASTILLO BAUTISTA Roberto Carlos

Doctor of Philosophy

Over the last three decades, the shifts brought about by the ‘rise of China’ as a key player in global capitalism have had implications in a myriad of places, practices and imaginations. One such implication can be seen in the decade long presence of an African population in the southern city of Guangzhou.

In this dissertation, I look into the dynamics informing this presence by focusing on transnational connections, relations and practices. I take up the call (coming from different fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences) for an analysis of transnationality grounded in the everyday experiences of individuals ‘on the move’ (physically and metaphorically). Accordingly, in this dissertation I provide an extensive ethnographic analysis, accompanied by theoretical formulations, to explain how is African presence in Guangzhou (re)produced and what are the possibilities for the future.

Throughout these pages, I contend that transnationality entails much more than mere ‘movement’ across borders, and, as such, can be analysed from multiple perspectives. So, while I pay attention to issues of border crossing, connections beyond the reach of the state, and the reproduction of livelihoods from multiple locations, I also explore how is the transnational embodied in people and things (in emotions and aspirations, as well as in materialities), and embedded in placemaking processes. Hence, drawing from my fieldwork, I identify several ‘discursive sites of the transnational’ (i.e. neighbourhoods, things and practices, organisations, and aspirations, amongst others) from where, without necessarily undertaking international travel, one could critically observe and analyse how the complex material, political, affective and emotional geographies of transnationality unfold and expand. In this dissertation I present, thus, a ‘local’ multi-scalar approach to transnationality in the case study of Africans in Guangzhou.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I present a historical overview of Guangzhou, focusing on the spatial conditions that facilitated the arrival (and continued presence) of foreigners in the city. I place an emphasis on highlighting how Africans articulate with China’s transprovincial migrants (and other populations) at the local level, and I problematise extant conceptualisations about the sociospatial formations emerging in the city. In Chapter 2, I explore how certain material formations have emerged after the arrival of foreigners to the city. I provide an ethnographic account of how multiple multiethnic interactions are mediated through certain objects and practices (that I construe as repositories, or sites, of the transnational). In Chapter 3, through the analysis of grassroots forms of organisation amongst Africans in the city, I discuss issues of placemaking and mobility and offer an insight into the complex relations between transnational movement, emplacement, identity, ‘homing’ and citizenship. In Chapter 4, I focus on the hopes, desires, and possibilities, what I call the ‘landscapes of aspiration’, amongst African musicians in the city. I argue that aspirations are crucial drives that not only move and motivate people but that help individuals to navigate through, and make sense of, their transnational journeys. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a theoretical discussion that advocates for a re-conceptualisation of the ‘transnational’ (and transnational mobilities) away from methodological nationalism. I argue that methodological nationalism is a burden that thwarts understandings of the multiple dimensions of contemporary forms of human movement.
DECLARATION

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been duly acknowledged.

(Roberto Carlos Castillo Bautista)
8 - Apr - 2015
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL OF THESIS

AFRICANS IN GUANGZHOU: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSNATIONALITY AMONGST AFRICANS ON THE MOVE
by
Roberto Carlos Castillo Bautista

Doctor of Philosophy

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Acknowledgements

When I bid farewell to my mother and my grandmother in Puebla, Mexico, in 2009, I told them that I was leaving to do a one-year Masters program at the University of Sydney in Australia. At that time, I had no idea that five years would pass without going back to Mexico. Los caminos de la vida no son como uno los imagina. Although I have not seen my family in Mexico during all these years, I know that they have been with me every step of the way. Without having them in my mind, I would have never have been able to make this journey. So, first and foremost, I dedicate this PhD thesis to my mother, grandmother, father and sister, for not having been physically there with them.

The journey that brought me to undertake and finalise this dissertation is a long journey that started in Beijing in 2006. Without the monumental support of Nadeemy Chen, mi gran Nadeemy, the love of my life, none of this would have ever been possible. Nadeemy’s brilliant mind, gracious words, patience, and contagious energy for life, have made this a far greater achievement than I could have ever imagined. Gracias, mi Nadeema. The writing of this dissertation would never have been possible without Nadeemy’s devoted and sometimes brutal editing. She should be granted an ‘honorary PhD’ in Cultural Studies for her massive involvement in this dissertation.

I would also like to offer my sincere gratitude to all of those who, whether realising it or not, contributed to this great achievement.

To Prof. John Erni, for his encouragement and support through all stages of the research and for always being ready with critical yet positive and kind comments. Since the first time we met, I knew that I was with the right person. Sticking with him throughout my dissertation, even when he moved to a position in another university, was the right decision. His guidance has greatly transformed my academic career, and his critical thinking will remain a strong influence in my life.

To Prof. Meaghan Morris who, in many ways, I consider my mentor in Cultural Studies. It has been an honour to meet her and to learn from her that the greatest minds of our time can also be as humble and down to earth as she is. Meaghan will remain an inspiration for decades to come; I knew this since I first met her at The University of Sydney.

To Dr. Law Wing Sang, Dr. Lau Kin Chi, Dr. Hui Po Keung, Dr. Lisa Leung, Dr. Li Siu-Leung, Dr. Rolien Hoyng, in the Cultural Studies department at Lingnan University for their constructive feedback during all my presentations and seminars.

To the Lingnan crowd – students and administrative staff – for having made life easier when I was there. Gratitude and friendship goes to Gietty, Mandy, Jay, Tung Yi, Tobi, Anneke, Ted, Evey and Guoyuan, and to Josephine, Chester and Jenny.

To my family, mates, and teachers in Australia, my life is now forever divided between Mexico, China and Australia. The support from my family there has been a critical strength throughout all these years in Asia. Love goes to Mary-Anne Chen, Michael Chen, Charles Francis Baldacchino (‘the Nannu’, who has been the grandfather I never had), the Nanna, the Borbor and Angang, Anna and Sam Chen, Kylie Chin and Louisa Searle. My best friends in Australia, César, Toño, Yunuen and Suna, have been an inspiration; as have been my teachers at the Gender and Cultural Studies department in
The University of Sydney which, it must be said, was a stepping stone in the achievement of my PhD: Catherine Driscoll, Guy Redden, and Jane Park have my gratitude.

To my thesis examiners, Dr. Helen Grace, Dr. PK Hui, and Dr. Richard Davis.

To Valente Barranco, my best friend, who has always been a source of spiritual support.

To the Hong Kong Research Grant Council (RGC), for the generous financial support they gave me throughout my doctoral study.

To all my African and Chinese friends in Guangzhou,

To the Interasia Cultural Studies people,

And finally, and again, to Jorge, my father; Rosa, my mother; Mony, my sister; Abue, my grandmother; and Nadeemy, mi Nadeemy.

Thanks to all of you, and if I am forgetting you (it’s 4am), I'll leave this space so you can write your name __________________________.

Love,
Gracias, mil.
Introduction

Preamble: a fleeting encounter

Between 2006 and 2009, I lived, studied and worked in Beijing on a variety of tourist, business and work visas that were not always congruent with my circumstances. As with many foreigners in China, I became familiar with the Hong Kong visa run, although, on one occasion, prior to the Olympics, I did have to fly back to Mexico. On the way back from one of my Hong Kong visa runs, a man approached me on the train platform and asked if I’d ever been to Beijing. ‘Of course – I live there,’ I replied. ‘Then you’ll be able to help me,’ he said, handing me a piece of wrinkled paper. Clearly, someone with only a rudimentary understanding of Chinese had carefully copied down some characters onto the paper (something I could tell by the awful writing that was almost as bad as mine). Although I was only able to recognise half of the characters, I knew it was an address. ‘It’s an address – a place not far from where I live,’ I said. ‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘It’s the address of the Embassy of Sierra Leone. Once in Beijing, you can tell me how to get there,’ he suggested with a broad smile on his face. I agreed, but not without hesitation. For a moment, I wondered if I was getting myself involved in the smuggling of illegal immigrants, before reproaching myself for harbouring such a foolish prejudice. As the train filled up with passengers, we boarded the train into adjoining carriages. ‘See you there, then. My name is Myers,’ he said, patting me in the back. As the stewardess led me to my hard-sleeper, I wondered: What is a man from Sierra Leone doing in China?

Later that evening when the train lights had been switched off, I heard Myers calling me. I climbed down from my bunk and we sat by the window in the narrow passageway running alongside the sleepers. ‘What in the world is a Mexican guy doing
in China?’ he asked. ‘I wondered the same about you,’ I said. As it turned out, this journey was not the first time Myers had been out of Sierra Leone. A couple of years earlier, he had lived in Europe for 18 months. ‘Once an African steps on European soil, he is not an African anymore,’ he told me. ‘You are changed forever and there is no way back’. After trying his luck in Germany and the Netherlands before being deported to Sierra Leone, he decided to look for an alternative. ‘Things in Sierra Leone are getting better, but there’s nothing for me there. Back in Freetown, everybody is talking about coming to China. I used my last savings from Europe to fly to Hong Kong. China is the land of opportunities now. I’ll be able to set myself up here,’ he said. As he kept talking about the possible businesses he could start in this ‘new land of opportunities,’ I began to recall just how difficult it was to arrive into the immensity of China without knowing anything about the place or the people, let alone the food or the language. I suddenly realised that I was starting to worry about Myers. How was he going to find his way out of the labyrinthine Beijing West Station? And, if he did, how would he find a taxi? Many Beijing taxi drivers refuse to take white foreigners, let alone black or brown ‘Muslim-looking’ ones, like me. Would his embassy really be able to help him? Despite my concerns, he seemed pretty relaxed about arriving to China with nothing more that a piece of wrinkled paper and a few American dollars. ‘A friend of my cousin knows someone who works in the embassy. They’ll help me, and put me somewhere. It won’t be a problem,’ he said, as the Chinese man on the next sleeper shushed us.

When the train finally reached Beijing West Station 25 hours later, I disembarked quickly and looked for Myers. As the train and platform cleared of the more than 1,000 passengers, Myers did not appear. I decided to wait for a few minutes longer, but when the doors of the empty train finally closed, I asked the stewardess from Myers’ carriage if she had seen an African man. Somewhat dismissively, she said that there were no black people in her carriage. I waited for a few more minutes before finally accepting that he was not going to appear. As I exited the station into Beijing’s freezing cold, the only thing I could think about was what had happened to Myers. Did he get off at the wrong station? Did he get swept up in the crowd? Did police remove him from the train in the middle of the night? In the end, I had to accept that I will never know what happened to him.

In mid-2009 (a few months after meeting Myers), I came across an atypical story whilst working as a news editor for China.org (a subsidiary of Xinhua News
Agency). It was a story that took me by surprise. In a routine raid searching for overstayers, police had cornered a group of Nigerians on the second floor of a trading mall in the commercial area of Guangyuan West Road (广园西路) in Guangzhou. According to several reports, a man who was trying to evade the police had jumped out of a window and fatally injured himself. As a consequence of this incident, a crowd of around 200 mainly Nigerian men began demonstrating against what some of them described as police harassment and racial persecution, and blocked the roads in front of Kuangquan Police Station (矿泉派出所) for several hours. After some hours of negotiation with Nigerian representatives, the demonstration finally came to an end. The incident was – as Adams Bodomo (2010) rightly pointed out – reported by Western media to create the impression that ordinary Chinese people and members of African communities ‘were at each other’s throats’ (2010: 697). China.org, and other Chinese media, portrayed the episode as evidence of the uncontrolled growth of the sanfei (三非人员) or ‘three illegals’ (a Chinese term for foreigners who enter, stay or work illegally in the country), and avoided any mention of injured or deceased foreigners. Nonetheless, both Chinese and international media claimed that the ‘Guangzhou demonstration’ was the first time in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that a group of foreign nationals had demonstrated against authorities on Chinese territory.1 As I left the newsroom that afternoon, I remembered Myers and I could not stop thinking about Guangzhou and about how little I knew about Africans in China.

1. Context

1.1. Foreigners in China

Over the last three decades, but notably after the accession of China to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in late 2001, foreign presence in urban areas of the country has increased significantly (Pieke, 2007, 2012). Korean and Russian ‘enclaves’ in Beijing, African and Middle Eastern ‘communities’ or ‘trading clusters’ in Guangzhou, ‘gated communities’ for ‘Westerners’ in first tier cities, and multiple sources and types of irregular forms of abode amongst foreigners,2 have been amongst the most salient
topics in research about foreign presence in China (Bodomo, 2010, 2012; Branigan, 2010; Li et al., 2008; Pieke, 2012; Skeldon, 2011; Wu & Webber, 2004; Zhang, 2008).

Indeed, the topic of this dissertation – Africans in Guangzhou – has become one of the most popular cases of foreign concentration for both media and scholarship – a popularity that can be attributed to both its relevance to wider geopolitical shifts (i.e. the Africa-China relationship), and the high visibility of Africans in Chinese ethnoscapes. These days, Africans from diverse countries and walks of life can be found in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Foshan, Dongguan, and Yiwu, and, to a lesser extent, in a plethora of relatively minor cities (Bodomo, 2012; Le Bail, 2009; Rennie, 2009; Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2008). Most notably though, the African presence in Guangzhou has steadily grown over the last decade; and, although the size of the population and its demographics are unclear, this case marks the first time in the history of modern China that a non-Asian foreign ‘group’ (perceived by Chinese as ethnically homogeneous (Lan, 2014)) thrives, largely unregulated, in a Chinese environment/city. Moreover, the persistence of African presence in the city marks a shift in terms of population management, as China finds itself in the early stages of no longer being an exclusively migrant sending country. Indeed, as this dissertation will show, the country is already on its way to becoming a place for individuals looking for better futures beyond the borders of their countries.

1.2. The land of opportunities narrative

The apparently inevitable ‘rise of China’ as an economic and political superpower, coupled with the word-of-mouth spread that China is ‘a new land of opportunities’, feature prominently in the narratives of many Africans in Guangzhou. ‘In the past, people used to say that all roads lead to Rome. Nowadays, all roads lead to Guangzhou,’ a Ugandan man told me during my fieldwork. A widely shared perception amongst both foreigners and Chinese is that Guangzhou is not only a place where everything can be bought, sold and produced (hence its fame as the ‘world’s factory’) but also a place (from) where ideas, dreams and aspirations can be kick-started and/or articulated. As the documentary maker Christiane Badgley (2014) put it, Guangzhou has also become a ‘dream factory’ – a place where transnational (and translocal) flows of imagination, desire, culture, politics and trade intersect and create possibilities for new ways of thinking about the world and the self. Moreover, in the imaginations of
many individuals I met, China represents not only a personal opportunity, but also ‘an opportunity for Africa’.

1.3. Guangzhou as a historic trading centre

For centuries, the southern Pearl River Delta (PRD) region has played a crucial role in networks of trade and culture connecting the Chinese hinterland with other parts of the world. As early as the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), for instance, Guangzhou was China’s largest trading port with connections to more than 100 countries (Ouyang, 1997: 2). Even during the decades prior to the Opium Wars, in the midst of the Qing dynasty’s isolationist policies, the port of Guangzhou was a zone of exception through which China traded with other imperial economies (1997: 2). Even after the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, Guangzhou managed to retain its status as a leading centre connecting China with other countries (Li et al., 2012: 57). In fact, from the early days of the maritime Silk Road to the Thirteen Hongs and the Opium Wars, from the Unequal Treaties and the foreign concessions to the Canton Fair and the Reform and Opening Up policies, the region has been a crucial intersection for people and merchandise moving to, and from, Southern Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Africa; then later to Europe and its colonies; and more recently to almost any part of the world. Over the last two decades, as the transformations resulting from China’s rearticulation into global economies have taken hold, and as policies on foreign entry and settlement have been slowly but steadily relaxed, myriad foreigners have arrived looking for opportunities in the countless trading chains that converge in the region.

1.4. African histories in China: diplomacy through education

The presence of African nationals in China is not an entirely new phenomenon, however. There are some historical accounts that even trace African presence back as far as the late-Ming/early-Qing Dynasty in the 1600s (Gao, 1984; Snow, 1988; Wilenski, 2002; Wyatt, 2010). More substantive African presence began shortly after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949. Almost since its inception, the PRC began courting African governments in search of political recognition and geostrategic advantages (Alden, 2007; Osnos, 2009; Shen, 2009). African presence in the PRC during this period was mainly comprised of students and
diplomats and coincided with the ‘spirit of Bandung’ (1950-60s) and the Afro-Asian unity efforts to create a ‘transnational imagined community’ articulated by the ideas behind the ‘Non-Aligned Movement’ (Gupta, 1992: 328).

Scholarship programs for university students also proved to be a useful tool for furthering political/geostrategic/diplomatic goals. As far back as the 1960s, the CCP had established several scholarship programs to mainly assist African students; and thousands of African students have studied at major Chinese universities since (Sullivan, 1994). In 1961, for instance, more than a hundred students (who were greeted as comrades in revolution) arrived in Beijing. However, due to frictions with school authorities and harassment by local students, more than 80 percent had returned to their home countries less than a year later (Sullivan, 1994). Despite the initial setbacks, international students from many African countries could be seen in all the major Chinese cities by the 1970s. Although relations between Chinese and African students were generally uncomplicated, there were a number of minor altercations (usually over African students dating Chinese women) reported during the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the first major ‘incident’ involving Africans in China occurred in the Shanghai Textile Engineering Institute in July 1979, when complaints over loud music resulted in an attack on the foreign students’ hall (Sautman, 1994: 415). As Sautman recounts, this was the first in a series of conflicts that culminated in the 1988 Nanjing racial confrontation. According to Sullivan (1994) who lived through the incident, a series of unfortunate misunderstandings, along with patriotism, racial prejudice, and rising tensions from a disillusionment with what many Chinese students saw as a failure of the socialist system, resulted in a series of violent skirmishes between factions of Chinese students and African students (for more on what later came to be known as the ‘1988-89 Nanjing anti-African protests’ see Sullivan, 1994). Over the last decade, however, Chinese campuses have not been marked by racial tensions and, according to Evan Osnos (2009), various surveys have reported a substantial decline in incidents of discrimination against African students.

1.5. The China – Africa narrative

While the logic behind African presence in Guangzhou extends back long before the last decade, and involves major conjunctural processes (i.e. China’s economic liberalisation, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and even the Non-Aligned Movement,
Internationalism, and the Bandung Conference), the current stage needs to be understood as the *flipside* of two interrelated processes structuring the ‘China/Africa’ narrative: Chinese economic presence in African countries (at both state and individual levels); and recent developments in African economic landscapes. Any analysis about the presence of Africans in China needs to take into consideration the influence of these two processes in African imaginations about China. Indeed, many Africans I spoke to in Guangzhou located their presence in the country within the context of China’s rise as a key player in the global economy, and more importantly, as a consequence of the political and economic rapprochement between the two regions. It is not news that Chinese direct investment and commercial migration to Africa have had a profound impact on the continent’s economies and the livelihoods of its people (see Alden, 2007; and Brautigam, 2011). Nor is it a coincidence then that the strengthening of African presence in China has coincided with China’s renewed investments and economic interests in Africa.

The political and economic rapprochement between the two regions is perhaps best exemplified by the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). In the decade following its first summit (held in Beijing in 2000), trade between the two regions increased twentyfold – reaching US$200 billion in 2012 from US$10 billion in 2002 (Africa.news.cn, 2013). Over a slightly longer period, direct exports from Guangzhou to African countries (mainly manufactured products) have increased more than tenfold – up from around US$165 million in 1996 to US$2.1 billion in 2010 (Li et al., 2012: 57). As a consequence of these structural macroeconomic pushes, and of individual microeconomic efforts, only a decade after the intensification of Africa-China economic relations, China is now Africa’s largest trading partner, having surpassed the United States in 2011 (Wonacott, 2011). Over this period, Chinese migration to Africa has also had an unparalleled increase – estimates show there are now around a million Chinese living on the continent, up from less than 40,000 in the early 2000s (Brautigam, 2011; Michel & Beuret, 2009). Commercial activities related to this massive flow of people into Africa have resulted in what has been described as a ‘tsunami’ of Chinese goods; and ‘made in China’ products are now ubiquitous in the markets of almost every big African city (Zhang 2008: 388). Accordingly, this ‘tsunami’ has spurred scores of traders to develop their own transnational trading strategies in an attempt to outdo their Chinese competitors,
and a first step in these strategies is often journeying to Guangzhou (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007).

Not all Africans in Guangzhou see their presence there as a direct counteraction to the wave of Chinese migrants and goods in Africa, however, many do. Many Africans I met during my fieldwork stated that they had the ‘right to be in China.’ Time and again, I was told that as there are many Chinese in Africa now, Africans should also be able to be in China. Indeed, a great number of those who set out to try their luck in China are informed and bolstered by this rationale. Furthermore, the omnipresent decade-long global media narrative about the ‘rise of China’ has greatly impacted on the narratives of ‘green pastures’ and ‘new lands of opportunities’ that have lured thousands of Africans (and many others) to Guangzhou. Indeed, these new ways of talking about (or imagining) China are also increasingly influenced by the growing ‘soft power’ that China has been disseminating across the continent. The emergence of Sino-African media outlets such as Xinhua’s South African Newspaper ‘Africa Times’ or CCTV Africa (based in Nairobi, Kenya), and projects like ‘Xinhua Gallery’, a 2011 photographic exhibition depicting the lives and works of ‘Africans in China’ (which kicked off simultaneously in 18 African countries), are good examples of this.

1.6. Academic engagements and methodological challenges

Since 2007, African presence in Guangzhou (and its surrounding cities) has garnered a fair amount of academic and media attention. A number of researchers, journalists, documentarians, photographers, and even dancers and painters, have attempted to document (in varying capacities) what happens in the areas where Africans and Chinese intersect at the market, neighbourhood and individual levels. As a result, a substantial body of knowledge about the topic has started to emerge (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009, 2007; Bodomo & Ma, 2012; Bodomo, 2010, 2012; Bredeloup, 2012; Haugen, 2012; Li, Lyons, & Brown, 2012a; Li, Ma, & Xue, 2009; Li, Xue, Lyons, & Brown, 2008; Marsh, 2014; Osnos, 2009; Piranty, 2013, 2014; Rennie, 2009; Zhang, 2008). Adams Bodomo (2010, 2012), Zhigang Li (2008, 2012), and Bertoncello & Bredeloup (2007) who were the pioneering researchers have, for instance: described some of the main activities Africans engage in; attempted to estimate the size of the population and its demographics; and, offered preliminary discussions about the nature
of the sociospatial formations (and the types of interactions) emerging as a consequence of African presence in the city (topics that I discuss in detail in Chapter 1). In a way, these researchers have attempted to provide answers to what could be thought of as the set of introductory questions that emerge after realising there is a significant number of Africans in Guangzhou: How many Africans are there in the city? Where are they from? How long have they been there? What are they doing in China? And, so on. Without a doubt, the contributions made by these early researchers have been crucial to make better sense of certain aspects of the African presence in the city. While this dissertation is an attempt to engage with (and build upon) some of the questions that have captivated early researchers, I contend that there are important historical, empirical and theoretical avenues and issues that have not been explored, and need to be explored if we are to understand the dynamics structuring (and being structured) by this case study. By focusing on the interactions between the multiple components (actors, processes and conjunctures) that make African presence in Guangzhou possible, I seek to go beyond the what, where, why, and when types of questions and provide a more thorough and nuanced explanation of not only what Africans do in the city, but how the possibilities for doing so are produced.

In the last few years, a second wave of research has begun to tackle the issues related to (im)mobility (see Haugen, 2012; and, Lan, 2014), transiency and recurrence (see Li et al., 2012; and, Bredeloup, 2012), and border crossing (see Bodomo, 2014; and, Mathews et al., 2014). These researchers have, however, tended to represent Africans as a mass of traders, and to conflate their presence in the region with a wave of ‘immigration’. Indeed, a pervasive economistic perspective looms over most research (both past and present) about African presence in the region. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that this perspective leaves little or no space for a consideration of agency, and has precluded other types of imaginings and conceptualisations about Africans in China. While acknowledging the importance of economic factors, this dissertation is an attempt to challenge these economistic lenses and unsettle extant trading narratives that mainly construe Africans as ‘immigrant traders’ on the outlook for comparative advantages. As such, the lack of perspectives beyond the narratives of trade and immigration are the main gaps that this dissertation attempts to fill.

No comprehensive ethnographic studies have been produced thus far. Indeed, this dissertation is the first in-depth ethnographic work produced about Africans in Guangzhou at the doctoral level. As such, this is an attempt to shed empirical and
theoretical light on African presence by highlighting the multiple ‘practices’ – histories, trajectories, connections, objects, stories, interactions, translations, politics and economies – that structure this presence. Throughout these pages, I argue that to better understand these practices, it is necessary to map them in transnational ways. This dissertation is thus an analysis of the transnational mobilities, spatialities and materialities informing African presence in Guangzhou. Through the analysis of the case study, this dissertation strives to connect to wider discussions about contemporary transnational processes, and assess how they impact on the lived experiences of individuals and the formation/production of individual and collective identities. Indeed, from early on in this research, a central aim has been to remain in close proximity to the lived experiences and everyday lives of Africans in Guangzhou, and give precedence to ethnographic findings over extant theoretical frameworks. As such, I first and foremost draw on the data gathered through my own ethnographic fieldwork in the city, which was conducted in various stages between 2011 and 2014. Then, by following the stories and trajectories of the individuals I met during my fieldwork, I attempt to establish connections between what their life stories, experiences, feelings, plans and aspirations reveal and wider theoretical notions concerning contemporary transnational processes (i.e. transnationality and mobility).

My decision to undertake this project from a cultural studies perspective (I am aware there is no single, let alone authorised, cultural studies view (Alasuutari, 1996)) stems from the fact that I believe that in the cultural studies project of radical contextualisation (Grossberg, 2006, 2010) there is a potential to unsettle (and transform) dominant practices in the academy, and in the production of knowledge, that all too often contribute to the reproduction of ‘relations of domination, inequality and suffering’ (2006: 2). I understand the cultural studies’ practice of contextuality as a way to unveil the (hidden/unseen/blurred) specifics of a particular sociocultural formation in order to better understand the specificity of the contexts in which it takes place. In this dissertation, I present the case study of African presence in Guangzhou as a point of articulation through which, I believe, new ways of thinking about individuals on the move can emerge, thus furthering a better understanding of the multiple forms of mobility of the contemporary transnational moment. Finally, the disposition of cultural studies in relation to transdisciplinarity weighed heavily on my decision to undertake this project from this ‘perspective’. I believe that the way to promote a better, wider and decentred (from paradigmatic knowledge production
centres) understanding of contemporary and future transformations begins from trans, or post, disciplinarity. Trade is not only ‘economic’, but also cultural and political; not all human movements are ‘migrations’, a fuller understanding of these practices requires multiple perspectives. I strongly believe that cultural studies is a space where multiple perspective can converge.

1.6.1. Methodological challenges

Existing research efforts have encountered some serious methodological challenges regarding the demographics and size of the African population in Guangzhou. At this point, I will briefly mention some of the most salient challenges and how this dissertation engages, confronts, and attempts to resolve them (a more thorough exploration is provided in Chapter 1). The first (and perhaps biggest) challenge is defining who is an ‘African in Guangzhou’ – a definition that has a direct correlation with the question of who should be counted as ‘African population’ in the city. In his pioneering study, *Africans in China*, Bodomo (2012) – the only researcher who has grappled with this challenge – resolves the issue in a rather simple way, claiming that anyone who is a national of any of the 54 African states and/or anyone who identifies as being of African origin is to be considered an ‘African in China’. Following Bodomo’s definition, white people from southern Africa, Arabs from North Africa, African–Americans, Europeans of African descent (whether white, black, Arab), and Afro-Americans from Brazil, Colombia, or Trinidad and Tobago, amongst many others, could be included within the expression ‘Africans in China’. In this dissertation, my definition is more humble/limited. The politics of African identity (and of African national identities) are too complex to be dealt with in the space of an introduction, or in a dissertation about recent African presence in southern China. So, the way in which I use the term ‘African’ here stems from my fieldwork. In Guangzhou, as in many other parts of China, the term is usually conflated – by Chinese and black people alike – with black people of Sub-Saharan origin. This use broadly follows Bodomo’s suggestion about an identity divide between Maghrebs and Sub-Saharan people (2012: 3). In my interactions with North Africans in Guangzhou, most of them privileged their national, religious and/or linguistic identities over the identity label of ‘African’. So, from herein after, when I say ‘Africans in Guangzhou’ I am mainly referring to
people of Sub-Saharan origin who identify themselves as ‘black’ and ‘African’ and who are, in most cases, citizens of Sub-Saharan African states.6

After defining who to identify as an ‘African in Guangzhou’, a second methodological challenge linked to estimating the size of the population rapidly appears: what criterion needs to be met to count as part of that population? Should every single black person of Sub-Saharan origin, regardless of the rationale behind their sojourn in the city, be considered as ‘African population’? The short answer is ‘no’, based on the same rationale that say, French citizens on business trips in Hong Kong are not considered part of the ‘French population’ in Hong Kong, or Chinese tourists in Australia are not considered part of the ‘Chinese population’ in Australia. Indeed, the intentions of the thousands of Africans passing through (or sojourning in) Guangzhou every year are very diverse. Many individuals, for instance, recurrently visit the city for short periods of time on business or tourist visas; others arrive as tourists but have the intention of staying for longer periods; and some individuals overstay their visas and live in that situation for periods of time.7 These complexities combined with a lack of statistical data, shed serious doubt on the reliability of any population calculations made by researchers.

A third methodological challenge hovering in the shadow of the last one is the attempt to elucidate the national composition of the ‘African population’. Unsurprisingly, early researchers produced strikingly different accounts of the nationalities composing the population. Indeed – as this thesis will show – (more than numbers, nationalities and types of people) there are multiple modalities of foreign emplacement in the city – and while certain modalities can be correlated with national origins, they are not exclusive of any nationality. These modalities of emplacement are not only determined by the Chinese visa system and by regimes of mobility, but also by individual trajectories, activities and, more importantly, intentions/aspirations. Moreover, these modalities cannot be accurately fixed. Individuals often switch back and forth between different types of sojourn and modes of emplacement. These unstable modalities (that I will discuss in detail in Chapter 1 and 3), coupled with the fact that the Chinese government does not provide clear and comprehensive data on the figures, nationalities and modalities of foreign presence in the country, further complicate attempts to make sense of the numbers and national composition of the African ensemble in the city. A fourth methodological challenge has emerged when
trying to determine the modes of the socio-spatial configurations/formations and distribution of the ‘African population’.

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Finally, less of a methodological challenge, but still relevant to this introduction is the selection of Africans in Guangzhou as a case study. As will become evident in Chapter 1, the places with a higher concentration or visibility of Africans are also places with high levels of Middle Eastern presence, along with foreigners from many other parts of the world. So, in an analysis of ‘transnationality’, why focus on Africans and not bring others in? A simplistic answer would be: because Africans are undoubtedly the major foreign ‘group’ in the city. More importantly, however, their centrality is derived from the types of connections that they have been establishing in the city. Indeed, it could be said (as I argue in Chapter 3) that many Africans have managed to somehow insert themselves within the complex Chinese transethnic system. In this way, the depth and magnitude of their interactions (in business and relationships) with transprovincial migrants has no paragon in previous histories of foreign presence in China, and has been leaving an important mark on the Chinese hinterland beyond Guangzhou. In fact, African presence has brought transnational flows into convergence with Chinese translocal flows. With their businesses and affective relations, Chinese and Africans are connecting locales (like Owerri, the capital of Imo State in southeastern Nigeria with Shijiazhuang in Hebei province, for instance) – locales that up until recently seemed unlikely to be connected in transnational/translocal ways. Indeed, some Chinese women from poorer provinces and/or backgrounds are marrying some of these African entrepreneurs as a means of advancement (social or economic), for instance. Arguably, none of the other foreign ‘groups’ found in Guangzhou are interacting with Chinese on the scale that Africans are. Moreover, if Africans were to leave Guangzhou, a number of thriving translocal/transnational subeconomies that they have established would be disrupted and have very real impacts on certain areas in local economies.

Furthermore, Africans have been establishing transnational relations and connections amongst themselves at the ‘local’ level – relations that could potentially result in the emergence of African transnational identities in China (see Chapter 3). So, in short, the types of external and internal transnational connections that Africans in
southern China have enabled are very particular to their types of transnational mobilities. Based on these arguments, I believe that the case study of Africans in Guangzhou is an important point of articulation to discuss transnationality.

2. The structure of the thesis

As mentioned above, I approach this project through the anchoring concept of transnationality. I take up the call (coming from different fields) for an analysis of transnationality grounded in the everyday experiences of those who move (physically and metaphorically) in transnational ways. However, I contend that transnationality entails much more than only ‘movement’, and can be observed from multiple perspectives. So, while I look at the transnational in the typical sense of crossing borders, establishing connections beyond the reach of the state, and reproducing lives (and families) from multiple cartographical locations, I also explore how the transnational is embodied in people and things (i.e. emotions, aspirations and materialities) and embedded in placemaking processes, social and physical spaces. Much of the literature on transnationalism calls for multi-sited perspectives in which researchers follow people (and money) through routes connecting locales in multiple countries. In an attempt to ground the transnational in the everyday, however, I do not equate a multi-sited perspective with multiple geographic locations. Rather, I identify several ‘sites of the transnational’ (i.e. neighbourhoods, things and practices, organisations, and aspirations, amongst others) from where, without necessarily undertaking international travel, one could critically observe and analyse how the complex material, political, affective and emotional geographies of transnationality unfold and expand (I will delve on this in Chapter 5). In this dissertation I present, thus, a ‘local’ multi-scalar approach to transnationality in the case study of Africans in Guangzhou.

This dissertation operates through presenting the stories of individuals as narrative and conceptual devices that link lived experiences to theoretical formulations. I contend that by bringing the stories and experiences of people to the fore, I am able not only to provide a clearer understanding of transnational processes, but also to breach the gap between the problematic and ever-present binary of structure and agency.
The dissertation is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I present a historical overview of Guangzhou, focusing on the spatial conditions that facilitated the arrival (and continued presence) of foreigners in the city. I place an emphasis on highlighting how Africans articulate with China’s transprovincial migrants (and other populations) at the local level. Moreover, by putting forward a relational way of thinking about ‘African presence’, I problematise extant conceptualisations about the sociospatial formations emerging in the city. In Chapter 2, I explore how certain material formations have emerged after the arrival of foreigners to the city. I provide an ethnographic account of how multiple multiethnic interactions are mediated through certain objects and practices. Moreover, I contend that things – conceptualised in this chapter as ‘things in formation’ and ‘gatherings’ – can be thought of as repositories (or sites) of the transnational. Hence, I set out to sketch how transnational/translocal flows of imagination, desire and skills are embedded/embodied in the materialities of the things and practices I analyse. In Chapter 3, through the analysis of grassroots forms of organisation amongst Africans in the city, I discuss issues of placemaking and mobility and offer an insight into the complex relations between transnational movement, emplacement, identity, ‘homing’ and citizenship. In Chapter 4, I focus on the hopes, desires, and possibilities, what I call the ‘landscapes of aspiration’, amongst African musicians in the city. I argue that aspirations are crucial drives that not only move and motivate people but that help individuals to navigate through, and make sense of, their transnational journeys. Moreover, I contend that the analysis of aspirations should be a key point of departure in any analysis that attempts to provide a more accurate understanding of the rationales behind African presence in the city. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a critique of knowledge production about individuals on the move, and advocates for a re-conceptualisation of the ‘transnational’ (and of transnational mobilities) away from methodological nationalism. I argue that methodological nationalism is a burden that thwarts understandings of the multiple dimensions of transnational movement. Furthermore, I suggest that the multiple forms of mobility converging in Guangzhou need to be concomitantly assessed with the ‘mobility of forms’, and I explain the rationale behind the ‘sites of the transnational’ that I identified through this research. Finally, I present a brief discussion about possible futures in terms of mobility and transnationality for Africans on the move.
3. The ‘Mexican’ researcher: me as a subject on the move

It is important to note that my lines of questioning and research approaches are certainly influenced by my ‘bio(geo)graphy’ (i.e. the stories of my own mobility, and socioeconomic and cultural background). Indeed, I am also a ‘subject on the transnational move’. For over a decade, I have moved between North America, Asia and Australia, without a clear intention (or real possibility) of ‘settling’ in any particular region. Indeed, my experiences in China, the languages I have acquired (Mandarin, Portuguese, French and English), the regimes of mobility that I have encountered (i.e. the Entry and Exit Bureau in China; and, the Department of Immigration in Australia) and the strategies I have employed to increase my mobility (juggling visas, applying for scholarships, changing the legal status of my relationship), the general sense of economic and professional uncertainty that accompanies me daily, and the affective difficulty of being far away from family are all factors that shape the kinds of questions I ask. Appadurai (1996) calls the sum of these factors the ‘ethnoscapes’ (i.e. perspectives, perceptions and situations determined by ethnicity, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and knowledge) that influence what the observer/researcher is able to ask and ‘see’ during the process of ethnography, and that affect the process and the product of representation.

3.1. On the ground: the body as an interface

Throughout my research, my body (appearance), and the ideas, assumptions and prejudices that people projected upon it, also impacted on the process and product of representation. Indeed, I embodied different things for the many people I interacted with. Some people assumed I was Middle Eastern, and others thought that I was a Uyghur from northwestern China, for instance. Many assumed that I was a Muslim. All these different gazes had the effect of opening some doors and closing others. Letting people know (or trying to convince them) that I was Mexican helped ease my
connection with many Christians, in particular. Also, trying to convince people that I was a researcher sometimes proved difficult. My class background was also an influence. Many of the conversations I had with my contacts were characterised by mutual remarks about growing up with the desire to go abroad. As many of the Africans I met in Guangzhou, I grew up in an aspirational middle-class family in a ‘developing’ country, where I was routinely bombarded with the idea that going abroad (becoming mobile) would open a whole series of possibilities that otherwise would not be there – and I, as well as them, took the bait! My age was also a determinant, most of my contacts were also young adults, and most of them were males. Indeed, although the languages I can speak gave me access to fleeting conversations with many women, I lacked the cultural codes to connect with them at a deeper level. While I was relatively successful at initiating superficial conversations with Angolan women doing itinerant trade (as Portuguese and Spanish share a great deal of cultural meaning), for several reasons (including the short stays in Guangzhou of most of these traders) I was unable to go beyond. Moreover, although I speak French, I was less successful with French speaking women, as I just did not know how to establish a culturally comfortable space with them. Hence, this thesis could come across as a very male-centric – it is not only the thesis that is dominated by males, however. While there is a sizeable presence of African women in Guangzhou, males are still the majority. A follow-up study specifically to look at African women in Guangzhou, and their rationales, patterns of movement, and experiences is thus suggested.

3.2. Representation and distrust

It is not news that much of what has been written about people on the move (whether considered as (im)migrants, transmigrants, transnational entrepreneurs, etc.) has usually been written from paradigmatic centres of knowledge production, and thus is heavily influenced by the gaze of the ‘Global North’ on the peoples of the ‘Global South’. As a subject classified by Western governmental rationality as a mestizo Mexican, and having witnessed firsthand the monstrous disjuncture and the complex contrasts between discourses of modernity and Western rationality on one hand, and the oppressive and overwhelming realities of poverty in Mexico on the other hand, I have long held the conviction that Western systems of classification and forms of knowledge production often fail to grasp the complexity of a case and, in turn, produce inaccurate
representations of many cultural and social formations that lie outside the Western world/tradition. Put another way, I believe that when dealing with ‘others’, a great deal of Social Sciences analysis tends to leave out complexity, thus, blurring difference and flattening out a multiplicity of less graspable stories and experiences, for the sake of generalisation and ‘explanation’. My position in regards to extant representations about Africans in China is, thus, informed by this irritation/distrust. In a way, my drive to problematise certain assumptions looming over non-‘Western’ individuals on the move stems from what I consider an imperious need to challenge hegemonic ways of producing knowledge.

In a way, this dissertation is then an attempt to turn some things around, and give individuals (and their stories) an opportunity to speak for themselves. My emphasis on going beyond the conceptualisations of ‘traders’ and ‘immigrants’ are attempts to eschew the hegemonic gaze mentioned earlier – a gaze that represents Africans staying in China for six months and doing well in trade as ‘immigrants’, but considers white American teachers that barely survive on their wages in China, as ‘expats’. Moreover, this gaze tends to conflate white ‘Western’ individuals with terms like ‘businesspeople’, and non-‘Western’ individuals (in particular black and brown people) with ‘low-end’ ‘traders’. Within this surreptitiously pervasive gaze Africans in Guangzhou are seen as displaced victims of a push-and-pull effect (wretched individuals suffering from oppression) rather than as entrepreneurs pursuing their dreams. As you are about to read, the Africans that I met in China do not comfortably fit within the stereotypical ways in which the gaze of the ‘Global North’ routinely represents them.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been careful not to fall into the popular (but stereotypical) narratives, of the clandestine, subterranean, or even ‘illegal’ lives of Africans. This is not so much out of a desire of producing a sanitized or convivial representation of Africans in China, but mainly due to the fact that what I encountered on the ground cannot be explained through those narratives. Moreover, all too often Western audiences eagerly await to hear about issues of violence, confrontation, victimisation, displacement and racism when discussing cases of Africans on the move. These narratives, however, are by no means the main (or best) descriptions of what happens with Africans in Guangzhou. This is best exemplified by what one of my contacts shared with me in the early days of this research: ‘there is no structural racism against black people (in China). Some people want us to say that there is, but ‘it is not
the case.’ If I have problems here, it is not because I am a black man, but many people don’t want to understand this … they think that if I have trouble here it must be because I am a black man’ (Castillo, 2014). So, rather than presupposing the existence of the abovementioned issues, and setting out with a ‘critical’ perspective/framework to document victimisation, confrontation or illegality, I deemed it proper to take a step back and conduct my fieldwork with an open mind. Nevertheless, at some point during my research, I came across a question about a lack of ‘critical’ engagement as I had failed to prioritise confrontation, racism and discrimination – the issues that, all too often, are assumed to be the de rigueur anchors of any critical analysis of the experiences of a minority in an unfamiliar place. However, while there are issues and tensions, mainly between young Nigerians and the local authorities, I tried to give these tensions the importance that individuals on the ground give them. It must be said: tension, discrimination and confrontation are not the foundation of interactions between Chinese and Africans. The construction of racial prejudice in China dates long back into Chinese history (see Dikotter, 1992) and I am sure that it could shed an interesting light on the representations of Africans in Chinese media, and, indeed, on certain attitudes towards Africans and foreigners in general. As such, while I do touch on discrimination, an approach of racial prejudice is not an avenue that this research explores.

4. Ethnography as a method

As mentioned above, the qualitative approach that I use in this project is ethnography. This is done for several reasons. However, before discussing some of these reasons, it is important to note that, as Strauss (2003) suggests (quoting the Centre for Ethnography at the University of California, Irvine) ‘there is no single definition of ethnography or a uniformed practice of ethnographic method, nor should there be: ethnographic practice responds and adapts to field research situations’ (162). Ethnography, as I have experienced it, is an unpredictable, intersubjective, and open-ended process that entails participation, interpretation and reinterpretation, creation, ongoing reflection, and representation. Moreover, ethnography is a method of knowledge production (primarily based on the ethnographer’s experiences and conversations ‘on the ground’) that ‘does not claim to produce an objective account of
reality, but should aim to offer versions that are as loyal as possible to the context and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was created’ (Pink, 2001: 18). Moreover, as an unpredictable, open-ended, process that has ‘on the ground’ fieldwork as a point of departure, the ethnographer ‘embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytic protocols are often devised after the fact’ (Strathern, 2003). Frequently, as Strathern explains, ethnography is a ‘deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection’ (2003).

However, the data upon which the ethnographic production of knowledge relies is *generated* (through participant-observation, interviewing, and other qualitative techniques) rather than simply *collected*. Indeed, as Dourish puts forward, ethnographic data ‘is a result of an ethnographer’s *participation* in a site rather than simply a feature or aspect of the site that the ethnographer harvests while hanging around’ (2014 – my emphasis).

As briefly sketched out in previous sections, I firmly believe that the ethnographer’s participation (and her or his positionality) strongly influence the whole process of knowledge production and representation. In this way, it is important to emphasise that my research process was clearly underwritten by my own positionality as an individual on the move (a ‘transnational’ student/academic, who sends monthly remittances to his family members in Mexico), and by my desire/anxiety to make sense of my own journey, and the world I live in. Consequently, the type of ethnographic approach deployed here would certainly be located close to what is known as ‘critical (self-reflexive) ethnography’, as it goes against predominant metaphors and practices in anthropological/sociological research, which presuppose the possibility of an outside viewpoint. Drawing on my fieldwork experiences and the writing process, I contend that there is no such standpoint: in the production of ethnographic data/knowledge, there is no outside view – the ethnographer is always written into the ethnography.

Indeed, following Clifford (1986), I argue that all ethnographic accounts (or fieldwork accounts) are ‘intentional creations’ (10). Thus, the exclusion of the role/position of the researcher (the ‘creator’), for the sake of ‘objectivity’, amounts to obscuring the intersubjective processes and positions from which knowledge was created.

The researcher is not the only producer of this ‘intentional creation’, however. As Bhattacharya (2008) explains, the ethnographic process is ‘co-performed’ by the researcher and those with whom the research is being carried out; and then simultaneously co-constituted by these performances, the researcher’s theoretical
reflections, and the writing process. Following this line of thought, I never approached the fieldwork presupposing the possibility of an ‘invisible’ experienced observer who would interpret other cultures (attempting to be detached from her or his ‘object of study’); I expected my data, reflections, and writing, to emerge from the convergence of the multiple stories, trajectories, intersections, dialogues and performances that I encountered. In a way, as an empirical methodology, I used ethnography to bring several distinct voices into a conversation about some of the sociocultural transformations that the subjects with whom I interacted are living through. Accordingly, this dissertation is not an attempt to produce a complete or exhaustive account of the experiences of individuals on the ground but, rather, to describe and theorise – with my words – some of the lived experiences that they shared with me about their journeys, along with my own experiences.

Although I have highlighted the importance of the intersubjective exchanges that take place in and throughout the fieldwork, ethnographies are not only about these exchanges. All ethnographies are also (or become at some point) textual (written) pieces. As written pieces, they not only entail the taking of field notes, formulating of questionnaires, or the writing up of thoughts and results, as explained by Clifford (1986) but, perhaps more importantly, they involve careful processes of inclusion(s) and exclusion(s): the researcher selects events, voices, parts of stories, and personal reflections, that get woven into a narrative, ‘more or less’ chosen by the author. In this way, writing is not a marginal process that merely reports the findings, but a constitutive element of fieldwork and a critical tool in terms of representation. Accordingly, the textual strategy that I chose (during the process of writing) led me to produce a text that in many ways is a ‘fieldwork account’ (mixed with some theoretical interventions, historical data, and anecdotal images), rather than a mere reporting and listing of the fieldwork findings. Fieldwork and writing are very difficult to compartmentalise, and that will come across throughout the reading of this dissertation.

Moreover, while the discursive style and textual strategies that I chose are mainly aimed at discussing issues relevant to African presence in Guangzhou and transnationality as a ‘cultural condition’, this written piece inevitably traces my own journey – or the journey of my own becoming (as a researcher and a man). As I hope will be evident over the course of this dissertation, I have deep concerns about positionality and representation. My intention in writing myself into the narrative of
the dissertation is part of an attempt to contextualise my own positionality in order to make the dynamics behind the intersubjective exchanges that led me to produce this piece more transparent. This is important since, as noted earlier, the interpretation on which ethnographic writing bases its attempt to produce knowledge takes place from within positions. Positionality, thus, is vital not only ‘because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects,’ as Madison (2012: 7) argues, but, more importantly because it has an impact on the ways knowledge is produced and the lived experiences of the research subjects represented (Clifford, 1986). Indeed, as Hall (1997) points out, ethnographic representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated (in Madison (2012: 4)) – as such, representation was a central concern for me during the writing process. Furthermore, the particular discursive style that I deploy throughout this dissertation is profoundly marked by my desire to tell stories and by my previous journalistic experience. In a way, my ethnographic writing cannot and does not escape my previous experiences and positions.

Certainly, as suggested by Clifford (1986), ethnographic writing is closely intertwined with storytelling. In this sense, all ethnographic writing is, to some extent, fictional (1986) (or a partial truth to be less radical) – an account created/crafted by a teller. However, as pointed out by Clifford (1986), to argue that ethnographic writing is to some extent fictional is not to suggest that it is false, or opposed to truth. Rather, this suggestion highlights the fact that, while one generally attempts to remain loyal to the ‘facts’, the writing is something made, crafted, or fashioned – a partial representation of cultural and historical lived realities. As a crafting process, ethnographic writing – as I discovered through the writing of this dissertation – inevitably engenders a difference between the unfolding (of events) and the inscription/description (of the events) (Van Loon, 2001). There is an important difference (or disjuncture) between the lived experiences of the ethnographer/researcher in the field, and what emerges from the writing process. And it is in this difference (or disjuncture) – the space (or gap) where interpretation takes place – that power and history work through the ways in which ethnographies are written in ways the authors cannot fully control.

Moreover, not only is ethnographic writing a craft, it is also a ‘temporal injunction’ (as noted by Rosaldo (1986)). The product of ethnographic writing emerges
from (and is itself) a spatially and temporally contingent enterprise (Van Loon, 2001). To put it simply, had I written this dissertation one year earlier (or later) the content would undoubtedly have been different – not only would I have met different subjects, with somewhat different experiences, but the whole writing process would have been different. As the product of intersubjective, temporally contingent, enterprises, ethnographic texts are inherently constrained and determined by contextual, rhetorical, institutional (i.e. traditions & disciplinary fields), political, and historical factors, as put forward by Clifford (1986). Thus, the interpretation needed to craft the ethnographic writing emerges from (and is determined by) all of these contexts. Indeed, the writing of ethnographic texts is a relational process, ‘an inscription of (complex) communicative processes that exist, historically, between subjects in relations of power’ (Clifford, 1986: 15). To be sure, ethnographic writing is a transient, temporal injunction, a contingently produced/determined version of multiple and complex lived realities – a thread made of multiple threads, a story encompassing multiple stories.

In short, this dissertation does not presuppose an ‘ideal correspondence’ between what is communicated through writing and the multiple lived realities it discusses. Interpretation and writing are filters that make this correspondence almost impossible. In a way, as with all types of stories, ethnographic writing is not so much about what happened, but about how we talk about what happened. Moreover, while I have argued here that all ethnographic accounts are inherently partial, committed and incomplete, this is not to suggest that other methods are impartial, objective and complete. As Clifford (1986) puts forward, once partiality is acknowledged and ‘built into the ethnographic process, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact’ (7). Whilst acknowledging some of the limitations of ethnographic writing maybe a source of pessimism for some, acknowledging that it is impossible to produce a single whole truth about sociocultural formations is liberating (rather than limiting) for me. My stance on the limitations and ‘partiality’ of ethnographic writing is well summarised in the following quote from Clifford (1986):

But is there not a liberation, too, in recognizing that no one can write about others any longer as if they were discrete objects or texts? And may not the vision of a complex, problematic, partial ethnography lead, not to its abandonment, but to more subtle, concrete ways of writing and reading, to new conceptions of culture as interactive and historical? (25)
In a way, rather than claiming that this written account is an exhaustive/objective representation of the object of study, I follow Clifford (1986: 7) in arguing that even the best ethnographic texts are systems or economies of truth. I have done my best to find a way to render all the complex lived realities that I encounter as part of this dissertation’s narrative. However, at times, I was not able to find the best ways to render these realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent as they sometimes are. This is certainly a limitation of my methodological approach.

Finally, in terms of the writing process, while some conceptualise writing and fieldwork as different activities, I argue that both are deeply intertwined. Indeed, these pages are as much a product of the fieldwork (observations, exchanges, engagements) as they are of the writing journey. Hence, rather than a mere fieldwork account, what I present in this dissertation is a critical ‘self-reflexive fieldwork account’ in which I decline to engage in the rhetorics of ‘experienced authority’ and ‘rigorous objectivity’ by privileging the production of an account that is at times sophisticated and naïve, autobiographical, confessional and analytical.

I started out this section by claiming that I chose the ethnographic method for several reasons. While in the above discussion I have tackled some of the limitations and politics of ethnography, I will now address some of the main reasons that led me to give prominence to ethnography. First and foremost, I believe that an ethnographic approach offers the opportunity to go beneath the surface of presumptions, and disrupt, unsettle, challenge, redescribe, and critique some of the assumed frameworks, and paradigms that pervade Social Sciences and Humanities discussions around people on the move and migration. Second, I believe that ethnographic approaches have the potential to restore the value of individual experience by highlighting the fact that individual perceptions, understandings, choices, hopes and fears are all things that matter (Strauss, 2003). In this way, while contextually grounding the voices, perceptions and experiences of individuals, such approaches are critical (and effective) tools of ‘cultural research against theoretical reductionism’ (Willis, 1977, in Van Loon, 2001: 274). Moreover, from a Cultural Studies perspective, ethnography is a way to get involved and deal with some of the problems of representation. Third, an ethnographic approach makes visible not only the observable, but also things like objects (and the relations embedded in them), and immaterial and sensorial aspects of
human experience. Fourth, an ethnographic approach is indispensable in tackling the complex entanglements that constitute how subjects inhabit their worlds symbolically, affectively and experientially. Fifth, and finally, I believe that critical ethnographies are eminently suited to the study of complex, emerging, transient, and contested sociocultural formations; and that self-reflexive ethnographies are a great space/forum from where (or within which) to engage in discussions and theorisations around a wide range of issues, from epistemological to political, that are inextricably related to African presence in China (and associated emerging sociocultural formations), and to the representation of that presence.

4.1. Method description

To be clear, rather than a linear process (from research questions to findings), the method through which I was able to produce this dissertation was a dialectical, evolving, and intersubjective one. Accordingly, throughout the process of data generation (i.e. the fieldwork, (re)interpretation and ongoing reflection), intersubjective exchanges led me to constantly reframe my perspectives and understandings of the complex realities to which I was exposed. This reframing involved the revision/rewriting of ideas, and the exploration of sources, stories and questions that in some cases I had not expected to explore. In other words, while I planned to approach certain individuals, observe certain practices, and expected to do certain key interviews, working in the field and reflecting on the data that I generated led me to identify sites, patterns and principles (new to my research planning) that needed to be explored and followed.

In what follows, I provide details pertaining to the methodological approach undertaken here. I stayed and visited Guangzhou many times during the course of this investigation (from 2011 to 2014). Some stays where longer than others – sometimes I went there for an interview, sometimes I stayed for a couple of months. The main two legs of my fieldwork took place during the summers of 2012 and 2013 (each stay was three months long). All in all, I spent a total amount of 9 months doing fieldwork in the city. During this time, I spoke to dozens of individuals from many parts of Africa and China. In particular, I interviewed 21 people and had informal (semi-structured) conversations with more than 30 people – some of them I had also interviewed. The main method of contact for interviewees was snowballing from contacts that I made in
early stages of my fieldwork. Sometimes, they came recommended from other researchers and journalists. Initially, some contacts worked as gatekeepers that, after interviewing them, led me to other people. As mentioned above, while I had planned to interview some ‘key players’ in the several African communities in the city, my decisions on who to talk to ultimately relied on the availability of the contacts. As I will describe in depth in the following chapters, not many Africans in the city willingly or easily engage with academics and media – they have had many disappointments. Obviously, this reluctance to speak played an important role in my fieldwork and in the written piece. However, having said this, through insistence, I eventually managed to speak to most of the people that I felt necessary to interview. For more specific details on the interviews, please refer to ‘Appendix Interviews’.

Moreover, all my interviewed research subjects agreed to have the information they shared with me published. In some specific cases, they demanded to see what was written about them before publishing, to which I agreed. At some points, I struggled to make people understand the nature of my work. Different cases required different degrees of explanation. However, even after explanation, not all of my research subjects were equally aware of the nature of my work. In some cases (the least), even after several conversations, some of them kept thinking that my interviews were for media related purposes. The time invested in different relations also varied. My engagements with some individuals, as evident throughout the dissertation, were deeper and longer than with others. As expected, trust building took time, but it was not as difficult as I had imagined. In most cases, in particular in my conversations with Nigerians, consent was given under the proviso that they would not be represented in wrongful ways. As I discover through my fieldwork, many Africans in the city had their politics about representation and wanted someone to ‘clean/fix’ the negative representations and perceptions about African presence in the city. Most of them accepted to participate in my project thinking that they were contributing somehow to this ‘cleaning’. Hopes and interests for a better, more profound and encompassing, explanation of African presence in China were always made clear to me during my engagements with people in the city.
Before proceeding, a couple of disclaimers are in order. First, throughout this dissertation, I use the phrase ‘African presence’ to refer to the multiple human (i.e. stories, trajectories, activities, aspirations, and hopes) and non-human (i.e. objects, places, materialities) manifestations associated with the arrival, sojourn, visit, and transit of people from mainly sub-Saharan origin in Guangzhou. ‘Presence’ is also a wider, more encompassing term that highlights the multiplicity of experiences (different voices, emplacements, and statuses). Second, I use the term ‘mobility’ instead of (im)migration. As I will show, the concept of (im)migration fails to account for the complexities of the geographical mobilities involved in this case study.
Chapter 1

The emergence of the ‘Chocolate City’: multiethnic spaces, catering networks, and articulated subeconomies

1. Looking for the Chocolate City

In late 2011, I conducted a short pre-fieldwork trip to Guangzhou. It was a two-day flyby during which I hoped to establish that the Africans I had been reading about for the past year were still in the city. As such, my first objective was to locate what some researchers had called the ‘Chocolate City’ (Zhang, 2008; Bodomo, 2010). Zhang (2008), along with Li et al. (2008), had conceptualised this ‘city’ as an ‘ethnic enclave’ where scores of Africans lived in relatively high levels of isolation. The only other prominent researcher at that time talked of an ‘emerging African community’ (Bodomo, 2010: 695). Influenced by this research, and by my place-based imagination, I assumed that the ‘Chocolate City’ would be like a ‘Chinatown of Africans’ – a ‘Nigeriatown’ as Osnos (2009) had called it. I also assumed that it would be easy to find.

From my pre-fieldwork research, I knew that there were at least two locations with significant African presence in the city: a building in Xiaobei (小北), and an area in Sanyuanli (三元里). Lured by the idea of the ‘Chocolate City,’ I decided to go first to Sanyuanli (after all, a ‘city’ could not be inside a building, I thought). I took line 2 on the metro to Sanyuanli Station and exited into the bustle of Baiyun District (白云区). After asking for directions and walking for a few minutes, I found myself in front of an ornate paifang (牌坊) – traditional village gate. Written from right to left under the awning were the characters: 三元里村 – Sanyuanli Village. I’ve made it, I thought. I’m finally here in the place where Africa meets China. This is the place I’ve read all about. For the next two hours, I walked through the streets of the ‘village’ (which looked more like a run-down neighbourhood) without spotting a single other foreigner. I began spiralling
into fears about the possible exodus or disappearance of the ‘African enclave’. My years in China had taught me that the speed of contemporary social, economic and urban transformations renders all forms of appearances and disappearances possible. And, at that point, it seemed plausible that the ‘African community’ could have left or been dispersed. Maybe it’s too early in the day or maybe they’ve moved to another city, I mused, trying to calm down, before asking several street vendors and restaurant owners about the fate of the Africans who used to live there. Their answers worried me. Time and again, I was told: ‘No Africans here. There have never been Africans in Sanyuanli.’ Maybe the visa restrictions were tightened and it became impossible for Africans to live here, I thought, descending into a cold sweat about the prospect of having lost my case study before even finding it. Bewildered and anxious, I set off in the vague direction of where I imagined my hotel to be.

Before long, I realised I was lost. I bought a map and a bottle of water from a newsstand and searched for the closest metro station, which happened to be Guangzhou Railway Station (广州火车站). Some 40 minutes after buying the map, I had walked halfway there. As I passed through what looked like a dilapidated industrial area, I spotted an African couple. Curiosity got the better of me, and I began following them at just enough of a distance to not draw attention to myself. Before long, I found myself at a busy intersection bustling with pedestrians. Dozens of people were crossing the street and about half of them were African. There were some Middle Eastern looking people (like me), and the rest were Chinese. Suddenly, I had a flashback to a video I had seen on Youtube. I was standing right on the spot where Nigerians had demonstrated against police harassment and racial profiling in 2009. As I turned around, I saw the Kuangquan Police Station – the target of the demonstrations. As the streetlights turned green and I got caught up in the moving mass, I couldn’t help but think that I had finally arrived at one of the main contemporary intersections between African and Chinese civilisations. A shiver ran through my body. The ‘Chocolate City’ could not be far away. I asked a young guy next to me where we were: ‘This is Guangyuan West Road (广园西路),’ he replied in Mandarin.
That day, I walked through several of the wholesale markets in the vicinity of that intersection. Clothes, shoes, cosmetics and electronics were pervasive and traded in countless stores. Some of the wholesale markets were run almost entirely by Chinese; some appeared to be mainly African; and a couple were composite spaces in which both Chinese and Africans appeared to own stores. In these particular markets, Chinese occupied the more accessible spaces near the front of the markets, while Africans were generally located in the basements, upper storeys and rear-side spaces. I spent a couple of hours in one market where most of the shopkeepers/sellers were Nigerian. I was offered all manner of tight shirts and jeans, but even after deciding to invest in a couple of shirts, my inquiries about the African presence in the market were met with suspicion. ‘I’ve been here four years man, but business is no good now,’ one clerk told me, somewhat dismissively, after I insisted a few times. There were only a handful of buyers that day, and most shopkeepers seemed anxious. Eventually, I found myself drinking a cup of awful coffee in the only restaurant in that market: a McDonalds. As I sat by the window, sipped my coffee, and watched the many African men dodging the traffic, I spotted the famous Canaan Market (迦南外贸服装城) on the other side of the road. According to Li et al. (2012), in the early 2000s, Canaan became one of the first wholesale markets catering for African buyers and the site where many pioneering Ghanaians and Nigerians opened their first shops.

Later that afternoon, I decided to walk down Guangyuan West Road on the way back to my hotel. This made me realise that the whole area was a commercial
space – a microcosm of the several transnational trading chains that converge in the city. There were numerous Africans looking for garments, consumer goods and mobile digital gadgets; Russians and Eastern Europeans surveying jewellery and shoe markets; Middle Easterners and South Asians looking for domestic appliances, and so forth. Specific types of merchandise (i.e. electronics or garments) where concentrated in each trading cluster, which seemed to cater to the particular needs of traders from different places. Indeed, as I learnt later, the whole commercial-scape of the city is organised into clusters of trading malls that specialise in meeting market demands originating in multifarious places the world over.

When I finally got back to my hotel that evening, I was overwhelmed. Not only was I surprised by the countless number of foreigners that I had seen, but by the intensity of trading activities. It was clear that I had only witnessed a minute sample of what happens in Guangzhou every day, but I was awed by the size, multiplicity, and complexity of the transnational connections in the city. Certainly, I knew that there were thousands of foreigners in China (I had learnt that from my years living in the country), and I was familiar with tropes like Guangzhou being the world’s factory, but this was no ‘factory’ at all. It seemed more like a Mecca for transnational and translocal trade – a place of economic pilgrimage where businesspeople, entrepreneurs, producers and consumers could find everything they had ever wished for. Before going to sleep, I jotted down my first notes. They were preliminary observations delving around the types of interactions I had seen that day: my surprise at the significant presence of African women and children in the markets; how big and modern Guangzhou seemed – certainly very different from the ‘dangerous, uncivilised place’ that many people in Beijing and Hong Kong had warned me about; and, more importantly, how this multiethnic and multinational congregation (in the most populous city of the most populous province of the most populous country (Zhang, 2011)) seemed to be a powerful indication of not only the massive transformations taking place in China, but in many other parts of the world.

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In this chapter, I explore how certain of these multiple transnational connections have been impacting at the local level. I aim to analyse and describe the
ongoing connections and networks involved in this case study and how they bind together localities in different places – what Featherstone (2007) calls the ‘spatialities’ involved in transnational human movement. I claim that the spatial dynamics produced by African presence in Guangzhou have not been fully explored. Following Smith (2001), I contend that there is a need to view the spatialities of foreign presence in a city not simply as a rupture in the urban fabric, but rather as part of wider and ongoing transformations of urban areas that emerge from local, translocal, and transnational interactions. Throughout these pages, I intend to present a more relational approach to African presence in the city – from an ethnographic perspective. An approach that while keeping Africans in focus, highlights the diversity, and importance, of other actors. I contend that such an approach guards off against simplifying narratives. Moreover, through fieldwork examples, I bring to fore the interconnected multiethnic activities that have emerged to cater to (and support) the needs of Africans (and other foreigners) in certain parts of the city. As I will show, the economic activities that Africans carry out in the city have given rise to microindustries and subeconomies that, in turn, support the working demands of transprovincial migrants in the area. This creates a mutual dependence between individuals on the transnational and the translocal move in China.

In what follows, I first review some of the historical spatial configurations that propelled Guangzhou to become an attractive site for foreigners the world over. After that, I present a detailed ethnographic account of the spaces in which Africans concentrate. In doing so, I engage with previous research that has attempted to define the features of African presence in the city. In relation to this, I present a critique of extant representations of the sociospatial formations that have emerged after the arrival of Africans. In mobilising this critique, I suggest that rather than thinking of these formations in terms of bounded, coherent, finished spatial entities (i.e. enclave or community), it is more accurate to think of these formations as multiple, internally multiethnic, interconnected archipelagos that produce relations which spread out way beyond the confines of the city. Before proceeding, it is worth reminding the reader that a relational approach also informs the following chapters – where I analyse materialities, mobilities, emplacement, and aspirations. I believe that beginning this study with a localised history/description of the activities of individuals is the best way to deepen the understanding of the specifics of the transnational connections being
made possible in Guangzhou, and in general to provide another perspective on the specificity of the contemporary transnational moment.

1.1. The city as a trade fair: urban transformations and foreign arrival

Every year, countless individuals from the world over arrive in Guangzhou looking for opportunities in the many transprovincial and transnational value chains that converge in the city. In order to make better sense of this foreign congregation, it is imperative that I now take a detour through some of the key historical, economic, and urban transformations and dynamics that have led people to think of Guangzhou as a ‘land of opportunities’.

Guangzhou has a long history as the trading centre of southern China, and its historical and contemporary importance in connecting several Chinese economic processes to those of other parts of the world cannot be overstated. Indeed, while Guangzhou might not be a ‘new Rome’, it has become a crucial hinge in the process of China’s reentry into the global economy over the last few decades. According to Ouyang (1997), as a consequence of several overlapping and interlinked processes associated with the gradual implementation of market-based reforms (i.e. the decollectivisation of agriculture, the reemergence of private enterprise, and the arrival of foreign investment), the city and the whole Pearl River Delta (PRD) region were reconstituted (and soon consolidated) as one of China’s main trading regions. Starting in the early 1980s, through a complex and comprehensive process of economic restructuring (mainly aimed at fostering foreign trade and commerce), for instance, old commercial and trading districts were revitalised, specialised service oriented clusters emerged, and certain areas of the city underwent redevelopment and expansion (with the ensuing incorporation of rural townships and villages) (1997: 4). As a consequence of this, by the mid-1990s, the city had managed to resort to its pre-1949 role as the main commercial and trading port for consumer goods and export-oriented activities in the country (Ouyang, 1997: 4), and leave behind its socialist designation as a centre for non-consumer goods (Zhang, 2008: 390). Shortly after these processes took hold, Guangzhou became a critical hub in the conglomerate of highly interconnected cities that Castells (2000) calls ‘the Pearl River Delta metropolitan system’: a ‘mega-city’ of over 50 million people linking segments of the regional economies to wider ‘global
networks’ (436). Certainly, these transformations set the foundations vis-à-vis the arrival of foreigners (Middle Easterners and Africans in particular) in search of economic opportunities in the late 1990s.

One such cluster where economic restructuring, spatial reconfiguration, and reorientation towards integration with external markets all converge is the area around Guangzhou Railway Station and the Liuhua Complex (流花展馆) – the venue in Yuexiu District (越秀区) that hosted the Canton Fair for more than 30 years. As its development laid the commercial and urban infrastructures that facilitated the arrival and gradual settlement of foreigners in the city, this cluster is of particular relevance to the study of contemporary African presence in Guangzhou. In a way, the Canton Fair epitomises the economic and urban transformations that led to Guangzhou’s contemporary status as one of the most prominent trading cities in the world. Arguably, the Fair’s history mirrors Guangzhou’s transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one, and, as such, can roughly be divided into three instalments: the historical era (1957-1978); the modernisation period (1979-2001); and the post-World Trade Organisation age (2001 onwards) (Guangzhou Globe, 2012). The historical era of the Fair, which predated the construction of the Liuhua Complex, took place in the Sino-Soviet friendship building – in accordance with the spirit of the times. At that time, the Fair was known as the Chinese Export Commodities Fair (中国出口商品交易会). During the years of the Great Leap Forward and the early years of the Cultural Revolution, the Fair was somewhat of an itinerant event – moving venue every couple of years. As the Sino-Soviet split consolidated in the early 1970s, and China and the United States resumed trading relations, the Liuhua Complex was selected to be the place where all early economic modernisation efforts were concentrated (Guangzhou Globe, 2012; Tretiak, 1973). Consequently, the Fair and its neighbouring areas were the sites where the first attempts to reorient and reposition Guangzhou were articulated. Although by the end of the historical era, there was some indication of intended economic liberalisation, the cautious implementation of policies meant that foreign trade was confined within the Fair’s complex, and heavily regulated by the Ministry of Commerce (Guangzhou Globe, 2012).

The early 1980s were a crucial time in China’s modernisation processes and, accordingly, they marked a new period in the history of the Canton Fair. By then, the Fair had consolidated its political and economic status and was considered by some as
an ‘incubator’ of foreign trade oriented enterprises (Jin & Weber, 2008: 225). The energies behind these enterprises, and the political and economic pressures they exerted, led the government to finally take a further step in the liberalisation of trade. By 1992, reforms were passed that granted individual enterprises the right to engage in foreign trade activities outside the watchful eye of the state-owned import and export corporations (Jin & Weber, 2008: 226-7). Whilst allowing individual enterprises and firms to trade directly with foreign companies had a relatively minor impact on the Fair’s turnover, it brought a relatively unexpected outcome: the Canton Fair lost its pre-eminence and monopoly over foreign trade. The ripple effect of this decision was the gradual dissemination of commercial activity to multiple parts of the city, which fostered competition, further liberalisation, and significant growth in individual entrepreneurship in the private sector. These developments also coincided with the gradual relaxation of policies regarding foreign entry and housing (Gaubatz, 1999). This gave foreigners the right to sojourn beyond the time limits of the Fair – a decision that ended up having a significant effect on Guangzhou’s future economic and urban planning. By the mid to late 1990s, the intensification and diversification of foreign trade activities in the city led to the modernisation of transport links (such as the subway, airport, and seaport). In addition, the hospitality industry began to flourish, and a plethora of trading centres sprung up in the vicinity of Guangzhou Railway Station. A final liberalisation push in China’s housing markets in the early 2000s, lifted most restrictions on places of abode for foreigners (Wu & Webber, 2004; Wang, 2006). Due to the convergence of the transformations I have highlighted here, this area of the city emerged as an ideal location to accommodate the increasing numbers of foreigners and cater for their needs and longer sojourns.

Finally, (as part of the spatial reconfigurations it contributed to structure), the Canton Fair ceased to take place in the Liuhua Complex and was relocated to the recently developed Pazhou Island (琶洲岛) in the central district of Haizhu (海珠区). This new era of the Canton Fair has been referred to as the post-WTO era. Although the Fair was relocated, the foundations it laid down during decades of trading activity in the area still endure. These foundations should not be ignored when attempting to make sense of the evolution of the spatial dynamics that make the presence of Africans and other foreigners in the area possible. The countless wholesale markets along Guangyuan West Road that extend from Guangzhou Railway Station to Canaan Market, for instance, are a spill over from the Canton Fair days.
Arguably, the same liberalisation processes that led to the decline in the preeminence of the Canton Fair, also led to the whole city becoming (something like) a trade fair – with the emergence of trading clusters practically everywhere. Indeed, by the mid 2000s, the Canton Fair had fulfilled one of its original missions: it had brought China closer to the world, and the world closer to China. While it is outside the scope of this dissertation to make an exhaustive review of the complex processes articulated by (and through) the Fair, its importance for Guangzhou’s repositioning, and the role it played in structuring the connections (or paving the roads) that keep bringing foreigners and transprovincial migrants to southern China cannot be overemphasised.

1.2. Welcome Aboard!

Early on the second day of that short trip, I set out to locate Tianxiu Building – the site where, according to Bertoncello & Bredeloup (2007), the first trader from sub-Saharan Africa (a Malian national) set up a shop in 2000. I took line 5 on the metro to Xiaobei and exited on the south-eastern side of Huanshi Middle Road (环市中路). I was immediately struck by the jumble of signs in Arabic, Chinese and English that belonged to a number of sprawling Middle Eastern restaurants. I entered the first one, which was named ‘Al-Jazeera Restaurant’ in English, and asked a waiter for the location of Tianxiu. He pointed me towards the opposite corner of the intersection. I only needed to walk a few metres before my gaze fell upon the three colossal towers of the building.
I crossed the street over a wide pedestrian bridge, dodging the mix of peddlers selling everything from prayer rugs to battery-operated toys, beggars, and young Chinese girls offering marketing leaflets. As I reached the entrance of the building, the thick aroma of coffee wafted up. I looked down to the ground floor and saw a sign: ‘Lounge Coffee’. I decided to give Chinese coffee one last go. As I opened the door, I realised that this was no place for Chinese coffee. There were some 40 African patrons crammed into a 100-square-metre room along with 5 or 6 young Chinese waitresses. The air was heavy with the smells of coffee and tobacco, and the mix of animated conversation and laughter created an atmosphere of intense excitement – almost joy. As I wove my way past the heavy wooden furniture toward a small corner table, I heard French, Mandarin, English and Arabic. Some patrons were speaking jovially to the waitresses in Mandarin, and there was a feeling I interpreted as familiarity. I quickly realised that most of the people in the room knew each other, or were at least acquainted with each other’s origins and/or businesses. The friendly manager, who I later found out was from Egypt, approached me with a menu and a greeting in Arabic. When I replied in English, he seemed disappointed and shouted in Mandarin for one of the waitresses to take my order.

As I was waiting for my double espresso, a warning notice slipped under the glass tabletop caught my attention.

Caution From the Police to Foreigners

• Every foreigner who lives here should register your accommodation at the local police station. (remember to take the copy and original of your passport and the renting contract, house owner’s ID card copy is also needed) If you didn’t do it, you would be fined up to 500RMB and have a bad record.12
• Every foreigner must bring the passport when outside.
• Change money privately is illegal in China. The guy who asks you to change money is trying to cheat you and use fake money.
• In China, there are many stores to sell telephone cards. Buying cards outside may cause some criminal problems. For example, robbery and fake money.

Hong Qiao Police Station
ADD. No. 147 Yingyuan Road

In all my years in China, I had never seen a notice like that. Even before I had finished reading it, I must have been shaking my head in disbelief, because the man sitting next to me leaned over and said: ‘So, you’d better carry it at all times.’ His name was Seydou and he was from Mali. In the short conversation that followed, he told me that he liked ‘the Lounge’, because Ibrahim (the Egyptian manager) really knew what Africans liked. He also suggested that I survey some electronics markets in
Haiyin Square (海印广场) which had good prices. Before leaving, I asked him for a good place to eat African fare (I had read that there were many African kitchens operating out of the apartments in Tianxiu (Bodomo, 2010)), and he directed me to a Ghanaian restaurant in one of the towers above us. As I stood up to pay the bill, I noticed the café’s maritime theme – there was a massive ship’s wheel at the entrance and three white and navy lifebuoys on the wall behind the coffee bar sporting the words ‘Welcome Aboard’. As I was going out, I thought of the maritime theme as a metaphor for how Africans were moving from place to place, across the vast circuits of trade that they navigate. In the late 1990s, they sailed away from Dubai – and certain key South East Asian locations – to set foot ‘near’ China, in the then thriving export oriented microindustries of Hong Kong’s Chungking Mansions. In the mid to late 2000s, as it became easier for foreigners to live in China, they started moving away from the Special Administrative Region and ventured into the Chinese hinterland, arriving first in Guangzhou, before spreading to other cities in the Southern China region. Indeed, I pictured Tianxiu and Chungking as different decks of the same ship. I thought of the buildings as places/vessels (buoyant assemblages of relationships) that travelled through geographical space and networks carrying along people, relations, things and images, and producing new relationships as they moved through new and distant spaces (Sheller & Urry, 2006). As I entered the building, I wondered: what will the next port be like? Will this formation stay, or sail away? And, where will it go after China?

[Left: ‘Caution From the Police to Foreigners’. Right: Seydou, testing some ‘movie-glasses’ that he was planning to take to Mali – Lounge Coffee, Tianxiu Building (photos by author)]
After making a quick survey of the first four floors, I joined one of the long queues for the elevators. It was nearly lunchtime, and there were dozens of Africans lined up along with some Chinese workers with heavily loaded trolleys. It took me several minutes to get into the overcrowded elevator and up to the kitchen that Seydou had suggested. When I finally reached the floor, the rich smells led me directly to Madamatta’s kitchen. Madamatta, a middle-aged Ghanaian woman, arrived in Guangzhou in 2008 when business was at its peak. As time passed and profits dwindled, she ended up moving in with a Chinese couple, and together, they opened a kitchen in their apartment. Before long, her business partner, Mr. Xu, had learnt how to prepare *foufou*, *jollof* rice and other dishes for the many West African patrons who frequent their kitchen. As I was digging into my *foufou*, two men in the corner kept throwing me suspicious glances. At some point, I considered that they might have been assessing my poor *foufou* eating skills. Finally breaking the tension, one of them asked me if I was Egyptian. I told them I was Mexican, and they laughed in disbelief. ‘Mexican? You look like an Arab!’ One of the men was from Guinea and the other was from the Ivory Coast. Strangely, however, when I spoke to them in French, they rapidly accepted that I was a Mexican, and the conversation turned, inevitably, to the Mexican *telenovelas* that were such a hit in the 1990s. As my comfort with them grew, I asked them how to get to the ‘Chocolate City’. They shot each other a confused look and changed the topic. Still without an answer, I asked Mr. Xu for the bill and left. I had a train to catch.
More than simply a building, Tianxiu – Xiaobei’s 18-year-old landmark – is a massive multi-towered complex. Apart from a three-star hotel and the commercial spaces on the first four floors of the towers, the 36 storeys of Tianxiu are filled with a mix of offices, residential apartments and eateries. The building is one of the several commercial centres that sprung up in the area as foreign trade extended beyond the premises of the Canton Fair. Moreover, Tianxiu became the first place to be identified as a site of congregation for ‘transnational migrants’ (mainly African and Middle Eastern) in Guangzhou (Li et al., 2008). Bertoncello and Bredeloup (2007), contend that the first African traders (who were Malian) arrived in Tianxiu following the 1997 Asian financial crisis with plans to (re)activate the connections they had made over the years at the Canton Fair. Shortly after, a number of Guinean and Nigerian traders left their positions in places like Dubai, Bangkok and Jakarta to establish outposts in Tianxiu and a few other emerging trading centres and housing blocks in the area (see Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009; Zhang, 2008; and Li et al., 2008). These early ‘pioneers’ carried out the collective, but perhaps unintended, task of opening trading routes, opportunities, and imaginations for future generations of African traders and entrepreneurs. Their Guangzhou offices in the early 2000s also laid a foundation for the emergence of ‘catering networks’ (a concept I will discuss later in this chapter) that facilitate the continued and recurrent presence of Africans in the city today.
Due to the presence of these transnational traders, Tianxiu has repeatedly been equated with Hong Kong’s famous Chungking Mansions as a container for ‘low-end globalisation’ in China (see Mathews 2007, 2011; and Mathews and Yang, 2012). The ‘low-end globalisation’ perspective casts African and South Asian traders in Southern China as carriers of globalisation by means of acquiring and smuggling cheap and (sometimes) counterfeit goods across borders. Mathews conceptualisation, which is profoundly inspired by the state-centric ‘world systems’ perspective (Wallerstein, 2004), deems ‘low-end globalisation’ as a process that takes place somewhere between the semi-periphery (i.e. China) and the extreme periphery (i.e. Africa). Mathews claims that without these carriers of globalisation, regions like South Asia and Africa would not experience globalisation (see Mathews, 2012).

Despite relative underoccupancy in the early years (caused by an oversupply of commercial spaces in the area (Zhang, 2008)), by the early 2000s, business in Tianxiu was thriving. Although there could have been any number of contributing factors as to why Tianxiu became a point of congregation for foreigners, and in particular for Africans by the mid 2000s (i.e. renting fees, high vacancy, management issues (Li et al., 2012)), location was paramount. The building is less than a 10-minute drive from Guangzhou Railway Station and in walking distance of the Huaisheng Mosque – Guangzhou’s principal mosque. It is perhaps for those reasons that, in the early days, dozens of trading companies from the Middle East (along with a handful of Chinese ones) set up offices, and Tianxiu became informally known as the ‘Yemen Building’ (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009: 59) or ‘Dubai Tower’. It was not until the late 2000s that the change in demographics led Tianxiu to being called – albeit unofficially – ‘Africa Tower’ (非洲大厦). From the mid 2000s, Tianxiu’s towers were one of the few sites where African entrepreneurs networked and organised trade deals. Places like Lounge Coffee and the adjacent Moka Coffee are crucial locales where African transnational traders have successfully extended their networks from Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia to China.
As I sat on the train heading for the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border, I began to gather and write down my thoughts. An early impression of those first encounters was that while it was possible to frame the multiplicity of the exchanges between Africans and Chinese within the state-centric narrative of the increased economic and political relationships between African states and China, doing so could risk abandoning the task of detailing the nuances and complexities involved in their stories and experiences. At the same time, another idea that emerged from this first short visit was that while I suspected that there were several regimes of mobility at play in this case study, I believed that part of what was happening on the ground happened far away from the reach of the state. In this sense, I wondered how to go about the study of the interconnectedness and mobilities that Ong (1999) put forward as the main characteristics of the transnationality condition without having to rely on the nation-state as the framing/container of analysis. Hence, I thought that an analysis of transnationality as a cultural condition informing contemporary mobilities required a perspective that, while considering the importance of state controlled/produced regimes of mobility, could move beyond nation-state centric analyses. This is how I first understood the ‘condition of transnationality’ implicated in this case study.

Moreover, I thought that in order to better understand the lived experiences of individuals moving between Africa and China, rather than basing my analysis on the assumption that these individuals were ‘transnationals’ only because they constantly crossed borders, I would benefit more from focusing on how such condition impacted on their ways of making sense of their journeys and, perhaps, in the ways in which that
sense making may (or may not) challenge their national identities. In short, I wanted to look at how was this transnational condition negotiated at the individual level. In doing this, I needed to think of the ‘trans’ in ‘transnational’ not only in the trans-gressive, trans-versal, trans-actional, and trans-lational senses suggested by Ong (1999: 4), but also as in trans-cending the national for the sake of analysis. Thus, my first reading of the ‘trans’ in transnational was in terms of perspective. Put another way, I thought about this transcending as an attempt to circumvent the monolith of ‘methodological nationalism’, not only in terms of framing my analysis but also in terms of the representation of the lived experiences of individuals on the move. So rather than looking at how the condition of transnationality impacts on the lived experiences of individuals on the move by following them through several nation-states and bordercrossings, as a methodological nationalism informed transnational perspective would have it, I thought that the ‘local’ was also a space/platform from where a transnational analysis could be undertaken. Transnationality, as a condition, is a multi-scalar phenomenon. As such, I suspected, it could also be analysed beyond the national scale and far away from border checkpoints. In short, while I thought that I could benefit from following research subjects through several geographic locations, I deemed it more important to analyse how this condition (and associated interconnections, mobilities, and systems of govermentality) impacted on the lived experiences of individuals, and in the formation of identities and aspirations. As the train was crossing the border, I thought that while a transnational analysis required a multi-sited perspective, these multiple sites did not need be equated with multiple geographical locations. ‘This could be a way of grounding transnational research in the everyday’, I thought, just before reminding myself that I had failed at locating the ‘Chocolate City’ that I had read about. I would have to wait. My next fieldwork trip was scheduled a couple of months ahead.

1.3. Counting the numbers: the early population surveys

If I took anything from that first rushed visit to Guangzhou, it was the sheer size of the foreign presence in the city. As I pointed out earlier, the gradual relaxation of policies on foreign presence over the last decade, along with the further liberalisation of trade, housing and investment, created the necessary conditions for foreigners to
freely choose where to reside. Consequently, foreigners have gradually become a common presence in China’s urban ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai, 1990), and Guangzhou (or perhaps Guangdong province in general) has been at the forefront of this trend.

Data from China’s last national census in 2011, the first ever to account for foreigners, indicated that there were some 600,000 registered foreigners living in the country, in addition to 250,000 residents from Hong Kong or Macau, and some 170,000 ‘compatriots’ from Taiwan (NBS, 2011). Citizens from Korea, the United States, Japan, Myanmar, Vietnam, Canada, France, India, Germany and Australia accounted for approximately 70 percent of foreign residents in the census (or some 420,000). Not surprisingly, Guangdong province was reported as hosting the majority of this ‘combined population’ (those from Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan, and all other foreigners) with ‘foreign’ numbers reaching some 300,000. At this point, it is important to note that the category of ‘foreign residents’ used in this statistical measurement does not account for the numbers of 'unregistered' foreigners (those 'living' in the country by extending or renewing tourist, business or student visas, or those who overstay their permits) – these figures could also be in the thousands. Disappointingly, the census did not provide any specific figures or details about the foreigners living in Guangzhou. However, Zhang (2008) reported that by 2007, some 50,000 permanent and long-term foreign residents (along with some 450,000 temporary foreign residents) resided in the cities of Guangdong province (386).

Indeed, China lacks a specific government body responsible for statistics on inbound international migration. Thus, reliable data on foreign entry (either authorised or unauthorised) and ‘migrant settlement’ in the country is summarily unavailable (Zhu et al., 2008; Li et al., 2008). Zhu et al. (2008) and Liu (2011) noted that a number ministerial-level government bodies (i.e. China National Tourism Administration, Exit & Entry Administration, and the Public Security Bureau) are in charge of the influx of foreigners and that they produce different figures that do not always correlate. Take for instance the disjuncture between data produced by the Exit & Entry Administration and by local branches of the Public Security Bureau, which both belong to the country’s Ministry of Public Security. On the one hand, the Exit & Entry Administration Bureau15 – the body controlling the flow of people across the border (both inbound and outbound) – produces annual data on overseas visitors. However, entries to the country are counted on a ‘person-times’ basis – this means that if an individual enters China three times in a year, the record registers three individuals (Zhu
et al., 2008: 421). On the other hand, data obtained from the local branches of the Public Security Bureau – the designated police stations where foreigners are supposed to register – only focuses on individuals registered in a particular area (either living in apartments or lodging in hotels). So, while data produced by the Exit & Entry Administration Bureau is quite raw and inflated, data provided by the Public Security Bureau is supposedly more accurate. Nonetheless, data provided by the Public Security Bureau fails to account for individuals who either do not register or who (illegally) extend their stay in the country. Indeed, depending on the particular sets of data analysed, the size of the population looks significantly different. As such, any real or conclusive figures on the foreign presence in Guangzhou (or in the country as a whole) are difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

Due to the disjuncture and inaccuracies in the official data, early researchers on the African presence in Guangzhou designed their own methods to ascertain just how big the population had grown. The results, however, were disparate figures ranging from 1,500 to 20,000 to well over 100,000 (see Zhang 2008; Li et al., 2009; Bodomo 2010; Haugen 2012; and, Pieke, 2012). By adding together the numbers of individuals registered in the police stations of several neighbourhoods in 2008, Zhang (2008), for instance, concluded that there were less than 3,500 Africans in the city (386). Li et al. (2008), however, resorted to a more creative method of tracking the African presence. By gathering data from hotels guest books and restaurants, they concluded that African presence in the city had peaked in 2005 (as there were some 30,000 records). Their figures (made up of ‘person-times’ too) were also very raw – no distinctions were made between short and long-term stays, for instance. Nonetheless, drawing also on reports issued by the Public Security Bureau, they countered that by 2008 there were some 1,000 African residents in the city (7). In stark contrast with these early researchers, Bodomo (2010; 2012) claimed (based on personal observations and ‘educated deductions’) that Guangzhou’s African population had exceeded 100,000.

There are several reasons why these figures are so disparate. As explained above, these researchers had different methods and approaches; and, in some cases, they were looking at different parts of the city. Zhang (2008) and Li et al. (2008) drew their figures from official sources sharing data about one location: the area around Xiaobei. They seem to have overlooked the significant number of Nigerians and Ghanaians that, since around 2004, have traded, lived and/or lodged around the area of Guangyuan West Road. In addition, these researchers looked at different types of
‘population’. While Zhang and Li et al. focused primarily on registered individuals, Bodomo’s (2010) calculation seemingly allowed for a sizeable number of non-registered and transient individuals, and even those overstaying their visas (an approach that was, perhaps, too wide). Zhang and Li et al.’s calculations, however, did not consider the fact that experienced foreigners often juggle a variety of visa types to extend their sojourns in the country.

As a result of these methods, the figures provided by these researchers were either incomplete or mere speculation. Furthermore, in the last five years, a number of journalists and scholars have failed to notice these inaccuracies and discrepancies, and, indiscriminately, reproduced the figures. Further bolstering the notion of an African population of 20,000, 30,000 and even 100,000 were a series of media reports claiming that there was an annual population increase of 30 to 40 percent (see Osnos, 2009; and Branigan, 2010; amongst countless others). Indeed, the composition and dynamics of the African population in Guangzhou are quite complex; and it is not really plausible that any researcher defines who counts as ‘an African in Guangzhou’. Should an individual who is visiting the city for the first time on a weeklong business trip be counted as an African in the city? Should only those individuals who register with the police be counted? What about those who opt (or are forced) to overstay (sometimes for years) then? Should itinerant traders who sporadically visit China be counted? In Chapter 3, I explore, at length, the diverse statuses, situations, and trajectories of the Africans living, lodging and sojourning in the city, and explain why their transiency and their multiple emplacements render the emphasis on the debates about numbers inadequate.

Over the last five years, scholarship has not only attempted to determine numbers but also the nationalities of the Africans in Guangzhou. The latter has also proven difficult. The ease of obtaining a Chinese entry visa (and extending it) is highly erratic and seemingly dependent on the relationship China is having with each African state at that particular time, although the concerns of local authorities in China also seem to play a role. Moreover, several individuals that I met enter China with passports from countries other than their country of origin – either because of having double citizenship or by acquiring passports illicitly. In addition to this, according to community representatives, many young Nigerians, for instance, often lie about their nationality, claiming to be Malian, Guinean, Sierra Leonean or Senegalese.¹⁶ Notwithstanding this, Bodomo (2010) reported that in 2008 and 2009, the majority of
those in what he calls Guangzhou’s ‘African community’ were from Nigeria and Ghana and, to a lesser extent, Mali and Guinea. Around the same time, Zhang (2008) and Li et al. (2008) wrote that the Africans in the ‘ethnic enclave’ they were surveying were mainly Francophones from West Africa (presumably, Mali, Senegal and Guinea). However, over the last 5 year, the dynamics have changed, other nationalities have arrived, and the distinction between a Francophone Muslim region and a purely Nigerian area is difficult to maintain. Besides these authors, there have been no further attempts to establish the origins of Africans in the city.

1.4. The French Connection: Dengfeng village

A couple of months after my first short visit to Guangzhou, I went back for a three-month trip and lodged in a hostel near the centre of the city. In between my first visit and this longer leg of my fieldwork, I had visited the city on two other occasions, and was still on the lookout for the so-called ‘Chocolate City’. On my first night in the hostel, I met a group of international students on break from their language studies in Beijing and ended up taking them for a ‘traditional’ Guangzhou dinner – roast duck, pork belly and the works. Over the course of the meal, one French student became fascinated by my research topic and, before going back to the hostel, made me draw her a map of how to get to Tianxiu. She left me with the promise of going there the next day.

The following evening in the hostel, I looked for her and asked about Tianxiu: ‘Amazing right?’ I said. ‘Yes, it’s amazing,’ she said. ‘But, I didn’t find the building. I found a town though – something like an African town!’ My heart skipped a beat. ‘African town? Where?’ I asked anxiously. ‘Right there,’ she said, ‘where you told me to go…’ as she spoke about the things she had seen that afternoon, she took out her camera and showed me dozens of photos of streets that I had not seen in my surveys of Xiaobei. Her images depicted bustling streets and restaurants full of African people in what looked like an old and very cramped neighbourhood. This time, I asked her to draw me a map. As she was scribbling down directions, I thought of calling a taxi and going there immediately. It was almost midnight, however, and as I had drunk more than a couple of beers with a group of Chinese travellers on the hostel’s rooftop, I decided to leave it for the next day.
The place my ‘French connection’ led me to, was a conglomerate of decaying buildings in an area not far from Tianxiu Building. At the moment I arrived to what the French woman had called an ‘African town,’ I knew that this was the place I would be based during my fieldwork in Guangzhou. I also could not believe that I had missed this section of Xiaobei before. As I roamed through the cramped alleys of the village, I witnessed innumerable interactions between Chinese, Africans and Middle Easterners, before finally finding myself in the lobby of the New Dengfeng Hotel (新登峰宾馆).

As I booked a room and made the deposit for a three-month stay, I asked the receptionist the name of the neighbourhood: ‘The whole region is called Xiaobei, she explained in Mandarin, ‘but, this part here is called Dengfeng Village (登峰村).’

Dengfeng’s main entrance, which was, at that time, flanked by a Public Security Bureau (or police station), is through a dimly lit tunnel that is usually bustling with peddlers and pedestrians. Most other entrances to this urban village are partially gated. As you enter the village through the main tunnel and cross Heng’an Road (恒安路), which tends to have a mix of taxis and mototaxis speeding down it dodging the carts selling dried fruits and cut cake (切糕), you can see New Dengfeng Hotel set back on the right. In front of it is a cemented area where minivans pull in and out all day. To the left is a construction site where a mall used to be. The road running between New Dengfeng Hotel and the construction site is the main thoroughfare – Baohan Straight Road (宝汉直街) – which is more like an alley than a road, more windy that straight. Along Baohan is an eclectic collection of restaurants and shops that are partially hidden behind the grills and racks of clothing that spill out from them and block the road.

The restaurants along Dengfeng’s main stretch are predominantly patronised by Africans, and serve several types of Chinese cuisine (mostly Muslim), along with African, Middle Eastern and some kind of ‘Sino-Afro-Turkic fusion’. Entrepreneurs from Guangdong have set up Turkish barbecue houses and African restaurant-bars; and Uyghurs have ‘Africanised’ their grills, plating up whole chickens and fish instead of their traditional lamb skewers. A number of other restaurants in the area have also followed suit and abandoned their traditional noodle menus for whole fish, chicken and rice. Entrepreneurs from the Cantonese hinterland have set up Turkish BBQ houses and African bars and restaurants.
Surrounding these restaurants is all manner of commercial activity. There are 24-hour stalls offering cheap calling rates to African countries, makeshift (and officially ‘illegal’) currency exchange booths, DVDs and CDs of Nigerian, Congolese, Indian and American movies and music, the odd advertisement in Chinese, French or Arabic for ‘micro-schools’ teaching Mandarin and English, and piles of African waxed fabrics manufactured in China. There are also dozens of printing shops filled with all types of African electoral propaganda: T-shirts, school bags, posters, drink bottles, jackets and badges bearing the faces of Uhuru Kenyatta (Kenya’s president) or Alassane Ouattara (The Ivory Coast’s president), for example. French speaking Chinese travel agents share office space with garment shops with staff from central China who is able to speak Portuguese.

All these businesses catering specifically for Africans are straddled amongst a plethora of other businesses catering for more general consumption: grocery stores, pharmacies, furniture, home and hardware stores, hair saloons, tailors, laundromats, Halal butchers, Uyghur bakeries, electronics and phone repair shops, clothes, shoes and cosmetics stores, travel agents, mail delivery services, sex shops, and even a wet market. In fact, as you keep walking down Baohan Straight Road towards the eastern side of the village (about a ten minute walk from the area where most Africans congregate), the businesses gradually change to reflect less transnational and more local economies, and become similar to those found in other urban villages or neighbourhoods without a significant foreign presence. Despite this, a substantial group of Indian and Pakistani businesspeople do lodge in the hotels on the eastern side of the village and have opened a couple of bars and restaurants, but their presence is far smaller than that of sub-Saharan people.

If enough time is spent in Dengfeng, a few questions are asked, and the right doors are knocked on, another layer of material practices emerges. There are several clandestine Pentecostal congregations taking place in hotel conference rooms, or in the higher stories of relatively unoccupied commercial buildings. Muslim prayer rooms (labelled as ‘Mosques’) can be found inside storage rooms in the malls, or below electric stairs. Unnamed hidden bars catering specifically for Africans can be found inside restaurants that otherwise would pass as Chinese food spaces – during the weekends, bottles of Guinness beer and whisky are conspicuously consumed in these spaces until late in the morning. Ghanaian, Malian, Guinean, and Congolese women run dozens of family kitchens or eateries from apartment rooms. Over the last 4 years,
from time to time, some of these women have ‘rented’ the kitchens of Chinese owned cafes and bars, thus attracting African clientele.

During my first few weeks in Dengfeng, I met several African itinerant traders, along with a number of Chinese shopkeepers, restaurant owners, drivers and hotel staff. One of the first Chinese I got to know well was Mrs. Deng. Originally from a remote village near the border of Guangdong province and Guangxi Autonomous Region, Mrs. Deng and her husband first arrived in Dengfeng in the mid-1980s and have lived and worked there since. About five years after arriving, they managed to open a tiny convenience store at the start of Baohan Straight Road that sells drinks, cigarettes, and snacks. In the many conversations we had, Mrs. Deng talked me through the history of the urban village. She told me that in the 1980s it became possible for many people living in rural villages and townships to move into urban areas, and thousands of families (like hers) moved to big(ger) cities looking for opportunities. As accommodation in downtown Guangzhou was expensive and difficult to come by, most of these migrants settled in places like Dengfeng, which was, at that time, a farming village on the outskirts of Guangzhou. As the influx of migrants into these villages continued, construction took off leading to a partial urbanisation of the villages during the 1980s and 1990s. ‘Almost everybody here comes from elsewhere,’ Mrs. Deng told me one night in Mandarin.

All the people you see in the streets here, from the fruits peddlers to those selling clothes or working in the restaurants, hotels and malls, are from Hunan, Hubei or Henan. There are almost no people from Guangzhou here. Some, like me, come from towns in Guangdong province, but the majority are from other places. They don’t even speak Cantonese. (Mrs. Deng – Interviewee 1)

With time, Mrs. Deng became an invaluable source of information and, in one way or another, I double-checked almost everything she told me. Some of my other Chinese acquaintances often looked surprised when I recounted the stories told to me by Mrs. Deng without quoting her. A few even thought that I was some kind of expert in the history of the city – which, needless to say, I was not. It was Mrs. Deng who explained to me, for example, that Dengfeng was like a ‘company’. She said that at some point in the 1980s, the village committee decided that as Guangzhou’s economy was thriving and the surrounding areas were being redeveloped, they needed to size up the opportunities and cash in on Dengfeng’s strategic geographical location (close to Guangzhou Railway Station and the former Canton Fair complex). Shortly after, some designated areas of the village were leased to investors with plans to develop
commercial spaces. ‘Most of the commercial buildings here were developed by entrepreneurs from other provinces,’ she explained.

It was a young Hunanese man who developed the hotel where you stay on land leased to him by the committee. People like him became rich here. They came without money and now they are big bosses. They still pay a lot of money to the committee, though. Many of the original villagers still receive monthly incomes from the buildings and businesses that you see around here. (Mrs. Deng – Interview 1)

Several times throughout our conversations, Mrs. Deng emphasised that it was difficult for her to make sense of just how fast and dramatically life had changed in Dengfeng.

When the first hotel [Dengfeng Hotel] opened in the early 1990s, and the Arabs started arriving, things changed forever – business got better for me, although I sometimes miss the days when there was no pavement and crops were farmed here. Some things were easier then, and it was not as polluted as it is now. (Mrs. Deng – Interview 1)

The last few times I spoke to Mrs. Deng, she complained about what she perceived as a decreased African presence in the area. She had felt it in her pocket. Mrs. Deng had started worrying about the economy and did not know what would happen if all the foreigners suddenly left. ‘We need Africans here,’ she muttered once while handing me a beer. ‘They bring good business’. As the drills from the demolitions around her store started up again, she looked around. ‘They are planning to renovate the whole of Dengfeng. I hope they don’t force me out of here,’ she said. ‘This spot is good business for me.’ In a way, the story of Mrs. Deng highlighted the complex interdependence (and the shared difficulties) between different types of individuals on the move, either ‘local’ or foreign.
1.5. Transprovincial migrants: the ‘others’ on the move

Guangzhou, along with many other cities in Guangdong province, are sites of heightened mobilities. As a ‘mega-city’ in the making, the PRD metropolitan system is a magnet not only for foreign traders and entrepreneurs, but a substantial population of transprovincial migrants. During that first extended leg of my fieldwork, I was struck by the fact that I barely heard Cantonese in the trading malls or areas where Africans interacted with Chinese. Most of the Chinese I met in those areas, and who were in close contact with Africans, were not Cantonese speakers and, as Mrs. Deng had explained, came from other provinces looking for opportunities. I realised at that early stage of my research that Africans were not the only ‘people on the move’; in many cases, their Chinese business counterparts were themselves ‘people on the move’ (I will expand on this comparison in Chapter 3). This realisation radically impacted on my further conceptualisations about Africans in Guangzhou. While I determined that my research would remain focused on what Africans were doing in the city, I became certain that central to how Africans had been inserting themselves into the complex economic, ethnic and social systems in China was their interactions with these transprovincial migrants. In short, I became convinced that by looking at these interactions, I would better understand how Africans have been able to reproduce their presence in city. Indeed, a short time later, I learnt that the city hosts one of the country’s largest ‘floating populations’ – a population composed predominantly of transprovincial migrants and, to a lesser extent, foreigners.17

Guangzhou’s development has been characterized by the acquisition and redevelopment of farmlands from dozens of formerly outlying villages (Humen, 2010). Nonetheless, there are a number of villages that have resisted redevelopment and remained somewhat as they were. It is these villages that are known as ‘urban villages’ or ‘villages in the city’ (城中村) – hybrid urban/rural formations surrounded by urban sprawl (Cheng, 2012). While these ‘villages’ can be found in many cities along the PRD, they are most typical of Guangzhou (Lin, 2011: 3583).18 Dengfeng is one such village that has resisted redevelopment and remained a hybrid formation. It is an assemblage of narrow alleys, old, decaying buildings, and larger, newer constructions
that, in less than 2,500 square metres, house a registered population of about 3,000 people (Symposium, 2011) – but, this number is, undoubtedly, higher. Over the last three decades, as China’s internal mobility restrictions have been gradually relaxed, transprovincial migrants have tended to congregate in the relatively marginal settings of these urban villages where the cost of living is lower (Zhou and Cai 2008). Indeed, Guangzhou’s 140 or so urban villages are home to up to 80 percent of the city’s transprovincial migrants (Hsing, 2009: 123). As such, contemporary Urban Studies scholars in China have conceptualised urban villages like Dengfeng as ‘migrant enclaves’ (see Lin, 2011; and, Li & Wu, 2014) characterised by economic exclusion, high density, overcrowding (Lin, 2011: 3584). Currently, most of Dengfeng’s ‘Chinese’ population are first and second-generation transprovincial migrants from Hunan, Hubei, Henan, Jiangxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang. These migrants usually rent property from the original villagers (now ‘landlords’), who, in many cases, have moved out of the village and into more affluent locations. The lives of many transprovincial migrants are further characterized by the fact that, in many cases, they do not enjoy the benefits of local citizenship (户口) (i.e. access to formal housing, medical care, pensions, insurance and education). As such, many migrants (including second-generation migrants born in Guangzhou) live in a permanent state of migrancy (Lin, 2011: 3586).

As Guangzhou re-entered the global economy, Dengfeng’s strategic location and relatively cheaper accommodation made it an attractive alternative for the hundreds of sub-Saharan, Middle Eastern and North African people who now either live in the village’s housing blocks or lodge in its hotels. Dengfeng’s foreign population has been estimated at some 1,500 registered residents from 83 countries (Zhang, 2008; Symposium, 2011) (and this figure excludes transient individuals that lodge in hotels, sometimes for months or years as many Tanzanians and Kenyans, I met, do). Over the last 15 years, Dengfeng has transformed radically as a consequence of the constant, recurring presence of foreigners and their interactions with the transprovincial migrants that keep flowing in from the Chinese hinterland. Now, due to the high visibility of Africans and other foreign groups in a single neighbourhood, media and some scholarship have coined this area: the ‘Chocolate City’; the ‘Little Muslim United Nations’; and, more recently, ‘China’s Little Africa’ (Zhang 2008; Osnos 2009; Li et al. 2012; Gillet 2013).
While at a certain point of my research, I believed I had finally found the so-called ‘Chocolate City,’ my early observations (along with my conversations with Mrs. Deng, business owners, and other African and Chinese residents in the urban village), led me to think of this notion as inaccurate. Given what I had seen and heard, it became impossible for me to think of Dengfeng as an ‘Africa town’ or a ‘Chocolate City,’ or, for that matter, as an ‘ethnic enclave’ (Zhang, 2008; Li et al., 2008, 2012) or an exclusively ‘African community’ (Bodomo, 2010, 2012). Such conceptualisations failed to grasp the complexities of Dengfeng and ignored the importance of the multifarious and sustained interactions between the Chinese ethnic minorities and the Africans who live or recurrently visit the area. In short, the ‘Chocolate City’ is a discursive construction that only exists in the imaginations of the researchers and journalists who have written about it – not in the everyday lives of the individuals who live there.

2. Debunking the ‘Chocolate City’: multiethnic assemblages in a Chinese village

As mentioned above, people from all over Africa have been flocking to Guangzhou since 2006; and many subsequent media and academic reports have reported the existence of a ‘Chocolate City’, which has, in some cases, been depicted as an ethnic enclave (or ghetto) where thousands of black people live in relatively high levels of isolation (Li et al., 2012, 2009, 2008; Zhang, 2008). This begs the question: Is there really a ‘Chocolate City’ in Guangzhou? And if so, where is it? And, what is it like? In the following section, I answer these questions, by describing the emergence of (and interactions taking place in) the space(s) that have become known as the ‘Chocolate City’. By doing so, I also intend to clarify the myths and misconceptions surrounding this ‘Africa town’ in the capital of Guangdong province.

The ‘Chocolate City’ (巧克力城) is a term of relatively obscure origin that started appearing in scholarship and media in 2008 to refer to the locale(s) where most Africans congregate in Guangzhou. The very first reference appears in Zhang’s article ‘Ethnic congregation in a globalizing city: The case of Guangzhou, China’ (2008). According to Zhang, taxi drivers had been using the term ‘Chocolate Town’ for a while to refer to an area in Yuexiu District where an African population was highly visible (387). In fact,
the ‘chocolate’ adjective was originally used to refer to two distinct (but, not so distant) locations that were, at that time, not so closely interrelated: a wholesale market area on Guangyuan West Road (near Canaan Market); and the conjoined area of Dengfeng and Xiaobei. So, indeed, for Zhang’s taxi drivers there was not only one, but (at least) two, ‘chocolate cities’. It is important to note that while both these locations are in the vicinity of Guangzhou Railway Station (Guangyuan West Road is to the northwest and Dengfeng-Xiaobei is to the east), their histories and land usages, along with their commercial and population dynamics, differ considerably. Nonetheless, over the last five years, the notion of a single ‘Chocolate City’ has trickled down to media and then flowed back to academia. Li et al., (2012) and Bodomo (2012), for instance, conceptualise these two distinct locations as one single space/area and use the term ‘Chocolate City’. At this point I have to mention that, during my fieldwork, I met very few people who actually use (or know what is meant by) the term – so, it is certainly not in common use.

Most Africans living, sojourning or arriving in Guangzhou converge, at one time or another, in one of these two (‘chocolaty’) locations. While the area of Dengfeng-Xiaobei is primarily residential and host to individuals from a myriad of countries and ethnicities, Guangyuan West Road is predominantly commercial and has more concentrated populations of Nigerians, and to a lesser extent, Ghanaians and Cameroonians. While these two areas are now closely interrelated, the majority of Africans who live, sojourn, or pass through the city stay in Dengfeng-Xiaobei.

Based on the observations I have made and the interviews I have conducted over the last two and a half years, I contend that Dengfeng (and the ensemble it forms with Tianxiu Building and other malls in Xiaobei) is a site of intense, multiethnic, translocal and transnational interactions and connections. In order to better understand what Africans are doing in Guangzhou, and how they are doing, it is imperative to look at some of the ways in which they interact with Chinese in the neighbourhood. As such, the following sections provide a fieldwork-based ethnographic description chronicling how the assemblage of several microindustries and subeconomies have given rise to ‘catering networks’ that are critical for the reproducibility of African presence in the area.

2.1. Vantage point: Dengfeng-Xiaobei
As African presence had increased substantially by the late 2000s, Tianxiu Building (along with some of the other buildings nearby) reached their capacity. Consequently, there was a gradual spill over into Dengfeng, which, due to its size and open spaces, became some kind of gravitational centre (or critical point of intersection) for several African and Chinese trading, migratory and cultural flows.

The ensemble formed by Dengfeng-Xiaobei is a crucial locale – a node at the intersection of several subeconomies involved in the reproduction of African presence in the city. The urban village of Dengfeng, in particular, is a great vantage point from where to observe and make better sense of how Africans and Chinese articulate at the local level. The space itself is one of intense activity, movement, competition, collaboration and struggle. Just walking over the pedestrian bridge from Tianxiu, for example, you can see transprovincial migrants selling everything from cheap and ingenious curios to photo souvenirs and phonecards, African traders (amongst others) on the hunt for everything from garments and cosmetics to electronics and machinery, Middle Easterners on their way to the upmarket Turkish and Syrian restaurants that flank one side of Huanshi Middle Road, local grandparents walking their grandchildren home from school, and beggars who greet passersby with a salaam walekum. After spending enough time there, you can also spot Hui youngsters offering on-the-spot currency exchange, Chinese graduates in search of a piece of the trading cake, Nigerian singers, football players and movie stars, Congolese priests and acolytes on their way to religious congregations, Ghanaian cooks taking a break from their kitchens, Colombian, Kazak and Nigerian sex workers offering their services, and the occasional uniformed chengguang (城管) looking for overstayers. As one gets off the pedestrian bridge and nears the tunnel marking the entry to Dengfeng, the activity intensifies and the energy becomes more chaotic. It is as if you were entering an area controlled by a different regime – another city, a refuge from Guangzhou. It’s a microcosm where myriad transnational and translocal stories and trajectories shrink and collapse at different paces – sometimes faster, sometimes slower.

In the midst of this vibrant conglomerate of economies, languages, and ethnicities, the New Dengfeng Hotel stands out as a critical hinge for certain transnational, translocal, and local subeconomic processes that struggle over and regiment the daily activities in the area. Originally developed by Hunanese migrant entrepreneurs, the New Dengfeng Hotel is a ‘mixed business’ that has a trading mall, upscale Muslim restaurants, Sahelian eateries, internet cafés, mini-‘mosques’,
hairdressing saloons, massage parlors, cargo offices, religious congregations and hotel rooms distributed across its eight floors. At any one time, it hosts around 400 sojourners who come, predominantly, from Angola, Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania, Congo and Guinea. Seizing the opportunities brought about by the intersection of the abovementioned flows in and around this hotel, Chinese nationals from different provinces and/or ethnic groups – the most salient being Hui (回族), Uyghur (维吾尔族) and Han (汉族) from Hunan and Hubei – have developed several microindustries in the area.

Every day at dawn, an incessant noise rises from one of the alleys by the side of the hotel. Dozens of middle-aged Hui men, glued to their phones with calculators in hand, hold tense negotiations before swapping packs of dollars and renminbi in an informal foreign exchange market. After fixing the exchange rates, they distribute smaller amounts of money to their fellow Hui youngsters who then roam around the area offering exchange to foreign traders. While the men organise the informal exchange activities in the neighbourhood, many of their female relatives either manage the highly frequented 24-hour Lanzhou Halal restaurants, or sell international phonecards. Although most restaurants and hotels have ‘cautionary notes’ advising foreigners not to exchange money or buy phonecards from street hawkers, these subeconomies thrive, in broad daylight, in Dengfeng.

The area in front of New Dengfeng Hotel is a small, open ‘plaza’ (about 200 square metres) that bustles with activity for around 20 hours every day. From early in the morning, hundreds of people converge there offering a plethora of different services. A large part of the space is taken up by the nonstop ebb and flow of minivans driven by young men from Hunan and Hubei who transport the merchandise acquired by African traders in the markets around Guangyuan West Road. As the minivans park, female porters from the same provinces bustle about waiting for the goods to be unloaded onto trolleys before pushing them towards hotel rooms. Most rooms in New Dengfeng Hotel are packed to the hilt. Once a room is full, the merchandise gets taken (usually by the same women) to cargo offices in the vicinity of the hotel. There are close connections between the people working as porters and drivers and the hotel staff – many of them have familial ties or come from neighbouring towns or cities. This tightly knit assemblage of people, who share regional or kinship ties, collectively control a whole layer of activities aimed at satisfying the trading and everyday life requirements of foreigners in the area.
All throughout the day, this open space in front of the hotel is a site of intense multiethnic, translocal and transnational interactions. As night falls, the area becomes a social centre for small groups of African men and women to discuss politics and exchange information about prices and markets. As these conversations emerge, and trading activities seem to fade, a whole ensemble of mainly Hunanese migrants carrying poles hung with colourful clothing, reminiscent of the traditional bamboo yokes, start populating the empty spaces left by the morning exchange market and the surrounding alleys. Around the same time, Uyghur grilling carts arrive, colonizing the space previously taken up by the minivans and the mostly young men start preparing whole roasted chickens for the Africans in the area. Over the stretch of a day, these same young Uyghurs switch from driving the pervasive mototaxis, to peddling freshly cut fruit, to finally participating in the grilling activities. Although the scene could come across as highly chaotic, the whole assemblage of sellers and peddlers occupying the alleys is highly regimented – the different microindustries having strong ethno-national affiliations. As the night deepens, many of the small restaurants become bars and the myriad passersby from Africa, the Middle East and China, dine, drink, shop and socialise in the neighbourhood. To some extent, the presence of Huis and Uyghurs alongside North Africans, Middle Easterners, Turkish, Pakistanis and Sub-Saharan Muslims, generates an Islamic atmosphere, or to be more precise, a Sino-Afro-Islamic assemblage.

If you walk out of the village and over the pedestrian bridge that connects Dengfeng with Xiaobei, it takes only a few minutes to reach Tianxiu Building. Tianxiu has some 680 apartments (many of which are now empty), but out of the building’s occupied apartments, some 50 to 60 percent are leased to Africans, and the rest to mostly Middle Easterners and Chinese. The building loosely follows the Hong Kong high-rise model with a shopping area at the bottom and apartment towers on top of it (there is even a pool that has been empty for years). Each day, hundreds of people shop in or pass through the official commercial space where mostly Chinese shopkeepers sell all kinds of shanzhai (山寨) – knockoff computers, USBs, headphones, tablets and smartphones, alongside shoes, garments, bedding, fabrics, leather products, powdered soap, toys, cosmetics, wigs, and human hair. The higher floors of the building are officially designated as residential and semi-commercial. In the afternoons, countless Africans pack into the elevators to visit one of the 50-odd restaurants or eateries (some better established than others) where – as pointed out
earlier – many West African cooks work in tandem with Chinese cooks preparing *foufou*, *jollof*, plantain and other African dishes. On the ground floor, the Egyptian and Libyan owned cafés like Lounge Coffee (which I introduced earlier) are critical spaces where French, Bambara, Wollof and Swahili speaking individuals do business and socialise.

While some Africans with more ‘settled’ histories have managed to open small businesses like garment shops, hair saloons and eateries in Tianxiu, Dengfeng and some of the other malls in Xiaobei, they, in no way, compete directly with transprovincial migrants at the microindustry and subeconmic levels described above. Moreover, as on Guangyuan West Road, African owned commercial spaces tend to be located in less accessible places – such as on top floors or in basements – where rents and visibility are lower (the same goes for churches and mosques). While African and Chinese businesses are, in a way, together (located in the same buildings), they tend to occupy different, and somewhat separate, spaces. One of the areas where Africans and Chinese do appear to compete and collaborate on relatively more equal grounds is in the highly competitive sector of import-export cargo and representation offices (business consultancy) (Haugen, 2011). Generally speaking, however, rather than competing commercially with Chinese, Africans in the area tend to act as mediators weaving together multiple components in assemblages of translocal/transnational subeconomies, thus generating new and more complex economic spaces.

It is in Dengfeng-Xiaobei (immersed in that translocal and transnational imbroglio) that almost all the Africans I have spoken to started looking for contacts and business opportunities. A high number of those who lodge or live in Dengfeng also report having known that an ‘African neighbourhood’ existed prior to their arrival in the city. Nowadays, regardless of whether they are semi-settled in China or short-term itinerant traders, most Africans converge, at one time or another, in Dengfeng-Xiaobei. This area is not only a main point of entry for Africans who arrive in Guangzhou, however, but (and more importantly), a crucial site where they intersect with other Africans and the complex ecology of Chinese transprovincial migrants. Accordingly, it could be argued that the whole area is a site where transnational African flows meet with those of the transprovincial and transethnic Chinese systems – a multiethnic neighbourhood where local practices, translocal economies and stories, and transnational politics and cultures converge.
2.2. Catering networks / articulated subeconomies

As is evident in the ethnographic description above, African presence in Guangzhou is not only sustained by ‘conditions of hospitality’ created by African traders, as Bredeloup (2012) has it, but also by how transprovincial migrants (aided by their entrepreneurial and ethnic organisations and traditions) have seized the opportunities brought about by their intersection with transnational flows at the local level. I argue that this seizing of opportunities has resulted in the emergence of several interconnected microindustries that altogether cater specifically for visitor/foreigner related needs (i.e. currency exchange, Halal food, phonecards, and so on) While these microindustries often appear to have an ethnic affiliation, as in the case of Uyghur fruit peddlers, or Hunanese porters, I do not define them as strictly ‘ethnic economies’ as they operate within (and are dependent on) wider multiethnic assemblages, rather than solely within one ethnic identity registry. These microindustries, in turn, are important components articulating complex subeconomies that, on a daily basis, weave supply, demand and services thus structuring multiethnic (transnational) ‘catering networks’.

The assemblage constituted by these networks, subeconomies, and microindustries (build around commercial, culinary, transport and leisure activities) produces what can be conceptualised as an ‘area of specialisation’ (Giddens in Delanda, 2006) from where not only most needs can be fulfilled with relative ease but, perhaps more importantly, through which the continuation of African presence in Guangzhou is negotiated, and where the foundations are set for the emergence of ‘more complex forms’ of organisation (i.e. grassroots form of organisation that I analyse in Chapters 3).

Finally, as I have been trying to show, to construe African presence in Guangzhou as a merely ‘African’ affair (happening within the bounded realms of an imagined ‘Chocolate City’) falls short in capturing the complexity of the Sino-African assemblages activated by the convergence in the city of the many actors that I have ethnographically listed above. Africans are not the only transients in this case study, Chinese (and others) are also on the move: Dengfeng is a multiethnic site of translocal and transnational transiency, not really a ‘Chocolate City’, or an ‘ethnic enclave’.

2.3. Modalities of sociospatial formations: ethnic enclave vs. African community
During my fieldwork, K.M. Lo, a Hong Kong-Singaporean filmmaker asked to interview me for a documentary he was shooting about Africans in Guangzhou. We met in Xiaobei’s McDonald’s, which is close to the tunnel entrance to Dengfeng. At that time, he had already been shooting in the markets of Guangyuan West Road and inside Tianxiu Building. Before starting the interview, I suggested that we move to another location (I’m not a fan of American restaurants in China), and took him and his assistant to a Turkish BBQ house located at the far end of Baohan Straight Road. As we walked through the tunnel and entered Dengfeng, Lo was surprised by what he called ‘a heavy multiethnic presence’ in the village. It turned out that he had not yet been to Dengfeng. All throughout the evening we spent together, Lo kept saying that he was astonished. In all his years documenting cities in Asia, he had never seen something like Dengfeng. A few weeks later, he sent me a Youtube link to a first rough cut of his documentary. In the piece, he called Dengfeng ‘the most inclusive and diverse global village in 21st century China’. While I was not convinced by that claim, I was struck by the fact that he didn’t single out the African presence. Indeed, the first thing his gaze fell upon was the diversity of the multiethnic ensemble in Dengfeng. In a way, Lo saw something that many researchers had missed – the central role played by several other actors in the area.

While Bodomo (2010, 2012) and Li et al., (2012) have clearly described the presence of Chinese nationals around Africans, the weight of their focus has fallen on the ‘African side’, and they make little differentiation between the groups of Chinese on the highly diverse ‘Chinese side’. In fact, their particular approaches and methods led them to devise different African-centred conceptualisations: the ‘ethnic enclave’ (Li et al., 2008; 2012) and the emerging (single) ‘African community’ (Bodomo, 2010; 2012). While both these tropes have been highly successful in the media (and are not always portrayed as oppositional), I contend that they are far from exhaustive ethnographic-based descriptions of ‘how things are’ on the ground. What these early researchers failed to describe (or perhaps even acknowledge) is complexity, and their conceptualisations (while useful) render the other actors in these complex transnational assemblages somewhat flat and invisible.

As noted earlier, by the end of my first extended fieldwork trip to Guangzhou, I could no longer think of Dengfeng-Xiaobei (or Guangyuan West Road) as a ‘Chocolate City’ (a notion that Bodomo leaves unchallenged) – let alone, an ‘ethnic enclave’. Likewise, based on the diversity of Africans in Guangzhou (be it cultural,
linguistic, ethnic, religious, country of origin or other), and on the multiplicity of their trajectories, activities and connections, I also found difficult to locate the ‘African community’ that Bodomo (2012) was so vocal about. Perhaps, to date, there is still strong disagreement over the modalities of the sociospatial formations emerging as a consequence of African presence in Guangzhou. The division in the debates about these modalities is rather clear, however: there is a relatively negative position (exemplified by Li et al.’s (2012) ‘ethnic enclave’); and a positive position (that of Bodomo’s (2012) ‘African community’).

2.3.1 Enclave = Chocolate City

The mobilisation of a concept such as the ‘ethnic enclave’ (or ‘African enclave’) to describe the foreign concentrations in spaces like Dengfeng-Xiaobei or Guangyuan West Road is based on two inaccurate assumptions: firstly, that Africans are the majority in the area identified as an enclave (otherwise why call it an ‘African’ enclave). Needless to say, here the assumption is made that all Africans identify as belonging to the same ‘ethnic group’. Secondly, that there is a degree of physical and structural separation between Africans and Chinese. These two assumptions, however, overlook the overwhelming presence of non-African people (the majority of internal migrants and other village residents) that live and work in the ‘enclave’. In this regard, Bertoncello and Bredeloup (2009) contend that the area (Dengfeng) with a visibly higher concentration of African entrepreneurs cannot be regarded as an ethnic or economic enclave, as it is a site of sustained multiethnic interaction between people from distant foreign and Chinese nationalities. However, proponents of this modality have repeatedly and consistently asserted the notion that Africans are ‘segregated’ from the local Chinese population (Zhang, 2008; Li et al., 2012), without defining what or who they mean by ‘local population’.

As noted earlier, for economic and spatial reasons (cheaper and convenient accommodation), Africans started lodging in the urban village. Interestingly, prior to the time Africans became highly visible in Dengfeng, the area was commonly associated with the negative perceptions mentioned earlier, and was the type of formation usually conceptualised as a transprovincial ‘migrant enclave’ by Chinese urbanologists (see Lin, 2011; and Li & Wu, 2014). These enclaves are spaces in which the experiences of ‘migrants’ are usually characterised by different forms and regimes.
of exclusion. It seems that the transferral of certain characteristics of these ‘migrant enclaves’ to an ‘African enclave’ was all too easy. Take for instance how Zhang and Li et al. suggest that the arrival of Africans somehow forced ‘local’ populations out of the urban village. My fieldwork indicates that this ‘local’ population (or the ‘original’ villagers) started leaving Dengfeng long before the arrival of Africans –most left during the 1990s as the influx of transprovincial migrants flowed in. In this way, Africans are not a population occupying a space abandoned by a formerly predominant group. Indeed, as I indicated earlier, Africans are not the majority in the ‘enclave’ – Chinese still are.

I argue that putting forward the notion of an ‘ethnic enclave’, as the sociospatial formation emerging as a consequence of the arrival of Africans in Guangzhou construes this arrival as a form of rupture that disturbs the urban fabric of the city (Waldinger, 1993). This interpretation reverberates all too easily with popular perceptions of ‘immigrants’ as problem populations associated with poverty and crime – threats to a supposedly seamless fabric of society (Collins, 2011). Furthermore, conflating notions like ‘ethnic enclave’ or ‘ghetto’ with the emergence of a ‘Chocolate City’ not only contributes to the pathologization of African presence in Guangzhou but also obscures certain key features crucial to understanding the reproduction of African presence in the region: a) the multiethnic interactions and the emergence of ‘catering networks’; b) the multiple patterns of mobility (beyond the notion of permanent settlement) that characterise African presence in the city. Indeed, rather than enclaves, Dengfeng-Xiaobei and Guangyuan West Road are sites of sustained multiethnic interactions in which people from distant foreign and Chinese nationalities engage in a complex ecology of economic, cultural, and affective exchanges that involve, friendship, love and family, along with interethnic competition, complementarity, and cooperation, as Haugen (2011) has argued. In short, as Collins (2011) indicates, while the spatialities of foreign presence may well be characterised by forms of proximity that appear in the urban landscape as territorially delimited, it is always problematic to construe such formations as distinct and separate in social, cultural and economic terms.

Despite its shortcomings, however, an interesting feature of Li et al.’s (2012) analysis of the ‘African enclave’ was the conceptualisation of African presence in Guangzhou as ‘restlessly restructuring’. This resonates with the concepts of transience
and recurrence that I analyse in Chapter 3 and that are critical to understand the regimes of mobility that inform the African presence in Guangzhou.

2.3.2. ‘Bridge theory’ and the ‘African community’

On the other side of the debate, Bodomo (2010; 2012), strongly resented the mobilisation of a concept such as the ‘African enclave’, and the notion that Africans are living in a ghetto of exporters. In turn, he argued for the acknowledgement of an ‘African community’ that functions as a cultural and economic bridge. Bodomo, along with Bertoncello & Bredeloup (2007), highlighted the fact that sub-Saharan entrepreneurs are neither blue-collar workers, nor poor and/or uneducated migrants. Conversely, they argued that these entrepreneurs bring well-established expertise in transnational trading, thus contributing to Guangzhou’s cultural capital and economic development. In addition, Bodomo developed a ‘migrant bridge theory’ in which he suggested that Africans act as translators/mediators carrying African culture and connecting individuals in Africa and China (2010). For Bodomo then, the ‘African community’ acts as a bridge between cultures, and is structured by the sharing of experiences and abilities between Africans and ‘local’ Chinese. Bodomo also claimed, at one point, that this ‘community’ was the cornerstone in the history of Sino-African ethnic mixing. Fond of predictions, he also estimated that at the rate Africans are arriving (and based on the ways they are interacting with ‘locals’), Africans in Guangzhou are the early pioneers of a new Sino-African ethnic group that, ‘in a hundred years time’, would be demanding ‘self-identity’ and full citizenship rights in major Chinese cities (2010: 694). Interestingly, where Li et al., (2008; 2012) saw isolation, detachment, and transiency, Bodomo found the roots of a new ethnic minority (2010).

Nonetheless, the existence of a single ‘African community’ or of the feeling of an exclusively ‘African’ community proves difficult to locate. Although most Africans in Guangzhou claim to feel a certain level of solidarity with other Africans in the country (and would find it extremely impolite if another black man or woman did not reply to a greeting in the street), to assume that all Africans in the city share a given sense of ‘community’ is quite another thing. I would argue that it is important to avoid conceptualisations that absorb all Africans in the region into an exclusively ‘African’
formation (either the enclave or the ‘community’). Based not only on the multiplicity of nationalities, languages, religions, professions, organisations, identities, interpersonal networks, and activities but also on my conversations and interviews with Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou, I contend that rather than a single ‘African community’, there are several transnational micro-communities, which are mainly organised around sub-regional and linguistic affiliations, and religious and commercial practices. While these micro-communities sometimes exist in close proximity, they do not always interact, and individuals participating in them do not necessarily share a ‘sense’ of belonging to a wider community of ‘Africans in Guangzhou’. These micro-communities have varying degrees of endurance, resilience, instability, transiency and porosity, and they negotiate their multifarious exchanges with Chinese peoples, organisations, local, and transnational institutions, from different socio-cultural positions. By this I mean that Nigerians, Malians and Angolans, for example, make sense of their experiences in the city in different ways, and tend to build Sino-African micro-communities with Chinese citizens of distinct ethnicities and religions.

Finally, although Bodomo’s analysis of what is happening in Guangzhou appears to be a relatively accurate analysis, and his ethnographic survey was useful, it is difficult to give credence to his highly politicised promotion of the ‘existence of an African community’. At times, he sounds like a politician (or ambassador) promising a brighter future for Africa and China. While Bodomo’s attempt to further the idea of the emergence-existence of a community (that works as a bridge for understanding between ‘civilisations’) seems to have an ultimately beneficial goal – to foster harmonious, interethnic interaction – his lack of critical analysis on the constitution of the community is disappointing. He failed to explain how the ‘African trading community’ became the ‘African community in Guangzhou’ (2010: 703), how this ‘community’ makes sense of itself, and how it develops senses of attachment and solidarity; and, if it really is a ‘community’, how belonging, for instance, is reproduced. Bodomo seems to have assumed that Africans in China are there to stay, and that the very fact of being African is enough to create a shared sense of ‘community’. He also omitted analysis on how ‘African culture’ (carried by what he framed as some kind of migrant cultural peddlers) might be affected by the fact that the ‘community’ is situated in a Chinese (or transnational) setting. It would also seem that for him, ‘African culture’ is an essential, (a given that erases differences between Lingala, Yoruba and Wolof, or Christianity and Islam), and that can be easily transplanted from Congo,
Nigeria or Angola to Guangdong province. However well-intentioned, Bodomo ended up reproducing a hegemonic gaze similar to that of the Chinese researchers reviewed earlier – if you are a ‘black’ African and happen to be in Guangzhou doing business, then you are member of the ‘enclave’, or ‘community’. Once again, views that encapsulate all Africans inside the monolithic idea of a community, render them classless, mono-ethnic and monolingual, and fail to account for their diversity (let alone the diversity of the communities/networks they move in).

3. Conclusion: interconnected multiethnic archipelagos?

I started my fieldwork looking for the ‘Chocolate City’, the ‘ethnic enclave’ and the ‘African community’, but finished with a much more complex understanding of the processes that structure and organise African presence in Guangzhou. While presenting a sociospatial analysis of certain components involved in this case study, I have also attempted to convey my transition from an aprioristic conceptual understanding of the case study to a more complex mode of understanding. I discovered how, while attempting to simplify (and make sense of) the complex material formations emerging in Guangzhou, the mobilisation of notions like the enclave and the community failed to account for the multiplicity of lived realities inside this case study.

Indeed I claim that in order to make better sense of African presence in Guangzhou, we need not to define or stabilise notions like the ‘Chocolate City’, the ‘community’ or the ‘enclave’ but, more importantly, to locate this ‘presence’ within wider assemblages that highlight the diversity of Africans and the participation of ‘non-African’ actors. The anxieties behind the debates about the ‘modality’ of the African ensemble in Guangzhou are a legacy of methodological approaches – rife in social sciences analyses – that share a compulsive obsession to classify, generalise, and to presuppose the existence of ‘finished products’ (i.e. community, society, state, nation and so on) (Delanda, 2006). Hence, instead of presupposing the existence of any totality (i.e. a particular social formation such as the ‘enclave’, or the ‘African community’) and then setting out to list and define its boundaries, characteristics and essence, in these pages I have attempted to trace some of the historical, urban, and
economic mechanisms that have facilitated the reproduction of conditions making the continuation of the African presence in Guangzhou possible.

Evidence from my fieldwork suggests that many Africans have been moving their individual and collective activities out of Dengfeng, and Guangyuan West Road, and spreading them into others parts of the city and the PRD region. As African presence in the city has grown stronger, and as obstacles to its consolidation have increased, Africans have strategically diversified and spread. Hence, I argue that if a metaphor is needed for making sense of Africans living, lodging, working, sojourning or transiting in (through) Guangzhou (and the region), rather than an ‘enclave/community’ approach, I believe that the notion of porous, interconnected ‘multiethnic islands’ forming something like an ‘archipelago’ extending outwards from Guangzhou to connect multiple localities in China, Asia, Africa, and the rest of the world would be more accurate. The notion of archipelago signals to the increasingly dispersed materialisation of the networks that constitute African presence in Guangzhou. In these ‘multiethnic archipelago’, the catering networks I have described provide a solid underlying infrastructure over which the Africans moving throughout these spaces (islands) have laboriously crafted/structured more complex forms of organization and structures of solidarity (Chapter 3). It is these structures that in many ways organise belonging, collective identities, and open up a plethora of possibilities for individuals to pursue their aspirations in the city.

Finally, Dengfeng, or the ‘Chocolate City,’ is a place-based site constantly reproduced by the frictions between local and circulating populations. I like to think of Dengfeng as a process – a site continuously linked, delinked and re-linked by people, economies and their cultures, to other locales. In this sense, Dengfeng is a node in a network of economies and cultures – a ‘translocality’, to use Arjun Appadurai’s term (1996). If we follow Appadurai’s conceptualisation of (trans)locality, then Dengfeng is not only a neighbourhood (a situated space) where locality is ‘variably realised’ (1996: 179) but a space where multiple ‘forms of circulation’ (of people, goods, technologies, and imaginations, etc.) have generated extended multiscalar connections involving several other localities. In these days, increasingly, the (re)production of locality seems to be more obviously translocal/transnational. Translocalities are not only conceptualisations, however. They can be ‘found’ out there (or at least mapped down). In short, the relationships structuring translocalities occur in cartographical plains (they are place-based) but they are also ungrounded (McKay 2004) – buoyant assemblages of
relationships and connections: networks.

As a translocality, Dengfeng has manifold functions. The multiple activities taking place there, for instance, have the capacity to organise sense-making narratives of a strong and enduring presence of Africans in the city – thus opening up possibilities for the (re)production of Sino-African translocal assemblages and for multiple senses of belonging to emerge. Moreover, the networks that nurture the emergence of the translocal/transnational practices described in this chapter extend along complex pathways and across local, provincial, and national borders and imaginaries. In this way, spaces like Dengfeng (although physically bound within a nation-state) are structured by myriad sets of relationships that in their interactions pay respect to no boundary. Finally, as a local, translocal and/or transnational site, the so-called ‘Chocolate City’ is crucial to make sense not only of the place-making strategies and processes of belonging that Africans have been structuring but also about the ways in which the multiple Chinese economic systems have been adapting to, intersecting with, and transgressing the requirements set up by the process of China’s re-articulation as a key global player.
Chapter 2

The materialities of transnational movement: food, hair, fashion, movies and other ‘things’

'The thing … is a 'going on', or better, a place where several goings on become entwined.' (Ingold, 2010)

1. Translocal image-inations

Everyday at noon, a small group of souvenir photographers set themselves up at strategic locations along the wide, semi-covered footbridge connecting Dengfeng to Tianxiu Building. They offer A4-size prints to the many foreigners passing by, but have the most success with Africans who seem to really go for this kind of memento of their time in China. Whilst these souvenir photographers are akin to those in places like Beijing’s Tiananmen Square or Hong Kong’s Avenue of Stars, the backdrop of their photos is not. Rather than a famous landmark or cityscape, the cameras point at what seems to be a nondescript urban space – a messy collage of buildings and overpasses.

On a rainy afternoon in late 2012, I spent several hours on the footbridge with Zeng Xiang Fang, one of the souvenir photographers, who told me his story. Zeng, a migrant from Hunan province, arrived in Guangzhou in 2009 and began looking for work opportunities around Dengfeng. After spending a couple of months doing odd jobs and attempting, relatively unsuccessfully, to sell cheap goods, he decided he needed a way to profit from the presence of foreigners in the area. One evening, as he crossed the footbridge, he noticed a group of Africans taking photos in front of Tianxiu Building. During the next few weeks, he saw the scene repeat several times. Following the advise of one of his relatives, Zeng gathered the necessary impetus to try and become a souvenir photographer. With little knowledge of photography, he joined
forces with a close friend from Hunan, bought two cameras and a printer and staked out a place on the footbridge. Shortly after, they were joined by a couple of relatives and now have a thriving business. Over the last six years, Zeng has shot tens of thousands of images. He recounts taking photos of Africans from all countries and all walks of life, and thinks that most Africans have these photos taken as a marker of their success in China to show people back in their countries.

On the few occasions that I sat with Zeng on the footbridge, he shot dozens of photos. While most of his clients were first-timers in China who simply wanted a memento of their trip, their origins and stories were quite varied. One Sudanese man, who has stuck in my mind, was sent to China by a Khartoum-based multinational to purchase construction materials. He told me that the photo was to show his fellow Sudanese that China was a modern country and that Sudan should follow the Chinese example. I also remember a spruced-up Angolan woman trading in hair and cosmetics who told me she had her photo taken every time she came to Guangzhou, and a Congolese student (of Mandarin) who wanted his photo taken in front of the building where he hoped to open an office in the near future. Several others from various countries commented that the photos were to send back home to relatives.

Behind these photo souvenirs, however, are not only the stories of transprovincial migrants profiting from foreign presence and foreigners procuring mementos of their journeys, but the story of that intersection between African and Chinese people ‘on the move’. Zeng’s photographs not only materially connect individual passersby with those working on the footbridge but also connect (translocal) imaginations about travel, migration, success and Chinese modernity. Indeed, Zeng’s photographs are only one of the many ‘things’, within a complex ecology of things and practices, that have emerged from the activation of multiple material processes following the arrival of foreigners in the area. In this chapter, I look at some of these things through an ethnographic lens to provide a more comprehensive picture on the types of (material and affective) interactions taking place in Guangzhou.
2. ‘Things in formation’: gatherings of people and practices

When discussing things/objects in relation to the African presence in China, media and academic reports tend to focus on the products exported by Africans – mobile phones, domestic appliances, machinery, motorised vehicles, garments, etc. – and the economic impact of this trade. Documenting the (quantities of) goods that are traded between China and Africa is necessary if we are to understand the nature and power dynamics of the increasing state-level economic relations between these two regions. However, when talking about African presence in Guangzhou, trade balances and logistics do not give a full picture of what is happening in the city; and a singular focus on export products contributes little to the understanding of how Africans (and other individuals in the multiethnic spaces that I described in Chapter 1) go about organising their everyday lives. In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the engagements, tensions, affects and accommodations experienced by Africans in Guangzhou, this chapter focuses on the processes and relationships involved in the emergence of (new) things (like the photo souvenirs) that, in one way or another, are linked to the arrival and sustained presence of Africans in the city. The particular things (and associated practices) that I analyse in this chapter are: ‘Africa fish’ and the surrounding foodscape; the trade in human hair and African-style fashion; and DVD movies as a source of transnational reproduction. In their emergence, circulation and
consumption, these things exemplify how transnational material and immaterial flows are involved in the production of things that connect (materially, symbolically and affectively) individuals and localities not only in Guangzhou, but across China, Africa and other parts of the world. Hence, what follows, is an analysis how these things become meaningful to everyday lived experiences and how they might give sense to the transnational and translocal trajectories of Africans and Chinese alike.27

Before proceeding, however, it is important that I clarify how I conceptualise the ‘things’ analysed in this chapter. Rather than seeing them as simply objects, I conceptualise them as processes – ‘things in formation’ (Ingold, 2007) – implicated within complex assemblages of people, desires, needs, skills, technologies and economies. As ‘things in formation’, my focus shifts to some of the ‘lines of becoming’ that give meaning to things in certain places, at specific times, and for particular individuals. In short, what I am tracing in this chapter are the specific relationships that co-constitute the emergence of the things I have listed above. These specific relationships comprise a multiplicity of connections, histories, affects and scales that converge in the production, consumption, and distribution of things – or, the ‘materialities’ of things. Broadly following Miller (2005) and Sheller and Urry (2006), I contend that materialities are contingently brought together to produce certain ‘forms and performances’ (in certain places and at certain times) that to a great extent determine the meanings and stories associated with the ‘social lives’ of things (Appadurai, 1986). So, while some of the things that I analyse here existed prior to recent interethnic interactions, I claim that their emergence in and around the areas and individuals highlighted in this case study, is an outcome of newly articulated materialities. My interest in engaging with the materialities of things originates from my fieldwork. Out of the multiple observations and conversations that I had with individuals involved with these things, I came to think of these things as ‘gatherings’ (Ingold, 2010). Confluences of local, translocal and transnational imaginations, stories and desires. As gatherings, the abovementioned things are, as I will show, not final products but ‘goings-on’, ‘places’ where various peoples, cultures and traditions (multiple ‘goings-on’) meet (Ingold, 2010). So, in short, my take on materialities assigns primacy not to mere things (as entities themselves), but rather to the mapping out of meanings, connections and relationships inscribed onto (and across) them (Miller, 2005).
Contemporary meanings associated with ‘materiality’ and ‘materialities’ are still open to debate (see Miller, 2005; Ingold, 2010). This suggests, however, a renewed interest in questions of how to study (cultural) objects, and of how things (either human or non-human) are being reworked at a time of transnational economic and cultural flux. The materialities involved in the processes by which the things that accompany individuals on the transnational move emerge have often been disregarded by more structural analysis of migration/transnational movement. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of work related to migration and transnationalism that focuses on small-scale negotiations of everyday life that comprise human experiences and their relationships with things (Walsh, 2006; Conradson & Latham, 2005; McKay, 2004; Law, 2001).

In the case of Africans in Guangzhou, however, the materialities associated with their transnational movement, presence in the city, and interactions with other actors have not been fully explored – either in theoretical and empirical terms. Hence, placing an emphasis on materialities, from an ethnographic perspective, endeavours to provide a more nuanced analysis of how individuals on the move articulate transnational and translocal practices and imaginations through things emerging at the local level. Furthermore, analysing the relationships and processes that organise (and that are organised by) the emergence of these things is an attempt to ‘ground’ research in the everyday lived experience of individuals rather than in grand narratives about global transformations.

Before proceeding, it must be noted that the materialities that I describe here are not exhaustive. While I focus on the emergence of certain things at the ‘local’ level, it is important to highlight that as materialities (i.e. the forces, energies, scales, beliefs and imaginations that ‘give’ material things and practices their ‘social lives’) often transgress borders and locales, there might be certain relations that are not considered in this chapter.

3. Africa style fish and the emergence of transnational foodscapes

Dengfeng/Xiaobei is the main entry point for Africans arriving in the city. It is a gateway from where they start making sense of Guangzhou, exploring opportunities, and establishing connections. As suggested by Bodomo and Ma (2012), as they arrive
in the area, however, one of the first things they worry about is what and where to eat.  

M. Bakuza, a Tanzanian itinerant trader who recently moved his electronics supply chain from Dubai to Guangzhou, told me that while he knew that there was an ‘African area’ in the city, he never expected to find grilled tilapia – a dish that he remembers fondly from his childhood near Lake Victoria in Tanzania. ‘After I ate it for the first time here, I felt like I was in Africa. Nowadays, I always eat tilapia with naan [Uyghur flatbread]. There are many African things here; it feels like home,’ he explained during our first, fleeting encounter in one of the corridors of New Dengfeng Hotel. M. Bakuza is one of the many East Africans who recurrently come to Guangzhou on short income-boosting trips and who lodge in the hotels around Dengfeng. ‘Once my room is full, once I cannot even go inside because of all the electronics I have bought, then I know it is time to go back to Dar es Salaam. I pack things, call the cargo company and then leave. After I sell everything in Africa, I come back here again. In a year, I normally live in this same room for 4 to 5 months – one month at a time, so I don’t overstay my visa,’ he explained one night over tilapia and naan.

The foodscapes around Dengfeng and Xiaobei are extremely diverse and host to some of the most active and thriving micro-industries in the area. From street peddlers selling cut fruit and grilled skewers, to Yunnan and Lanzhou noodle houses, Sahelian eateries, Nigerian and Kenyan/Tanzanian (‘Kenzanian’) restaurants-bars, upmarket Muslim Chinese, Turkish, Syrian and Indian restaurants, and fast food chains, there are choices for all tastes. In many ways, these eating spaces (from the street stalls to the high-end restaurants) are critical entry points in the processes of identification of the wide range of individuals that converge in Dengfeng and Xiaobei. Food, and the associated senses, beliefs and memories (as in the case of M. Bakuza) help individuals make sense of place (Sutton, 2010). As such, a careful analysis of the materialities of foodscapes in the area is critical to a better understanding of the depths and intensities of the multiethnic interactions taking place there.

3.1. The translocal story of tilapia: from Lake Victoria to the Pearl River

Out of the complex ecology of foods in Dengfeng-Xiaobei’s foodscapes, tilapia – best known as ‘Africa fish’ – is one of the most striking cases of interethnic interactions
involved in the emergence of a food product. Not only M. Bakuza is fond of tilapia, most Africans that live or lodge in the area report that they often eat the fish.

Tilapia is a freshwater Nile river species highly popular across many African cuisines in the eastern and southern parts of Africa. Tilapia is a latinisation of the Tswana word for fish (Tswana is a language spoken in southern Africa), and is thought to be the fish in several biblical stories such as the ‘miracle of the seven loaves and the fish’ (Chapman, 2012; Rosenthal, 2011). The fish arrived in China in two major waves. In the 1950-60s, Mozambican tilapia was introduced to Yunnan and Guangdong provinces, but its aquaculture failed (Lai & Yang, n.d.). The second wave came in the late 1970s, and saw the introduction of Nile and hybrid tilapias. Following this wave, the production and commercialisation of the fish rocketed. In Southern China, tilapia is commonly known as African carp (罗非鱼). However, despite being aquafarmed for several decades, tilapia has failed to become a central element in regional cuisines, and most of its production is destined for export – indeed, tilapia is considered to be one of the backbones of China’s seafood exports (Shuping, 2005; El-Sayed, 2006). In China, tilapia is seen as a low value fish, and is mainly consumed in rural areas and ‘low class’ restaurants (Shuping, 2005). Due to local culinary practices, and as a consequence of the prejudices against it, tilapia was not a central element in the menus of the many restaurants scattered across Dengfeng-Xiaobei prior to the arrival of Africans looking for cheap and familiar foods.

For many Africans residing or lodging in the urban village, tilapia is now a common (almost staple) food. According to M. Atta, since the early 2000s, the fish was being cooked by Africans at the domestic level in Guangzhou, and in small eateries catering for specific nationalities (i.e. Guinean and Malian family kitchens in Tianxiu Building). However, in the late 2000s when the demand for African foods in the area increased, tilapia found its way onto the menus in Chinese restaurants, and since then has slowly but steadily become one of the most popular dishes in the area. Nowadays, grilled tilapia is found in places ranging from Uyghur street stalls and former noodle restaurants, to the Egyptian and Algerian cafés in Tianxiu Building; and usually sells for between 15 and 30 RMB.

Memetian, an Uyghur from Kashgar who grills tilapia amongst the clothing stands crowding the entrance to his restaurant, arrived in Guangzhou a little over a decade ago now. Memetian explained to me that when he arrived there were more Arabs, and they sold more lamb. But as Africans arrived, his lamb business started
going down. Uyghurs are famous across China for their grilled lamb, and streets stalls selling spicy, lamb skewers can be found all over the country. According to Memetjian, Uyghurs were the first to experiment with tilapia in Dengfeng, and did so after several African patrons expressed a desire for more ‘African flavours’. As a consequence of this, lamb skewers sales have been overtaken by the ‘fish business’. While there are still Uyghur people selling lamb skewers in the area, most have slowly adapted to the changes in demand. In a similar example to that of tilapia, a number of young Uyghurs now have complexly designed carts with dozens of chickens being barbecued on rotating poles. Each evening, they push these smoky carts into Dengfeng to sell what they call ‘Africa chicken’ – whole chickens basted in cumin, chilli and other Central Asian spices.

The Uyghur adaptation to more ‘African styles’ has also impacted on other Chinese food spaces. Li Wen, the Hunanese owner of a traditional noodle house across from Memetjian’s restaurant, explained that as his wife saw Uyghurs doing well with their ‘grilling activities’, she suggested abandoning the noodle business and joining the grilling. Soon after, the former noodle house was full of Angolan women. Li explained that about 90 percent of their customers are from Angola, and joked about his wife’s new name: ‘Maria’, who is now able to speak very basic restaurant related Portuguese. Likewise, Ma Jie, a Hui woman from Qinghai who runs a 24-hour ‘Halal food restaurant’ highly frequented by Africans told me that after resisting for a long time, her husband finally called his uncle to come and set up a grill.
It could be argued that it took the grilling traditions/expertise of the Uyghur and the popularity of the fish amongst Africans to disseminate this dish to practically every restaurant in and around Dengfeng. Over the three years in which I was either based in (or recurrently visiting) the area, I witnessed how tilapia slowly took over. When alive, tilapia is considered as an ‘invasive’ species (Rosenthal, 2011). In a way, that invasiveness has extended into its ‘after life’ in Guangzhou. With a little help from Uyghur and African people, the fish has ‘invaded’ multiple food spaces. Sometimes it is sold alongside other foods, as in the case of Uyghur and Hui stalls and restaurants, but in other cases it has replaced the foods that preceded it, as in some of the former noodle houses. The emergence and consumption of tilapia in the area is, arguably, the outcome of a complex and unique Sino-African assemblage: a fish from Lake Victoria/the Nile River aquafarmed since the 1950s on a massive scale in China for export, then introduced to the area’s foodscape by Uyghur migrants following the suggestions of their African customers, and now cooked (and consumed) by transprovincial migrants (of multifarious origins) for their Tanzanian, Angolan and Congolese patrons, amongst others, near the banks of the Pearl River.
In a way, the emergence and popularisation of tilapia as a pervasive food in the area is the outcome of a convergence between African culinary needs and imaginations, and ‘local’ cooking practices. Indeed, the emergence of tilapia is not only a great example (on a micro scale) of how transprovincial migrant entrepreneurs have been adapting to the changing environment brought about by the arrival of foreigners to the urban village, but, more importantly, of wider transformations in the area’s food and ethnoscapes.

4. The transnational hair route

In the infinite ecology of beauty products traded in Dengfeng/Xiaobei and Guangyuan West Road, there is one thing that stands out due to its pervasiveness: human hair. The production of this commodity involves complex transnational chains of collection, transportation, chemical processing, marketing and supply that connect many distant locations (Jones, 2001). Since the late 1980s China, along with India, have been at the centre of the transnational trade in human hair. In the early days, hair trade mainly originated in India, from where hair was predominantly collected and then transported to China for processing. Once in Chinese factories, the hair was treated and
fashioned into wigs that, for the large part, went into European and North American markets (Berry, 2008). While Guangzhou has long been a crucial node in hair trade, most of hair going through the city was for export – an activity mainly carried out by Chinese traders (Pomfret, 2003). However, as a consequence of the 2008 economic crisis, and the increased presence of African traders taking hair to Africa, demand for human hair at the local level soared.

According to Chinese hair traders in Dengfeng, Tianxiu Building, and the markets in Guangyuan West Road, the demand for human hair dropped after the 2008 economic crisis, and the trade shifted significantly away from the European (and North American) markets. Li Yuan, a migrant from Hubei province that operates two hair trading shops (one inside the mall on the first floor of the New Dengfeng Hotel, and the other in a massive Beauty Market in Guangyuan West Road), explained to me that before 2008 they were mainly exporting to Europe and then, all of a sudden, demand stopped. According to Li, huge stocks were left behind after the crisis and the industry almost came to a halt. It was around that time that Africans started buying hair from them. Li believes that Africans saved the industry. She is convinced that without her clients from Angola, Uganda, South Africa and Congo, her business (and probably the whole industry) would have collapsed. ‘Nowadays, much of the hair we sell is bought by Africans or Chinese that either resell it here or transport it to Africa. Both Africans and Chinese sell hair in African markets,’ Li commented as she braided a lock of the highly popular ‘Bresilienne’ or ‘Brazilian’ hair. Along with these new buyers, however, came a change in demand: Africans were not particularly interested in buying hair imported from India (the hair that had traditionally appealed to European clients). Instead, they were interested in the relatively less expensive hair collected and processed in China. Later, Li explained that the hair they sell is graded by ‘nationality’. So while ‘Indian’ hair was once the top-grade, now ‘Brazilian’ hair is the most sought after and expensive. ‘Asian’ hair (meaning hair collected in China, Indonesia and Korea) tends to be relatively cheaper. Isabelle, a Ugandan woman that frequently buys from Li, further explained that it seems to be a matter of ‘quality’ and ‘belief’. ‘If the quality is good, we say its Brazilian, although it may have come from China. If its not as good, but still good, then we might say it is Peruvian. Less good is Korean, Indonesain, and then Chinese. Even lower than that, it is synthetic, or maybe horse or goat hair,’ she said as Li laughed out loud, while shaking her head in denial.
In Baile market, which is across the road from where Li has her second shop, Uche a Nigerian who has been trading in hair for the past eight years, explained to me that while hair is a very profitable business, it is also complex. Uche has been in Guangzhou for over a decade now, and, early on, dabbled in several different trade sectors (mostly electronics and clothing). It was not until he married a woman from Shandong that he finally established himself in the hair trade. Soon after he got married, he went back to Nigeria to visit his family. He was worried about finding a good and stable business that would allow him to properly take care of his new wife and future family. As he was in a market in Lagos, he saw that many women were buying hair and that they were all talking about it being Chinese. ‘I thought that I could be successful in bringing Chinese hair to Africans,’ he recalled. As he knew nothing about the trade, he started by surveying dozens of shops in Nigeria, discovering along the way that most of the hair was synthetic. Before flying back to Guangzhou, he bought some of the highest quality synthetic hair that he could find along with some tresses of human hair. Back in China, he set about convincing his wife that selling human hair (not synthetic) to Africans in Africa, and Africans in China, would be a great business opportunity for the family. As they thought they had found a niche, they quickly opened their first shop and brought Uche’s in-laws into the business. ‘I knew that as someone who had lived longer in China and who had a Chinese family, I had the opportunity to explore and to go deeper into the industry and its secrets. It was then that I discovered how difficult it was,’ he said.

Uche and other Africans and Chinese involved in the hair trade often complain about how complex and secretive the industry is. Uche said he struggled for over a
year to get past the middlemen and the fake factories. However, in the end, he finally managed to make contact with some high quality producers in Shandong and Hebei provinces. After all his efforts, after fighting his way through to the real producers, Uche discovered that one of his wife’s close relatives had been trading hair for over a decade. ‘This is the problem with hair. Everybody hides information as if they were doing something wrong, and they don’t even share it with family’. Indeed, according to Uche, there are many Africans involved in the hair trade in Guangzhou who lack family connections and do not really know the business even after 10 or 15 years of trading. He also has his secrets, however. The hair he sells online and in his shop is advertised as 100% ‘Bresilienne’ imported from the tropical regions of Peru, Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela. One of his ads claims that as ‘Brazilians have some degree of European, African, and Amerindian ancestry, there’s such a unique and varied texture quality to Brazilian hair.’ Uche further explained that for Africans, Brazil means fashion.

African women want to look like Brazilian women, not like Indian women. That’s why women across Africa are crazy about Bresilienne, and now we are introducing Peruvienne to them, and they will go crazy about it. One day they may go crazy about Mexican hair, you know… this is the way the human hair business works. It’s all about marketing the new, and the fashionable. (Uche)

I asked Uche about the authenticity of the Brazilian hair he sold. He explained that during all his years in the business, he had sold tons of Brazilian hair, but that not a single lock had actually come from Brazil. Uche’s confession reinforced what I had heard many times before: it is all ‘Chinese’ hair, marketed and imagined as Brazilian, Peruvian or Indian. In response to my queries about the future of hair, Uche predicted that the future of the industry is in the African markets. ‘In the last few years, almost all of the orders we got were from Africa’. Nonetheless, both Chinese and Africans traders that I spoke to reported slow but steady drops in profits related to hair sales. Hair is one of those industries that has been negatively affected by the strengthening of the RMB vis-à-vis the American dollar, rising labour costs, tighter regulations in the industry, and by what is generally perceived in Guangzhou as an economic slowdown. Indeed, each time I visited Uche in his shop, there were no buyers; but he remained positive. Last time we spoke, Uche told me that things were difficult in the markets, but that he was certain his online hair trading business would suffice to keep him and his family afloat.
Human hair is only one more thing in the ecology of things that are part of the multidirectional transnational flows that converge in Guangzhou. And, what I have described here is only one phase in the ‘social life’ of human hair as a thing moving through these flows: that of its emergence and articulation into the lives, interactions and trading activities of many Africans and Chinese in the city. Nowadays, Guangzhou’s human hair trade could be thought of as a ‘place’ (site) where African and Chinese entrepreneurialism, needs, and aspirations ‘gather’, simultaneously articulating competition, collaboration and forms of making a living. Nonetheless, human hair in Guangzhou also tells part of the story of how certain practices relating to African beauty are produced transnationally from locations in the Chinese hinterland. In a way, human hair (in ‘its second chance at life’, as Berry (2008) puts it) not only connects imaginations about fashion. Perhaps, it also connects bodies transnationally – the bodies of those women who grow the hair with those of the ones that process, braid, transport, and ultimately wear it (Berry, 2008). Perhaps, as an unintended, symbolic gesture, the increasing transnational connections between Africa and China can be seen in the number of African women carrying the hair of Chinese women on their heads.

As the stories in this section suggest, there are multiple transnational and translocal connections, histories, imaginations, desires and technologies of beauty and fashion, implicated in the emergence of human hair. As a ‘thing en route’ to somewhere else, human hair (human fibres on the move) produces myriad (unexpected) connections at the local level that emerge, as Berry (2008) suggests, as a consequence of the ever-unfolding story of the transnationalisation of capital (64).

4.1. Fashion

Interactions between Africans and Chinese at the local level can also be seen in the wider industry of fashion. Samuel, a Cameroonian friend of Uche who has been in the clothes trade for over a decade, told me that clothing used to be a very profitable business. As we dined in a Lanzhou Halal restaurant, Samuel explained that in 2003 he arrived in Guangzhou, and despite having no trading experience, he was soon exporting clothes to West Africa. During his time in the city, Samuel bought, sold and
exported everything from shoes, fabrics and leather bags, to suits, scarfs, jewellery, cosmetics and wigs.

In the early days, Chinese didn’t know what we were looking for. They didn’t know anything about African styles, so I was forced to become a designer. I started designing clothes that I knew would sell well in Cameroon and other West African countries. It was looking like a dream come true. A lot of money was coming in, and many orders were going out. I filled dozens of containers bound for Douala myself. It was easy money then. (Samuel)

Many young Africans like Samuel arrive in China without much knowledge, but with some ideas and a strong entrepreneurial drive. One of the most common sites where they first try their luck is the clothing business. Paul, a Ghanaian who first arrived in Guangzhou in 2002, for example, made the move because he had heard there were plenty of ‘moneymaking opportunities’. His goal was to kick-start his own jeans brand.

It took me a while, but I found the best denim quality that can be found in Guangdong province. For over a year, while doing other jobs, I travelled to every single fabric-producing town in the province, until I found Xintang – a town they call the world’s jeans capital. In many of the factories that I visited, they had never seen a black man. They were very happy to have me buying from them – some of them even treated me as an NBA star. (Paul)

Paul explained that initially, before designing his own clothing line, he had started sending small amounts of stock to his relatives in Accra and Kumasi in shipping containers that he shared with other West Africans. The sending process was very risky and sometimes the cargo in the containers would fail to pass through customs. Paul recalled losing all of his investment once, as his cargo was delayed by five months and the fabrics were rotten with mould. ‘But, if things made it to Accra, then we were talking about big profits,’ Paul told me.

The lack of infrastructure in many African countries is generally cited as one of the main reasons to come to China. Samuel and Paul, along with many other individuals I spoke to, agree in that although ‘China is not an easy place,’ in terms of production, China offers incomparable opportunities for many young Africans with ideas. In Guangzhou, many of these entrepreneurs have managed to strategically insert themselves along various chains of production. However, they normally depend on collaboration with Chinese business partners. ‘When it comes to collaboration for clothing, it’s usually the African putting the creative side and the Chinese putting the labour. We provide them with specifications for styles and brands, and they produce
the things,’ Samuel explained. By unleashing their creativity in China, some West Africans who I met around the clothing markets, for instance, have managed to garner relative ‘fame’ for their own ‘brand name’ start-ups (both in Guangzhou and in West Africa). According to Samuel, in the mid to late 2000s, great collaboration and fierce competition between Africans and Chinese resulted in a rapid and large-scale expansion of the clothing sector.

Indeed, most West Africans who have been in Guangzhou for longer periods are (or have been) involved, in one way or another, in the clothing industry. Once they become ‘more established’, however, they often leave the trade to explore other activities (i.e. consultancy or shipping). Samuel did not find his way out of the industry quickly enough, however, and shared his version of a complaint I have heard many times across different trade sectors in the city: as soon as Chinese producers get a sense of what Africans want, they are likely to cut the Africans out.

Even if you have been working with them for a long time, they’ll cut you out. There’s no friendship here, it’s pure competition. But it’s not only that they cut you out, if they can, they take the stock to Africa and sell it by themselves at a cheaper price than what they sell it for here. In 2009, a Chinese guy in Douala was selling some of the same clothes I was selling, but at a cheaper price than in China. I never understood how they could afford to do that, but they were certainly killing me. Even if they make no profit, they sell cheaper. They just want to prevail over their competitors. (Samuel)

While Samuel managed to survive for a couple of years in the clothing industry by sending clothes to his relatives in Cameroon and by selling to other Africans in Guangzhou’s markets, in late 2013, he finally caved in to the competition and decided to go back to Cameroon. Paul, on the other hand, has stayed in the business, as he was fortunate enough to find a niche that Chinese could not easily reach. Last time I spoke to him (mid-2013), he was manufacturing and exporting uniforms for Liberia’s Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Arguing that it was a matter of ‘national security’, he refused to tell me how, being a Ghanaian, he had managed to get such an important contract with a Liberian institution.

As the African ‘clothes rush’ has unfolded over the last decade, countless Chinese factories have set out to produce tons of fabrics and garments. The craze has resulted in over production, leaving huge clothing stocks abandoned in malls and warehouses. According to a Hunanese migrant who peddles colourful ‘African style/size’ clothes on the streets of Dengfeng, it is from those warehouses that he buys garments at wholesale prices and then sells them to African passers-by. So, the leftover
stock has now been rearticulated into one of the subeconomies thriving in Dengfeng, meaning ‘African’ clothes and fashion items are now sold and consumed at the local level.

![Hunanese street peddlers selling clothes in front of Jianyue African Restaurant (photo by author)](image)

5. The DVD trade: transnational (re)production

One other thing widely consumed in Dengfeng is movies. More specifically, DVDs of American, Nigerian, French, Congolese, Mexican and Chinese films and TV dramas – some of them dubbed in languages like Lingala, Swahili and French. Every evening in several shops across Dengfeng’s malls and hotels, scores of seemingly bored individuals congregate around small cardboard boxes full of ‘Blu-Ray high definition’ DVDs that sell at prices ranging from 5 to 15 RMB. Most boxes have labels like: ‘African movies’, ‘Western movies’, ‘Chinese music’ and ‘African music’, amongst others. Usually, each individual DVD in these boxes has 4 to 8 films burnt onto it; and the covers and titles are psychedelic collages of (confused) transnational imaginations. There are titles like: ‘Jesus en Kikongo’; ‘Ninja Assassin – True Grit – American Violet’; ‘Dix Commandment VS Messager’ (with Charlton Heston and Osama Bin
Laden, side by side, on the cover); ‘The lives of Kadafi, Savimbi and Gbagbo’ (special edition); ‘Corazon Salvaje’ (a 1990s Mexican telenovela dubbed in French); ‘Mission Impossible 1-2’ (the Congolese remake); ‘L’histoire de la Sapologie Vol.5’ and ‘Satanic Kingdom – Dog of War’ (Congolese productions in Lingala); ‘Le Retour de Be Yonce, un Film Nigerien’ (a Nigerian film in Lingala); ‘Transformers VS Robocop and Iron Man 2’; and the complete seven seasons of ‘Xena – Warrior Princess’ in French.

These DVDs were not originally produced for local consumption, but are the remnants of a trade activated by the arrival of Africans in the mid-to-late 2000s. According to Alex Ren, a Hunanese supplier who still sells these kinds of DVDs wholesale (and who also runs a small retail store), the movies bought by Africans in Dengfeng are for local consumption – they either watch them at home or in their hotel rooms. From Ren’s explanations, I gathered that these DVDs are only a miniscule fraction of a massive trade in movies and entertainment that connects many DVD burning factories in China with several street markets across Africa. ‘Africans are great consumers and producers of media, but they lack the infrastructure to produce the quantity required to meet market demands. That’s why they come here. In our factory, we produce thousands of copies in a couple of hours,’ Ren told me as I flipped through a 300-page catalogue with all kinds of media compilations (everything from movies like the ones described above, to American TV series, and Bollywood and Nollywood films). Ren recalled that in the past, he had worked with many West African movie producers and directors who came to Guangzhou to make copies of their own films to take back and sell in African markets. He also told me that he always kept a copy of every single film or set of films that his African clients ordered. ‘That’s how we came up with these catalogues,’ Ren explained.
After struggling to find an African involved in the DVD trade, one of my contacts led me to Godswill, a well-known Nigerian who, according to my sources, had been exporting African movies from China to West Africa during his early days in the city. After rejecting my interview requests a number of times, he finally accepted to meet me. Godswill arrived in Guangzhou in 2003 looking for his version of the ‘American Dream’. ‘Many people dream about becoming successful businessmen, others want to become soccer superstars. My dream has always been about media,’ Godswill told me as we left Guangzhou’s cathedral, where he had been shooting a wedding video. Before coming to China, Godswill had been involved on a small scale in some film and TV drama productions in Lagos, but as he had failed to achieve what he wanted, he started thinking of going abroad. ‘I came to China with a couple of hundred dollars to pursue my dream. It was the biggest risk I had ever taken’.

Godswill knew that there was a sizeable Nigerian community in Guangzhou, and he wanted to explore the possibilities of doing some media work around his compatriots: ‘I wanted to shoot the first Nigerian film in China,’ he confessed. However, during his first few years in Guangzhou, he lacked the economic means, and his media dream had to be postponed. ‘The first few years were difficult. I did many different jobs. I even became an English teacher for Chinese children’. One day, as he was talking about his interest in film to one of his acquaintances in Guangzhou, he learnt that there were many Nigerians involved in producing copies of Nollywood movies to export back to Africa. After doing some surveys, he was astonished by the sheer quantity of African movies that were being copied in Guangzhou, and he found many of the films and TV dramas that he had seen in Nigeria. Before long, he found himself investing some of the money he had earned from his odd jobs, and buying thousands of DVD copies to ship back to Lagos. ‘Back then it was very easy and cheap, and the profit was not bad. Chinese producers already had many African film files, but they didn’t know how to compile them in an appealing way for African audiences. I created my own DVD label and started creating my own movie compilations to export’ he explained. His compilations were sold in Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and even Congo. ‘The good business didn’t last for long though,’ he added. At some point, Chinese suppliers gained sufficient knowledge about the language requirements and possible movie combinations that appealed to different African audiences, and Africans were, once again, cut out of the supply chain as Chinese started exporting directly to Africa.
Nevertheless, Godswill’s earnings from his short incursion in the DVD trade, meant he was able to acquire a set of high quality filming/photographic equipment. As by that time he was well-connected and the Nigerian community appeared to him to be thriving, he thought that the time to shoot his film in China had come. However, his plans failed to materialise. Godswill did not find any interested investors for his enterprise. As he had already acquired the equipment, however, he decided to start shooting every single social occasion and celebration related to Nigerians in Guangzhou. Before long, he was famed as the community’s social occasions photographer. For about four years, he made a living out of being hired to film/photograph weddings, parties and community gatherings. In mid-2013, Godswill failed to secure a visa extension and finally, tired of the instabilities related to visas (during his time in China, he had overstayed his visa twice and had been in trouble with police), he decided to leave China and go back to Nigeria to continue pursuing his ‘media dream’, but with the equipment and knowledge he gained in China. Last time I contacted him through WeChat (early 2014), he told me that he was doing well. He had been covering social events in Imo state, had opened up a website, and, was finally about to shoot his first self-produced film. ‘If things go well, I may come back to Guangzhou next year to shoot there,’ he wrote in the last communication we had.

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What struck me from the stories behind the DVDs in the area was not so much the complex transnational imaginations assembled in their covers, nor the Sino-African competition/collaboration involved in their production. I was most struck by how the stories and relations behind the DVDs (which appear as relatively insignificant things displayed for consumption) can articulate desires and aspirations that go beyond the fictional ones portrayed in the stories they contain. In a way, it could be said that Godswill managed, in part, to set up his businesses in both Guangzhou and Imo by designing and selling DVD compilations during his early days in China. Indeed, one day, Godswill’s first Sino-Nigerian film could very well be found in one of those cardboard boxes on a street corner in Dengfeng.

6. Conclusion: little things, ‘major’ transformations?
All types of human movement involve material effect/affects. As Brickell and Datta (2011) suggest, in migration and transnational movement, the symbolic and material qualities of places are transformed. As I have shown in these first two chapters, the continued arrival and recurrent circulation of ‘individuals on the move’ have had a significant impact on the composition of ethnoscapes, and on previously established practices (ways of doing things). In this chapter, my insistence on analysing the relationships and processes implicated in the emergence of things (and practices) stems from the assumption that, by looking at the connections made in (and through) them, a more comprehensive understanding of the transformations emerging out of interethnic interactions is provided. As I have claimed, the stories presented above only examine one stage in the ‘life’ of these things: their movement through Guangzhou. However, I argue that these stories show how the emergence of things in a ‘local’ context are crucially articulated by relationships between people, and their cultures, traditions and economies. Moreover, an attempt was made to highlight the importance of cultural meanings attached to trade (see Polanyi, 1944), and to try to go beyond the exclusive economistic focus when discussing things and objects traded in Guangzhou.

My emphasis on materialities in this chapter emerged out of what I perceived as the difficulty of separating things from people (materials from humans, objects from subjects), things from other things, and people from other people. By highlighting the importance of the materialities of the things I analyse, my intention is to underscore the role of things in forming, maintaining and reproducing connections between individuals across different locales. While I do not claim that these things and practices are crucial for the reproduction of African presence in Guangzhou, I do suggest that they are exemplars of the depth and intensity of certain local interactions, and, as such, are central for the reproduction of everyday connections in Guangzhou. There may be, of course, other things that could also be susceptible to similar analyses.

Although photographs, fish, human hair, and DVDs, may seem somewhat insignificant, I claim that analysing the ways in which they are implicated in the everyday lives of individuals sheds light on how so-called ‘major transformations’ are impacting on the lived-worlds (grounded experiences) of individuals in (and moving through) Guangzhou. In short, by looking at the things and practices I analyse here, one could make better sense of the placemaking processes that individuals on the
move undertake. Furthermore, analysing the materialities of things emerging out of multiethnic interactions in places like Dengfeng illustrate how neighbourhoods (or urban villages, for that matter) are not just localised receptors of transnational processes, but rather sites of critical social and cultural formations in which things, practices and subjects are constantly connected and (re)produced (Brickell & Datta, 2011). Finally, focusing on the materialities of things is to acknowledge that ‘relationality’ is a critical feature involved in the emergence of things and practices. In this way, things described in this chapter are, as I mentioned earlier, not ‘fixed things’ but ephemeral performances: ‘things in formation’ (Ingold, 2007). Thing that are evolving, and that, for a moment at least, appear as a recognisable (and meaningful) form to someone, like the tilapia in M. Bakuza’s Lake Victoria story.
Chapter 3

Placemaking in Guangzhou: emplacement, transiency and the ‘politics’ of solidarity

1. Saturday morning football

In the early stages of my fieldwork, a journalist gave me the contact of Tony Ekai – a 37-year-old Igbo who is known by most Nigerians in Guangzhou. Among Tony’s many enterprises is managing Owners Football Club (Owners F.C.) – the first African club to play in Guangzhou’s International Football League.32 After a couple of informal meetings in which we spoke about everything from his early days in China to his plans for the future, Tony offered to take me to one of the club’s training sessions. Early the following Saturday, he sent me a text: ‘Go to Canaan now. I’ll pick you up there’. Not wanting to be late, I quickly left my hotel in Dengfeng and crossed the pedestrian bridge to buy takeout. After waiting close on 45 minutes for a falafel roll and then being rejected by several taxi drivers, I finally made it to Canaan – the iconic wholesale clothing market I mentioned in Chapter 1.

At around 11 (about an hour after I arrived), Tony rocked in his new Korean SUV. With an eclectic mix of Nigerian pop and Americana blaring on the stereo, he drove me out to what he had previously referred to as an ‘undisclosed location’ – a somewhat lonely patch of grass serving as a soccer pitch in the northern outskirts of the city. ‘We [Nigerians] have been coming here for sixteen years,’ Tony explained, as he pulled onto the dirt in an empty parking lot. ‘Everybody is welcome on the pitch, but we keep the location private. We are safe here. Nobody harasses us and the police never come’. It is in this place that Tony and the coach, Ken O, try out new players and select the most talented ones to play for Owners F.C. While some of the players who attend trainings have professional experience, others are newcomers to the sport. ‘Training is an opportunity to play some soccer, meet people, and make friends,’ Tony
said, as we were greeted by some of the players. ‘And, if they make it to the team, they might get exposure to Chinese recruiting agents’. As we crossed the pitch, I noticed Ken drilling some fifteen players to do a combination of sprints and push-ups while another ten players were laid out amongst the sports bags and sneakers in the shade behind one of the goal posts. Although it was the tail end of summer, the sun was still scorching. In addition to the players, a three-year-old was kicking a ball around. Later in the day, with play at the other end of the pitch, the goalkeeper turned and asked sternly for the half-Nigerian, half-Chinese child to show his passport and visa. Everyone laughed. ‘There are many young Nigerians here without valid visas,’ Tony said, trying to explain the joke. ‘There may be hundreds only in Guangzhou’. As it turned out, at that training session, only five people had valid visas – the rest were overstayers.

![Ken talks to the players (photo by author)](image)

The group on the pitch could be thought of as a representative sample of Nigerians and, to a lesser extent, other African nationalities in the city. There are a minority, like Tony, who arrived over a decade ago and who have managed (predominantly through marriage and/or investment) to ‘establish’ themselves in Guangzhou. There are others, like Ken and a couple of the players, that recurrently travel between several locations in transnational circuits of trade, but that think of Guangzhou as their main ‘home’. And then there are those, like the majority of the players on that hot morning, who have only recently left their countries in search of opportunities. Despite their different trajectories and stories, a common thread runs through the accounts of most Africans I spoke to in Guangzhou: a lack of certainty
about their future in China. ‘China is a difficult place’ is a comment that almost all Africans I have interviewed or spoken to eventually make – ‘A la Chine c’est pas facile’ in French, ‘Aqui na China tudo é muito difícil’ in Portuguese. Nonetheless, as with the group on the pitch, these individuals are emplaced in multiple positions, and their strategies for coping, with both the structural/legal impediments (which I will discuss in the next section) and their personal difficulties, are multifarious.

2. At home in Guangzhou?: placemaking and mobility

Most migration-related literature on placemaking has focused on the ways in which immigrants forge collective identities when facing discrimination or poverty in a host society (Gill, 2010). Accordingly, placemaking is often understood as a ‘strategy for settlement’ in which immigrants develop ‘common identities and means of mobilising collectively’ (Gill 2010: 1157). While placemaking strategies amongst Africans in Guangzhou do generate ‘common identities’ and opportunities for collective mobilisation, these strategies are not inherently aimed at ‘settling’ in the ‘host country’ nor linked, necessarily, to issues of poverty and discrimination. My contention is, then, that little assessment has been made of how placemaking operates under the conditions of (im)mobility that characterise the contemporary African presence in the city. Moreover, few attempts have been made to correlate the placemaking strategies of individuals in transnational circuits with their attempts to feel ‘at home’ in the places through which they journey. Hence, in this chapter, I depart from the traditional association between placemaking and settlement to examine how individuals, whose trajectories do not fit comfortably within the binary logic of migrant-immigrant/origin-settlement, craft the material and affective spaces where they may feel comfortable and ‘at-home’.

Most Africans I have met in Guangzhou consider themselves to be people on the move. From the short-term itinerant traders that spend years (sometimes decades) of their lives moving around in transnational circuits between Africa and Asia, to more established individuals that have ‘homes’ in China and in Africa (and that travel between the two areas two or three times a year), there is a general consensus that their sojourns in China are temporal and/or transient. So, my interest here lies on analysing
how certain individuals ‘home’ (or fail to ‘home’) the spaces they inhabit while on the move, and exploring some of the implications of such processes.

Following Ahmed (2000), I contend that to better understand the multiple ways in which ‘people on the move’ structure feelings of ‘at-homeness’ we need to pay closer attention to affective, material and symbolic processes through which placemaking and ‘homing’ during transnational journeys occur. ‘Home,’ as I conceptualise it here, is not necessarily a place to go back to. It can be a process and a feeling (an embodied experience) that can be (re)produced while on the move, and ‘emplaced’ in several locations (i.e. an attempt to feel comfortable in an unfamiliar place). Moreover, I maintain that under certain modes of transnational movement, ‘home’ can be emplaced within transiency; and it is by using this notion of ‘emplacement within transiency’ that I highlight how individuals are differently emplaced and how they attempt to (re)produce a feeling of ‘being-at-home’ while on the move. I do this by following the stories and insights of Tony and three Africans community leaders, and by exploring some of the strategies that individuals and collectives employ to negotiate their everyday lives in Guangzhou under conditions of transiency and precarity.

As in many cases of transnational mobility,33 the precarity experienced by most Africans in Guangzhou is predicated on economic uncertainty; in this particular case, however, the precarity is heightened by the logics of surveillance and control imposed over populations by the Chinese state – in the case of Africans in the city, this precarity is best characterised by difficulties renewing visas, immobility resulting from overstaying, and from the impossibility of obtaining permanent residency. While sometimes paralyzing, precarity can, nonetheless, function as a trigger encouraging individuals to develop structures of solidarity and networks of support. These networks, structured by (and structuring) the emergence of grassroots forms of organization (i.e. sporting clubs and community offices) are crucial sites for individual and collective attempts to ‘feel-at-home’ in Guangzhou. Throughout this chapter, these attempts to (re)create a measure of stability, familiarity and security under conditions of transiency, migrancy and precarity are referred to as ‘precarious homing’.

‘Precarious homing’ performs a double function. First, it gives me a way to describe the difficulties experienced by Africans in their attempts to ‘home’ Guangzhou; and second, it allows me to highlight the importance of the strategies used to counteract what are perceived as adverse conditions. As I will show, precarious
homing is intrinsically connected to the notion of emplacement within transiency. This connection not only helps to elucidate the conditions under which individuals are emplaced while on the move, but makes their everyday efforts to (re)create a sense of ‘being-at-home’ clear. Indeed, through particular placemaking practices and ‘homing’ projects some Africans have managed to generate the necessary spaces where affective attachments to communities, and alternative forms of ‘citizenship’, have emerged.

Moreover, by highlighting transiency (and mobility), but grounding African homing (placemaking) attempts within precarious emplacements in Guangzhou, I do two things: first, I provide a more accurate glimpse of how these mobile (and sometimes simultaneously immobile) subjects inhabit their journeys; and second, I bridge (and move beyond) some of the tensions between theories of globalisation, transnational connectivity, flows and fluids (Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 2000; Castells, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; Urry, 2000) and ‘more grounded’ approaches like those found in the literature on migrant transnationalism and translocality (Basch et al., 1994; Mandaville, 1999; McKay, 2004; Ong, 1999).

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In the following section, I present a partial typology of the emplacements that Africans occupy in the city, highlighting the importance of transiency. I contend that thinking in terms of transient emplacements, rather than in terms of immigration and settlement, provides a better perspective to understand the dynamics behind the multiple mobilities converging in Guangzhou. In the second part of the chapter, following Tony’s story, I explore how solidarity and belonging are built through particular homing projects, underscoring the difficulties and adversities that confront most Africans I met. Following this, I introduce the notion of ‘precarious homing’ and argue that precarity has also lead to the organisation of complex networks of support – best exemplified by the emergence of community offices. In the third part of the chapter, I argue that these offices have given raise to the emergence of alternative (incipient) forms of ‘citizenship’ on the move.
3. Emplacement within transiency: African ‘immigrants’ in Guangzhou?

3.1 Multiple emplacements

Encapsulated in the term ‘Africans in Guangzhou’ is a multiplicity of individuals with diverse origins and trajectories and personal stories. From economic crises to state-level relations, from the aspirations of an individual to trading traditions, there is a plethora of factors determining who is moving between Africa and China, and how, why and when they are moving. To a great extent, these factors also determine the positions or ‘emplacements’ from which individuals experience uncertainty and adversity (and the strategies they employ to cope with these difficulties). Hence, my use of ‘emplacement’ here is aimed at highlighting the multiple ways in which individuals are immersed in particular localities, and how this defines not only what they can feel, remember, touch, smell and so on, as Ahmed suggests (2000: 89), but, and this is important, what they can do. If a focus is placed, for instance on personal stories and mobilities, it is possible to identify at least three main trajectories: those who (attempt to) live in Guangzhou; those who recurrently visit the city; and those who merely pass through. Within the first two trajectories, it is possible to discern at least three types of emplacements: the ‘more established’; the ‘semi-established’ and ‘itinerants’; and the ‘newcomers’. ‘Overstayers’ can and do emerge from all of these emplacements.

The ‘more established’ individuals are usually older traders (mainly middle-aged males) who have been doing business in Guangzhou for more than a decade. They usually have considerable investments in the city, and are very well connected with local producers, as well as with authorities and other foreigners. Many of these individuals have managed to open offices (where they usually act as middlemen between Chinese and Africans) and shops in local clothing and electronics markets. Some of these individuals have even established trading organisations that, in some cases, have become national community offices. While most of the individuals in this category have long been participating in transnational trading networks, a significant proportion of them came to China in the early 2000s, directly from their countries (mainly Mali, Ghana and Nigeria), without much previous trading experience. At that time, some of them found themselves, almost accidentally, involved in the once flourishing garment trade, and it was from there that they learnt how to shift into other
trading activities. Depending on their capacities to adapt, many of these individuals succeeded in becoming businessmen – a fact that, to some extent, has facilitated their continued presence in the country.

Most individuals in this broad category are relatively proficient in a Chinese language (usually Mandarin, but sometimes in Cantonese); and a minority (although still a considerable number) have managed to establish families in Guangzhou. In these particular cases, most have married Chinese women, but there are cases in which families have been brought out from abroad. As these ‘more established’ individuals have a decidedly more extensive understanding of China and Chinese culture(s) than those newly arrived, they can often be found acting as ‘mediators’ and/or ‘facilitators’ – influencing and negotiating the movement and temporary settlement of their fellow co-nationals, thus benefiting from their ability to be located in China (Bredeloup 2012: 32). It is important to note, however, that while their stay in the country is in most cases legal (they are more likely to hold longer-term stay permits), there are no working ‘immigration’ frameworks that would ensure their permanent stay or citizenship in the country – being married to a Chinese or having a business (or property) in China does not guarantee the right of abode.

A second type of emplacement is composed of all those ‘itinerant’ and ‘semi-settled’ individuals who frequently move back and forth between Guangzhou and places like Abuja, Nairobi, Luanda and Dar-Es-Salaam. It is important to note, however, that most of these traders have different patterns of movement. Marcela (who I met in the New Dengfeng Hotel), for instance, is an itinerant Angolan trader who has been coming to Guangzhou since 2008 on short income-boosting trips. She explained that Angolan women have a long tradition of itinerant trading and how over the generations, their trading activities have become increasingly more complex. In the past, she said, trading women only moved between trading posts in Angola; it was not until later that they began circulating between other countries and markets in the southern part of Africa. Recently, bolstered by the ease in transportation and by the improved state-level relationships between Angola and China, many trading women have set their sight upon China. In Marcela’s particular case, she moves between Luanda and Guangzhou every 4 to 6 weeks. She usually travels alone, but relies on other Angolan traders once in Guangzhou to share lodging, organize shipping containers, and expand her network of business contacts. In these recurrent transnational commutes, individuals like Marcela circulate between different trading...
posts, sometimes relying on the arrangements and infrastructure set up by both ‘more established’ and ‘semi-settled’ individuals. In a way, the presence of these Angolan women, like Marcela, could also be seen as a contemporary (re)articulation (relocation) of longstanding traditions of movement and trade – evidence of how certain African trading cultures of circulation, in their transnational mode, have finally reached China. Arguably, itinerants are individuals who have reacted with transnational individual entrepreneurial efforts in an attempt to counter Chinese presence in African markets.

Strengthened economic links between China and Angola have meant that visas for Angolans are granted with relative ease. Michel, a ‘semi-settled’ Congolese-born, Angolan man, for instance, has been in Guangzhou since 2011. Profiteering from his more stable position, Michel opened a representation office in 2013 where he acts as a middleman negotiating business deals between Congolese, Angolans and Chinese. While during his first year, Michel stayed in China with a tourist visa and needed to exit the country every 30 days, his latest business visa arrangement allowed him to remain in Guangzhou for six months at a time. The possibilities and mobility that Michel, and other semi/more settled individuals, get from their visa arrangements stand in stark contrast to those of newly arrived Nigerians, or Cameroonians, who usually only get 30 days non-extendable visas. Semi-settled individuals, like Michel, are more like economic explorers seeking opportunities, anticipating trends, mediating deals, and sometimes buying directly from Chinese to resell to other Africans (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009). I contend that individuals in this broad category, ‘semi-settled’ and ‘itinerants’, constitute the bulk of what has been construed as the African ‘population’ in the city.

Finally, alongside the more established traders and the itinerants and semi-settled, almost anyone with some economic means can start moving back and forth between the two regions. This third broad type of emplacement, thus, encapsulates multiple stories of fortune seeking, success, failure, and becoming. These ‘newly arrived’, like some of the players, are usually younger individuals who have been propelled toward China in multifarious ways. Indeed, lured by the word-of-mouth about a ‘new land of opportunities’, many of these youngsters collect funds amongst relatives and friends and set out on a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ (or ‘suicidal’ as some of them call it) mission to seek for their fortunes in China. Rather than displaced wanderers, these individuals are best characterised as explorers and/or risk takers – some manage to do relatively well in a short time and obtain business visas; others, however, are less
fortunate. Take for instance, Ivo, a young Ghanaian with a technical degree in graphic design from a university in Accra, who left to China after the passing away of his sister – with whom he had lived for several years. With some money that was left to him by his sister, Ivo left for China, without even telling his parents. When I met him, Ivo was in his third day in the city and had been taken in by a former Ghanaian community office leader in the city – a business acquaintance of his father’s youth. Ivo was looking for opportunities to teach English, graphic design, and desperately wanted to find a place where he could play soccer, one of his other possible pursuits in China. As after 30 days in Guangzhou, he did not manage to secure a job and a visa extension, Ivo thought of overstaying his visa. However, after pondering the risks (entrapment and imprisonment) and the possible gains, he left for his country. Many individuals in this category lack the expertise needed to succeed in what is readily available in the city: trading opportunities. Their shortage of capital, along with a limited understanding of how things work in trade, and in China, further complicate their attempts to seek for their fortunes. Moreover, many are also abroad for the first time. Consequently, a high number, end up stranded or ‘immobile,’ (as reported by Haugen 2012) with difficult migratory statuses and a reliance on community networks to survive.

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Although the typology laid out above is useful to describe the different types of positions, affiliations and commitments of individuals in this case study, the very mobilities and fluidities they display (or could attain) renders it rather difficult to fix them in specific types of emplacement along the settled/itinerant continuum. While, for instance, there seems to be a constant/recurrent presence of say, semi-settled people, these individuals can, at any given moment and depending on individual strategies and circumstances (and/or macro-political conjunctures), attempt to become more settled (i.e. former itinerant traders that stop constantly moving back-and-forth and take up more settled positions in the city). As Bertoncello and Bredeloup (2009) have argued, most African transnational traders go through unpatterned cycles of rest and movement (never settling, always departing, or vice versa, if you want) throughout their trading lives. Seasoned and ‘settled’ businessmen may relaunch into risky itinerant trade, while a newer itinerant trader might settle down for a couple of years only to reconvert a few years later (2009: 58).
In other words, journeying through the transnational networks that connect localities in China and Africa, an individual may shift from being a football player trying to break into the Chinese league to a semi-settled trader roaming around factories in southern China in the search for comparative advantages; or, from a Pentecostal clerk attempting to evangelise China to an English kindergarten teacher; or from an itinerant trader to a ‘settled’ family man with a restaurant and cargo office. When we pay attention to individual stories, decisions, aspirations, trajectories and mobilities (this is, to the individual ability to shift as a strategy for the pursuit of self-realisation and/or survival), and to the instability of the context, it becomes rather clear how difficult is to maintain a fixed distinction between more settled, semi-settled, and itinerant.

3.2. Emplacement within transiency

Arguably, focusing on the multiple (complex, unstable and transient) emplacements Africans occupy in Guangzhou can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities associated with the case study. A focus on emplacements remains attentive to how place and locality (along with personal dispositions) determine, to a great extent, the ways in which Africans in the city negotiate ‘the lived experience of locality’ (Ahmed, 2000: 89) and ‘the constraints it imposes and the opportunities it offers’ (Ang, 1993: 38). Indeed, the notion of ‘emplacement within transiency’ firmly grounds individual attempts to feel-at-home, while on the move, in situated localities; thus opening up possibilities for a conceptualization of ‘home’ as a mobile project – rather than as a place to go back to (see Brah, 1996), or a place to build in the future. Moreover, highlighting emplacement within transiency guards against simplified understandings and discourses of international (im)migration that tend to hastily locate all sorts of people on the move within the home-host, departure-destination, origin-settlement, and assimilation-acculturation binaries and tropes. At the same time, through this conceptualization, it also becomes clear that even while on the move (and even while not attempting to ‘settle’), these individuals are not disembedded/floating subjects and that often they develop senses of belonging and being-at-home ‘despite relatively transient connections to particular places’ (Conradson and Latham, 2005: 288). Before proceeding, it must be mentioned that transiency in this case study is informed by three main factors: African patterns of mobility (I will explore this in Chapter 5); the dynamics behind transnational networks of trade (i.e. itinerant cultures
and transnational entrepreneurialism); and, most importantly, the legal impediments to
staying in China for extended periods of time.

Based on individual and collective practices amongst Africans in Guangzhou
dynamics, possibilities, emplacements and trajectories), as well as on the structural
imperatives that condition (foster or hamper) their mobility, it is a misnomer to
conceptualise these individuals as ‘immigrants’ in a process of assimilation and
settlement. It is more accurate to conceptualise these subjects as sojourning
‘transnational entrepreneurs’ – individuals who have chosen to go to China in search
of opportunities for personal development and greater economic wellbeing, and that
are often confronted with precarious conditions.

4. Precarity and the strengthening of solidarity networks

4.1. Structuring solidarity through football

Back on the soccer pitch, Ken finally decided to let the players go after almost four
hours of training. After changing out of their soccer gear, the players joined Tony (who
had bought two crates of bottled drinks) under the trees in the car park. As the
conversation gravitated to the last police crackdown on a hotel where hundreds of
Nigerians lodged (following a drug peddling lead), Tony listened from afar with a
serious face. On the several occasions I met him, Tony persistently emphasized how
people in the Nigerian community have been fighting hard to counteract the bad
reputation they have gained from the wrongdoings of a minority. During his tenure at
Owners F.C. (which started in 2008), Tony has witnessed an increase in the arrival of
individuals without trading skills who believe that they could find success quickly by
playing soccer. As success is rather elusive, however, and most visas are short, many
opt to overstay their visas and look for other activities to engage in.36 ‘Once they find
out how difficult it is to make it in China, they start getting frustrated, and some take
the wrong decisions. The team is a good way to keep them out of trouble,’ Tony
explained. In an attempt to help the players, he usually gives them advice on how to
start doing business. While most of the people Tony has met through soccer have
eventually left the country, some of them have managed to stay, get married, and do
relatively well in trade.
Tony himself was one of these young Nigerians back in 2001 when he first arrived in China with only USD $240 in his pocket. Without his father's approval or family support, he left Nigeria at 25 to explore the possibilities of outsourcing part of his father's business to China. At that time, there were less than 50 Nigerians in the city, and Tony was lucky enough to have a contact amongst them. Shortly after his arrival, and before being able to explore opportunities related to his father’s business, he began loading containers and doing other random jobs assigned to him by his fellow countrymen. ‘Back then Guangzhou was very different. There was not as much business as there is now, there were not so many people, and Chinese were not as open as they are now,’ he said. In his early days in Guangzhou, Tony’s life revolved around three main activities: ‘During the week, I would try to make ends meet and wait for the weekend to come so I could go to church and play football,’ he recounted. These activities not only kept him busy – they were fruitful. Through the networks he found at soccer and in the church, Tony acquired more contacts, and more importantly, the necessary knowledge to start his own business with the little he was earning. As most of his acquaintances were in the clothing business, Tony was drawn into it. Without much knowledge, and investing almost everything he had, Tony started buying clothes and sending them back to Lagos (in shared containers), where his relatives would sell them and send part of the profits back to him. As the clothing sector was thriving back in the early 2000s, Tony quickly abandoned the idea of
outsourcing his father’s business. At the height of the African clothing craze in the mid 2000s, Tony went back to Nigeria and bought a house with the initial profits he had made. ‘When my father saw me come home and buy a house, he finally approved of my life in China,’ Tony remembered.

Believing that he was on the right track, Tony returned to China and proposed to his Chinese girlfriend. However, just before getting married, the clothing sector became highly competitive (due to a large influx of African entrepreneurs), and profits became too small to keep him afloat. A couple of months into his marriage, he was happily awaiting a child, but his business had collapsed. ‘Bankruptcy was just around the corner. I didn’t know what to do. I flew to Nigeria with a hundred dollars in my pocket looking for support, but I came back empty-handed. By then, my father was late, and nobody was there to help me,’ Tony told me with a hint of sadness. ‘Penniless, I went to the hospital to receive my firstborn. It was very embarrassing. But, just a couple of hours before he was born, I received a business call that saved me. It was a miracle. I took the money and payed for the delivery,’ he remembered somewhat joyfully. Having learnt his lesson, Tony moved out of the clothing sector and opened a representation office with his wife, where they acted as mediators between Nigerians and other West Africans and Chinese producers. ‘Africans do not trust other Africans, but they sometimes trust Chinese,’ he said. ‘My wife has been very important for the success of our consultancy’.

When I first met Tony in a Starbucks – a couple of months before he took me to the training – one of the first things that I noticed about him was that he used a walking stick. In a later meeting, he told me that during his last trip to Nigeria, he was involved in a car accident and had his right femur broken in two places. He was hospitalised for eight weeks, had several operations, and was told that he needed to stay in bed for three to four months. However, against the doctor’s advice, Tony rushed back to Guangzhou only two months after the accident to be with his wife and their two children. One pertinent reason for his rush was that, according to the law for foreigners in place at that time, his ‘spouse residence permit’ did not allow him to be out of the country for more than three months each year. He was afraid that he would be prevented from coming back into the country.

Tony is one of the few Nigerians who have managed to secure ‘residency’ (a one year visa) in Guangzhou.37 However, as with many other Africans in the city, notwithstanding marriage certificates, children and investments, Tony still finds it
difficult every time he has to renew his documents. ‘It is a serious issue. I never know if I will get it. The visa problem is the main reason why we Africans find it quite difficult to feel at home in China. With the way the current visa system is structured, they let you know that you don’t belong here, that you will have to move out. It is very difficult to plan a future here,’ he said. In order to cope with this sense of uncertainty, but still fulfil his duties as a husband and a father, Tony has had to develop several transnational strategies. In the early years of his marriage, for instance, his in-laws started pressuring him to buy property in China. However, as he had heard stories about Africans buying property in the country and later being banned from re-entry, he decided to take his wife on a surprise trip to Nigeria, and buy property in the names of his children there. ‘When I came back to Guangzhou, I showed the property deeds to my father-in-law and that somehow eased the tensions,’ he recounted.

During his 12 years plus in the city, Tony has seen a great deal of transformation, not only in the Chinese economy and foreign activity but also in his personal life. Indeed, Tony has journeyed from being a ‘newly-arrived’ looking for opportunities, through an episode of overstaying, to finally leading a relatively ‘more established’ life in China. For many of those years, Tony anxiously awaited a reform in the regulations controlling foreign populations in China. By mid-2013, he was hopeful that the announced reform to the 1980s ‘law for foreigners’ would eventually ease his stay in the country. The new regulation was finally announced in late 2013, but no real immigration framework was laid out.38 As a consequence of this, Tony has finally decided to move his family to Nigeria in the near future. Included in this plan is the intention to send his children back to China when they are ready to attend university. Arguably, Tony’s journey through a range of emplacements shows that while emplacements can and do change or evolve, precarity remains a condition.
Overall, Tony has a slightly negative perception about the real possibilities for Africans living in Guangzhou. Each time we met, he stressed the stubbornness of the city’s officials in easing the granting of residence permits as the main reason why there are not more Africans in the city. In China, local authorities are in charge of granting residence permits to foreigners inside the country; and, to some extent, each municipality, city and province have different policies to manage the foreigners residing in their jurisdictions. As a consequence of this, many Africans have moved to Foshan, Dongguan, and other surrounding locales where this process is relatively smoother.

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After the soccer training, Tony drove me back to Guangyuan West Road. As we drove past the wholesale markets across from Canaan, we witnessed how a group of plain-clothed chengguang stopped every single African male coming out of Baile
Market (柏乐). ‘They only search black people. It is very embarrassing. If you are not carrying your passport or if you have overstayed, you’re in big trouble,’ Tony told me as we watched a young man being chased through moving cars by several chenguan with sticks and dogs. As they caught him in front of a crowd of Chinese and African onlookers, Tony explained that ‘they will hand him in to the police and he will call a local representative of his national community. If he has connections, they may be able to sort the matter out’. As it stands, many ‘more established’ individuals, like Tony, have connections with the police and often mediate between detained overstayers and the authorities.

Since the emergence of the ‘Nigerian markets’, Guangyuan West Road has become a point of heightened tension between Africans (mainly Nigerians, but also Cameroonian and Ghanaians) and local police. The area is also the site where Africans demonstrated against the police in 2009 and 2012, as noted previously. After the demonstrations, and in particular after the one in 2012, there was a significant increase in surveillance in the area. Nowadays, most Nigerians, including Tony, agree that the wholesale market area is a ‘very difficult place to live and work.’ So while many West Africans still live and lodge in apartments and hotels in the vicinity of the markets, many more settled individuals – especially those who own shops in the markets – have moved to other neighbourhoods. Hugo, a Cameroonian that owns an electronics shop in one of the markets, explained that:

It is horrible. The police (chengguan) here act like a pack of wolves. They roam around all day looking for prey. They receive RMB100 for each overstayer they arrest. They actually don’t have the right to stop people. They are not migration officers. But since there’s no law here, they do what they want. (Hugo – Interviewee 5)

Biafra, a Nigerian I met in a bar in Dengfeng the day he came out of detention, told me that he had overstayed for two years before he was detained.

My brother talked to the police. He made a payment and a promise that I would leave the country, so they let me out. He’s well known here. Now I have to leave within 15 days, but I’m not sure if I’ll go. Life is difficult here, but it’s better than back home. (Biafra – Interviewee 7)

As he ordered a round of Guinness beer, he further explained that ‘some of the guys in detention have no one to help them, so they stay there until they get money sent by someone to pay for their fines and flight tickets. If there’s no money, they stay for longer. There’s no deportation here’. Biafra told me that he was thinking of
proposing to his girlfriend one more time, but that if she rejected him, then he would seriously consider leaving, as he dreaded going into detention again.

While Tony sees detentions, persecution, and police harassment as big problems for Africans in Guangzhou, he does not directly relate these problems to racism or discrimination, as many others do. He thinks that this ‘cat-mouse game’ is a problem emerging from loopholes in Chinese laws that create spaces for individuals to abuse their authority. ‘They have built an economy out of this,’ he told me. ‘For them, it is not discrimination. It is business’. According to Tony, in the early 2000s, overstaying a visa was not a big problem, as new visas could be obtained easily through unofficial agents. Nowadays, however, hefty fines and the possibility of being jailed deter foreigners with irregular statuses from trying to fix their situations or from leaving the country. Tony further explained that, local authorities have established truces for overstayers to leave the country, but as very few of those who overstay trust the Chinese authorities and all dread being jailed, most stay on – their precarious emplacement becoming a dangerous entrapment.40

Paradoxically, Chinese policies aimed at restricting the ‘illegal’ presence of foreigners force individuals with irregular statuses to remain in those situations (this migratory catch-22, or ‘state of immobility’ has been explored by Haugen [2012]). Tony concludes that it is the duty of Africans to understand that China has its own ways of doing things and that that will not change. ‘It is us that have to get used to their ways, not them to ours,’ he said, adding that he would not actively encourage anyone to come to China. ‘China is difficult, and it is not a green pasture as many imagine. The government makes it very difficult for foreigners’.
4.2. Structural discrimination and racism

A great deal of what has been written in the media about Africans in Guangzhou racialises their presence in the country. Africans are frequently represented as having constant trouble and conflict with ‘local’ Chinese. Chuck, a Nigerian who has been in the country since 2008 (and who has been interviewed several times by Western media outlets), told me that:

There is no structural racism against black people. Some people want us to say that there is, but it is not the case. … If I have problems here, it is not because I am a black man, but many people don’t want to understand this. They think that if I have trouble here, it must be because I am a black man. (Chuck – Interviewee 3)

Tony’s point of view is somewhat similar. ‘When I have had problems with Chinese and tried to solve them, I have always been treated in the way I’m supposed to be treated’. Tony argues that on an individual level, there might be some Chinese that dislike foreigners, but he does not feel there is racism against Africans. Tony also agreed with Chuck that there is no structural racism, and told me that although he thought that Chinese were racist when he first arrived in China, his views changed with time. He now thinks that misunderstandings are mostly a matter of ignorance and language. As soon as he had a good level of Chinese and was able to communicate
with people and the authorities, he was treated better. ‘Yes, the government has their policies that are tough, but with individuals, it is something different,’ he said.

Although both Tony and Chuck seem to have somewhat neutral views on the subjects of racism and discrimination, not everybody agrees with them. It is common to find Africans that complain about different forms of discrimination in their everyday interactions with Chinese – and some of them call it ‘racism’. Bodomo (2012) reports that cases of overt discrimination against black people are rife – especially in dealings with the police. And, local authorities have deployed a variety of strategies aimed at hampering what is perceived as the uncontrolled growth of foreign activity in the city. The Public Security Bureau in Dengfeng, for instance, has posted trilingual English-French-Chinese posters in hotels where foreigners congregate, outlining the penalties for drug trafficking, violence, robbery and prostitution. Again, as with the ‘Caution to foreigners from the police’ notices in restaurants and cafes, these posters are difficult to find in other areas of the city hosting significant, non-African, foreign populations. Moreover, in May 2011, Guangdong’s provincial government issued the ‘Interim Provisions of Guangdong Province on Administration of and Services to Aliens’ – also known as the Guangdong Act – a new regulation (the first of its kind on the administration of foreigners in the country) that requires, based on a reward-penalty principle, local residents to report any ‘malpractice’ involving foreigners, such as: illegal entry, overstaying, working without permits, or doing business without licenses (Lan, 2014: 7). This regulation also comes with the threat of exorbitant fines for residents who fail to comply (Lau 2012). The feeling of being under constant surveillance and systematically harassed by the authorities is one of the shared features in the placemaking narratives of many Africans in Dengfeng/Xiaobei and Guanyuan West Road. According to Tony, while the government has the right to decide how to manage foreign populations, these hurdles make it somewhat difficult to feel at home in Guangzhou.

4.3. Precarious homing, or the difficult task of feeling at ‘home’ in Guangzhou

As evinced by Tony’s story (and the more difficult stories of the young individuals who have overstayed their visas), many Africans in the city perceive that their presence is heavily curtailed by: the laws and practices I highlighted above; (the perception of)
systematic harassment and persecution; and the impossibility of obtaining residency rights or citizenship. I argue that the feelings of uncertainty, difficulty, and risk (partly caused by these practices and laws) generate a ‘shared sense of precarity’ that permeates most attempts to make Guangzhou a new ‘home’.

While precarity has, to some extent, become a buzzword to theorise ‘lived experiences’ in the risky environments produced by neoliberalism (Horning, 2012), it takes distinct forms in different contexts – there is no one single way of talking about precarity. I use this notion here to describe the uncertain conditions and feelings under which Africans attempt to make sense of their time (and reproduce their presence) in Guangzhou. This ‘shared sense of precarity’ is, of course, still predicated on ‘economic uncertainty’, and on the lack of access to stable/secure forms of living (as in many cases of (im)migration or transnational movement). However, in the case of Africans in Guangzhou, this sense needs to be partially detached from the senses of exploitation and relative powerlessness that pervade European theorisations about the ‘precarisation of work’ and ‘precarious labour’ (especially theories under the umbrella designation of the so-called Italian Autonomism (i.e. Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno)) as Africans in Guangzhou are not necessarily ‘immigrants’ facing the impossibility of finding stable employment (or entering into exploitative working relations with Chinese employers) – rather they are more like individual transnational entrepreneurs that face other forms of precarity. Indeed, the need to theoretically detach from previous theorisations on precarity does not intend to suggest that these discussions are irrelevant to the case of Africans in Guangzhou, but to highlight the specificity of precarity in this case study. In the case of foreign presence in China, precarity is, up until now, mainly determined by the logics of surveillance and control that the Chinese state imposes over populations.

Arguably though, precarity in this case study is confronted by a considerable amount of agency. Indeed, it is often precarity that leads individuals to organise themselves to forge spaces (‘homes’) where they can feel at ease. Precarity is, therefore, not only a negative term for describing the shaky grounds on which Africans attempt to (re)produce a feeling of at-homeness while on the move. It is also a shared sense that can trigger individuals or groups to develop (transnational and translocal) strategies to perpetuate their presence in the country, and, as in the case of Tony, reproduce and preserve a sense of community and family.
Relating precarity to ‘homing projects’ leads me to further explicate my conceptualization of ‘home’ while on the move. If, as I have suggested earlier, we understand ‘home’ as a process (or some kind of transient project) then it follows that ‘home’, wherever it is emplaced, has to be constantly ‘re-homed’. In other words, to make a place feel like ‘home’ entails the (re)productive process of ‘homing’ it (imagining it, creating it, unmaking it, changing it, and moving it – see Walsh, 2006). What I am suggesting here is a move from ‘home’ as a noun to ‘home’ as a verb/action: to home (as Ahmed, 2000; and, Hua, 2011 have also implied). In this way, I claim homing within transnational movement is an attempt (and also an ability) to (re)create certain affective and material markers facilitating the sometimes difficult task of feeling comfortable in an unfamiliar (and transient) place. In a way then, ‘homing’ is a craft – the humanising and personalising of (physical and affective) spaces. Individual abilities that precondition the attempt to ‘feel-at-home’ emerge from the intersections between individual experience (i.e. emotions, skills, knowledge and connections) and practices/discourses of nationality, class, gender and education. Accordingly, homing the place one inhabits is not the same for an experienced Congolese trader with high degrees of mobility and for a young and unskilled Nigerian looking for instant success as a soccer player. Individuals negotiate the multiple relations that structure the localities they inhabit in various ways, and it is this negotiation that defines the success or failure of their homing attempts. Based on the accounts gathered during my fieldwork, however, I argue that these multifarious and multiple attempts to ‘home’ all take place on precarious grounds – hence the term, ‘precarious homing.’

Nonetheless, as Tony’s story shows, it is possible to overcome or counter a certain amount of this precarity; and, central to this possibility are the networks of support that Africans have established in the city. While the soccer pitch is one of the arenas where senses of solidarity, endurance and resistance associated with precarious homing are more evident, attempts to (re)create measures of stability, security and familiarity also occur on larger scales – for example, in the national community offices.
5. Community offices as sites of alternative citizenship: African ‘politics’ in Guangzhou

In the last five years, there have been two ‘crisis points’ for Africans in Guangzhou. In July 2009, the second ever demonstration of foreigners in the PRC took place in front of the Kuangquan Police Station on Guangyuan West Road when, following a police raid, around 300 Africans (mainly Nigerians) took to the streets, blocked the traffic, and congregated outside the station. They were protesting against what many of them saw as systematic racial profiling and police harassment. Again, in July 2012, several hundred individuals protested in the same place, after news spread that a Nigerian man had died in police custody. A few days after the second incident, a Cameroonian man involved in the protests told me: ‘We Africans have the right to demonstrate.’ To be honest, his claim struck me as somewhat misplaced. How do you know that you have that right here? I thought. In response to questions about ‘rights’ and community problems, I often found myself directed to the leaders or representatives in the several African community offices in the city. It is these leaders who claim to do what they can to organise and protect their fellow compatriots. Indeed, to appease both demonstrations, police summoned the leaders of the Nigerian and Ghanaian communities, amongst others. After their mediation, the demonstrations were dispersed, roads were unblocked, and things went back to normal.

While it is not without precedent that diasporic African communities organise networks of support and representation (see MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000), the ways it is being done in Guangzhou mark a new dynamic for foreign presence in China, and signal the strengthening of African presence in the country. Shortly after the first African traders arrived in Guangzhou, individuals of several nationalities started organising networks, mainly around trade, sport and religion. Over the last five years, some 30 unofficial, and informally organised, national community offices have sprung up in the city. Their primary objectives tend to be giving Africans a voice during their sojourns in China, and to positively promote the image of Africans in the city. Community office activities vary, however, depending on the needs and sizes of specific communities.
5.1. Nigerian ‘wars’ in Guangzhou and the ‘peacemakers’

With some 3,000 registered members, the Nigerian community office is, without a doubt, the most salient African organisation in the city. O. Emma, an Igbo with decades of experience in transnational trade and who holds the title ‘President of Nigeria in China’ (and a personal claim to the more bombastic title of ‘President of Africa in China’), has been in office for the last two terms. Every couple of years, the Nigerian office, along with other national offices in the city, organise elections for presidents and their cabinets. According to Emma, the last election (which had a turnout of more than 80 percent of the members) firmly ratified how Nigerians in the city trust him – indeed, Emma was elected to a second term with an overwhelming 99 percent of the votes. Emma claims that the main missions of the community offices are to: promote understanding; bring Chinese and Africans closer; and generate a familiar atmosphere for Africans in the country – ‘a home away from home,’ as he puts it.

Emma is renowned amongst Nigerians and other Africans in the city for having ‘pacified’ Nigerians, and for his constant attempts to unify the African community offices. Before Emma took office, Nigerians in the city were incipiently organising into several competing (and often clashing) factions – factions that mirrored Nigeria’s own ethnic and religious divides. ‘The community was fractured. There were multiple leaders, there was no organisation, and there were a lot of quarrels amongst the groups,’ Emma explained during our first meeting in his ‘presidential’ office. ‘What we needed was unity, order and peace. That’s exactly what I offered and what almost everybody accepted,’ he added, in a very political tone.

According to Joe, a former member of the community office, prior to 2008 many Nigerians in the city were not only fighting factional struggles. ‘Many of us doing business legally and leading more or less law-abiding lives, were worried about the few bad elements involved in illegal activities.’ Joe further explained that by the mid-2000s many young Nigerians had arrived in the city, and a small number of them took to criminal activities such as drug peddling, extortion and abduction of other Nigerians. These problems, in particular drug related offences, damaged not only the Nigerian reputation but also local perceptions of Africans in general.
In order to fulfil some of the promises that took him into office, Emma’s first move as president was to set up a group of vigilantes called ‘the peacemakers’, who were instructed to clamp down on Africans involved in activities that damaged ‘African reputation’. Chuck, who was a member of the peacemakers, explained that the group would target any African in Guangzhou involved in illegal activity. Generally, peacemakers would first approach a wrongdoer and give them a warning. If they recurred, the vigilantes would come back and apprehend them. Indeed, the peacemakers ‘apprehended’ several individuals and handed them over to the local authorities. ‘We cannot allow that the wrongful action of one affects the whole of the communities in the city,’ Chuck told me. During Emma’s early years as president, the peacemakers were more active. ‘As he [Emma] consolidated his position, the Nigerian wars in Guangzhou were over,’ Joe explained. Gradually, the need for the vigilantes faded. While, according to many Nigerians and some other Africans in the city, Emma’s vigilante ‘policy’ had a positive impact, some disgruntled individuals claim that the group was used to harass and detain individuals from rival factions. Indeed, not everyone in the city feels represented by the community offices, and there are often accusations against leaders using their positions for personal gain.

Nonetheless, the Nigerian community office does not only clamp down on illegal activities, settle quarrels, and dissolve angry mobs at demonstrations. On a regular basis, Emma and the other representatives in his ‘cabinet’ help individuals in trouble. Almost every day, Emma receives calls from people who have either been
cheated or detained for overstaying. ‘In the office we do what we can to get people out of trouble. If they have been detained, we contact their relatives in Nigeria and help them get the money to pay for the fines and flight out of China,’ Emma explained. There are some cases, however, in which the community office cannot find relatives or any other way of helping, so the individual remains in (illegal) detention for anywhere from a couple of months to possibly years.

Emma and other Nigerians in the city claim that after the emergence of a centralised leadership, Nigerians (and Africans in general) have a voice in city affairs. ‘Now, they listen to us as a group,’ Chuck (who is also Emma’s business partner) told me, going on to argue that the office’s biggest success was the procurement of legal and recognised market spaces for Africans in the city. In late 2011, Emma managed to negotiate the opening of the first fully approved, fully African commercial space: ‘Guangda African Market’, which is located in the northern outskirts of the city – far from the ‘Nigerian Markets’ of Guangyuan West Road and the urban village of Dengfeng. With this achievement, Emma hoped that the Africans in Guangyuan West Road would be willing to relocate there – a place where, he argued, they would most likely not be harassed and persecuted as they were in downtown Guangzhou. However, by mid 2013, the Market and some African restaurants had collapsed due to a lack of occupation.

Throughout his time in office, Emma has not only been networking and promoting trade; he has also invested his time in what he calls ‘cross-cultural activities’. ‘We want to make local authorities understand and accept that Africans are something good for the city and that as many of us have married and had children here, we will most likely stay for a long time.’ With the experience of having lived more than 15 years in Guangzhou (and having a Chinese wife and a ‘little Ojukwu’), Emma has recently put his efforts into creating and maintaining a ‘family forum’. The forum, which is mainly run by his wife, is aimed at fostering ‘cross-cultural dialogue’ in Sino-Nigerian marriages and promoting ‘cultural understanding’.

5.2. ‘We Africans deserve the treatment we get’

Amongst Africans in Guangzhou, the widespread perception that ‘there is no rule of law in China’ is one of the most salient rationales for justifying the need for community offices. ‘The main problem in Guangzhou is that Africans have no right to
have rights,’ A. Kubi, the secretary of the Ghanaian community office, told me. In an attempt to fill this perceived vacuum, some of these offices operate on the premise of providing ‘services and rights’ to their members. ‘While not all Ghanaians are registered with us, the ones who stay here for longer periods soon discover the advantage of membership,’ he explained. According to Kubi, the main task that a community office has in Guangzhou is securing the wellbeing of its members. ‘We look after our people. If they are sick, if they are in detention, if they have family problems, we always assist them’. Kubi further explained that every member of the community pays a monthly ‘welfare fee’, so, in the case of an emergency, there are funds to cover the associated costs (i.e. detention fines or medical fees). Nonetheless, the Ghanaian community office not only assists its 100-odd members. ‘We often get calls from people who have lost their passports or who want us to procure visa extensions,’ Kubi commented during an interview. ‘Even if they are not members, it is difficult for us to deny the service’.

Kubi, who comes from the Ashanti region of Ghana, first arrived in Beijing in 2004 with the intention of becoming an English teacher and then using his earnings to start a business back home. Shortly after arriving, he found himself teaching at a secondary school in the outskirts of Lanzhou, in Gansu province – a place where, as he recalled: ‘They had never seen a foreigner, let alone a black man’. One day in 2007, he received a call from a Ghanaian acquaintance asking him to travel to Guangzhou to inspect some products that were about to be sent to Kumasi. ‘That’s how I ended up here,’ he said. ‘I had no experience in trade, but there was no other Ghanaian that could come down here. It was by accident that I found myself inspecting merchandise and shipping it’. After that, Kubi decided to try his luck with what he calls ‘petty exports’. Then in 2011, he participated in the community office’s election and was elected to the post of secretary.

Kubi explained that one of the biggest challenges for African representatives in the city, regardless of their national origin, is the issue of ‘African reputation’. In fact, all the community leaders that I spoke to identified this as a critical issue hampering the consolidation of an African presence in the city. The problem is, according to Kubi, that when a black person commits an offence, Chinese people do not say, ‘Ah, it was a Nigerian.’ They say, ‘Oh, those Africans.’ After mentioning that he holds nothing personal against Nigerians, he went on to say that the recent arrival of many young males who, in many cases, end up stranded and in difficult situations, has had its
shortcomings. ‘Some of these young Nigerians have started creating problems and, naturally, the local authorities reacted.’ According to Kubi the illegal activities of young Nigerians are the main reason why the reputation of African people in China has been damaged. Kubi claimed that in the early days, things were not as difficult for Africans in the city as they are now, and that police harassment was not the norm. ‘In the last 6 years, many things have changed for Africans in the city,’ he said, ‘and, certainly not for the better.’ While Kubi does not defend police harassment in the streets, he commented that Africans are being mistreated, in part, because of their own behaviour. ‘Before criticising Chinese authorities for how they treat us now, let’s consider what we’ve done in the past. Let’s blame ourselves, and work to rebuild our image and the local authority’s confidence in us,’ he suggested. Kubi believes that the tensions between Africans and the local authorities are not a matter of discrimination, but more likely a consequence of ‘things Africans did wrong.’ However, he contends that through the work of the community offices, this could be reverted. In a way, Kubi’s perspective is very similar to that of Tony. Both of them argue that in China, Africans have to learn to live by Chinese rules, get used to Chinese social practices, and not try to force Chinese to get used to theirs.

At least once a year, community leaders from most of the African nationalities represented in the city gather to discuss the situation of their communities. Kubi contends that it is the responsibility of the Nigerian community, as the leading and most populous African community in the city, to set the example. ‘I know that they are working on it, but I think that it is very difficult to control the behaviour of so many young Nigerians that are facing tough times here,’ he said. Kubi acknowledges the efforts that Nigerians have made to strengthen cooperation between Africans and the local authorities. Nonetheless, during the community office meetings, he usually highlights the need for the Nigerian community leaders to develop more efficient strategies of controlling ‘their own population’.
Leaders like Kubi and Emma usually refer to their community offices’ quasi-formal recognition by the local authorities as the greatest achievement of Africans in the city. Kubi also believes that through this recognition, communities and local authorities could eventually work out strategies and policies for granting ‘permanent’ residency rights to law abiding Africans in the city – ‘community offices are stepping stones, or spearheads, for future generations of Africans in China,’ as Emma puts it. In order to make things easier for Africans in the city, the Ghanaian and Nigerian community offices have repeatedly called for their governments to open consulates in the city. In this way, some of the stress that falls upon them could be relieved. ‘I don’t understand why the embassies are in Beijing, when Guangzhou is the capital of Africans in China. They should have their offices here,’ Kubi argued. Over the last decade, countries like Uganda, Mali and Ethiopia have acknowledged the crucial role of Guangzhou in Africa-China relations, however, and have established formal representation in the city.
5.3. ‘Same skin, but not the same habits’

‘Paradoxically, the 2012 demonstrations were a turning point,’ M. Dieng, the leader of the Senegalese community told me, in French, during our first meeting. ‘That was the moment in which we, as community representatives, realised that local authorities were taking us seriously. Now, they contact us to solve all kinds of problems.’ Dieng arrived in Guangzhou in 2003, after a four-year sojourn in Thailand. In 2011, after the sudden death of a former community representative, Dieng became the President of the Senegalese community. ‘During my first seven years here I was an active participant in community activities, but it was not until he passed away that I realised the importance of having a community organisation,’ he explained. ‘We went through a very difficult process to repatriate his body, and if we had not been united it would not have been possible,’ he added. As Dieng and other community members realised that they would most probably face other difficult situations in the future, they decided to get organised and be prepared. ‘Soon after he passed away, we organised an election.’ Dieng said, confessing that he never imagined he was going to become a community representative, much less hold a position that would put him in contact with the Senegalese diplomatic corps in China. ‘Before I was only a simple trader that loved football, now I’m the one who takes care of the community members. Yes, I’m more important now but I still play football every Saturday night,’ Dieng told me.

‘Our situation is very different to that of Nigerians. We are not a big community and overstayers are very rare. So, the most important function of this office is a social one.’ Dieng told me that his office attempts to reproduce the feeling of being in Senegal. ‘We provide social security and organise all types of celebrations and cultural activities that we would have in our country’. As with the Ghanaian community, the Senegalese office have implemented some kind of insurance scheme and membership system for their 150-odd members in Guangzhou. ‘Most Senegalese here are males that have their families back home, so we try to get together, help them forget about their problems, and ensure that they are alright,’ he said, explaining that ‘the biggest challenge has been to convince people, especially newcomers, of the advantages of registering as members.’ Nonetheless, Dieng believes that Senegalese presence in China will not last long. ‘In the past, we were able to make visa runs to Macau, but they stopped that. After that, we were going to Malaysia. Now they are
forcing us to go all the way back to Senegal.’ As a consequence of this, many of the community members are thinking of leaving China for good.

When asked about the leading role that the Nigerian community office plays in the general landscape of African communities in the city, Dieng said, ‘When Emma claims to be the “President of Africa in China,” he might be going a bit too far.’ Nonetheless, he views the notion of bringing all the community offices in the city together as a positive development. ‘We have been in conversation about unifying African voices, in particular after the 2012 incident,’ he said. ‘But there are still many steps to be taken in that direction and, as we have no obligation to take them, I don’t think we are going to achieve that unity anytime soon.’ Moreover, Dieng warned that although Africans from different countries may experience similar difficulties in China, they still had cultural differences. ‘We have the same skin, but not the same habits,’ he said, while explaining that it would be very difficult for Senegalese, and other West African Francophone communities, to be organised under a Nigerian leadership. Furthermore, according to Dieng, when the idea of an all-African office was introduced to local authorities following the 2012 demonstration, authorities were not pleased and dismissed the proposal. ‘They didn’t want us to negotiate with them as a whole. China, as a communist country, is very wary of people organising themselves, so they kept dealing with us only on a national and separate basis.’ Dieng argues that if there is to be unity amongst African community offices in Guangzhou, they should first strengthen the already important links they have along regional and cultural lines. ‘West African French speakers here; Nigerians, Cameroonian and Ghanaians there; the Congos over there; southern African Portuguese speakers; and so on. After that we may consider creating a super community office, or something like that,’ he concluded, as he proudly showed me letters from the local Public Security Bureau and from his embassy in Beijing addressing him as ‘Mr. President’.
Finally, while still incipient, the networks of support organized through the community offices can be seen as a broader attempt to generate spaces where individuals can feel ‘at home away from home’. Amongst Africans in the city, it is generally agreed that the emergence of these offices has had a positive impact on the lives of those residing in Guangzhou. However, while local authorities informally recognize these organizations, their effectiveness is heavily curtailed by the fact that they lack the formal, legal frameworks to empower their representational activities. In this way, their efforts to forge a collective identity (and to home Guangzhou) are also constrained, albeit on a different scale, by the transiency and precarity discussed throughout this chapter.

5.4. Citizenship on the move

While most community office representatives claim to be ‘outside’ politics, the very fact that most offices hold elections indicates the emergence of an incipient form of ‘political’ organisation amongst Africans in the city -- a collective form of homing Guangzhou, if you will. Interestingly, it seems to be the shared sense of precarity that
has politicised representatives to the level of pondering the advantages of joining forces to better combat the difficulties associated with their sojourns in Guangzhou. While still in the early stages, discussions mooting the creation of a ‘Pan-African’ representative body that would elect an individual with the authority to speak for all Africans – the ‘President of Africa in Guangzhou’ – may signal to the possible emergence of transnational, Pan-African, politics and identities in China. A form of politics, perhaps, somewhat (dis)embedded from the ‘local’ political context: a distinct translocal/transnational form of political organisation for those individuals on the move. Before this happens, however, there are several cultural, political, and religious divides that need to be bridged, as M. Dieng pointed out. Nonetheless, the emergence of community offices has not only empowered leaders to occupy positions and establish connections that they would probably not have had in their home countries, but it has empowered Africans in general, as the community office leaders are recognised by Chinese authorities, as valid (albeit not formal) negotiators for both individuals and collectives.

If the emergence of these offices, and the spaces for negotiation and recognition that they have garnered are understood as collective attempts to assert collective identities amongst host populations (Gill, 2010), they have been relatively successful. Put another way, these offices are crucial sites from where efforts to change the terms of recognition for Africans in the city have been articulated. Not only have these organisations asserted a ‘common’ African identity in negotiations with local authorities, but they have been functioning as sites where individual and collective placemaking efforts have converged, thus generating the possibility for senses and structures of belonging to emerge. Arguably, these offices evince grassroots efforts to organise senses of solidarity and support, not dissimilar to those offered by traditional forms of citizenship. While under modern contemporary regimes, citizenship is crucial for social, economic and political survival (Hua, 2011: 47), for some Africans in Guangzhou, membership in the community offices is just as critical. While still predicated upon national imaginations, these community offices structure some kind of ‘alternative mode of citizenship,’ similar to what May Joseph (1999) calls ‘nomadic citizenship’ – informal, transnational networks of kinship and migrancy that ‘attempt to achieve cultural citizenship through political affiliations and community formations within and beyond national boundaries’ (1999: 5).
While I do not suggest that community offices are granting citizenship rights, the roles they are playing challenge normative correlations between the nation-state and the notion of citizenship. In order to shed the blinders of nation-state centred methodological nationalism, I follow Hua (2011) in suggesting that we strive to expand the ‘understanding of citizenship to include other multiple modes of belonging and political membership in various communities at the local, national and supranational [transnational] levels’ (2011: 52). In the case of the African community offices in Guangzhou, we are arguably witnessing the emergence of new (alternative) modes of citizenship, not predicated on the territoriality of nation-states, but produced by subjects who move recurrently ‘through space and across national borders,’ as Ahmed (2000: 85) suggests.

6. ‘China is a difficult place’: emplacing people on the move in Southern China

After spending the day with Tony, I went back to the New Dengfeng Hotel and flopped onto the only sofa in in the lobby – a worn, brown, leather two-seater that is usually occupied by the same group of six or seven Tanzanians. As I was relaxing and scrolling down through my Instagram feed, my attention was drawn to the international calling booth that used to be only a few steps away from the sofa. A relatively large man in his fifties was on the phone and shouting repetitively in French, ‘À la Chine c’est pas facile! Tu comprends pas?’ (China is not easy! Do you understand?). Struck by the shouting, and having witnessed the persecution and harassment of Africans on Guangyuan West Road, I told one of my Cantonese friends the following day that China was not an easy place for Africans to be, to which she replied, ‘For who is ‘China’ an easy place?’

A week or so later, I was drinking a beer on the sidewalk with Michel (the Angolan trader I mentioned earlier), when a group of policemen entered the lobby of the New Dengfeng Hotel and started asking for passports. ‘The way they are treating Africans is even worse than the way they treat their own minorities,’ he said, angrily. At first, I didn’t pay much attention to his comment, but later that evening, I couldn’t stop thinking about what he said and about the many tense moments I had witnessed
between Africans and Chinese authorities during my fieldwork. Indeed, according to most of the community office leaders I interviewed, Guangzhou’s authorities see and treat all Africans as though they belong to the same ethnic group: ‘black’.

As I have pointed in Chapter 1, places like Dengfeng are sites of heightened (translocal and transnational) mobilities – places of convergence for vast numbers of people from across China and the world looking for opportunities. Notwithstanding this convergence, most researchers have framed African presence in the city through the binary of foreigners versus a fixed ‘local’ Chinese population (see, for instance, Haugen, 2013, 2012; Han, 2013; Bredeloup, 2012; Bodomo, 2012, 2010; Li et al., 2012, 2009, 2008; Mathews & Yang, 2012; Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009, 2007; Le Bail, 2009; Rennie, 2009; and Zhang, 2008) – only a few have highlighted how the spaces where Africans and Chinese intersect are subjected to different regimes of control than other parts of the city (see Castillo, 2014; and Lan, 2014).

In order to better understand the dynamics and (im)mobilities behind African presence in Guangzhou, it is imperative to move beyond the foreign/local binary and problematise the notion of the ‘local’. Indeed, rather than a group of foreign migrants encountering a settled local population, Africans in the city mainly intersect and interact with ‘Chinese’ individuals on the move: the ‘transprovincial migrants’ of different ethnicities that I have referred to in previous chapters. A further conceptual move is needed to clarify the nature of the spaces in which such intersections occur. This move requires thinking of ‘individuals on the move’ beyond the lens of methodological nationalism⁴⁴, and to rethink the national scale as a contingent rather than an absolute force in organizing different types of migrant experiences (Ellis, 2011). Accordingly, if the mobile subjects converging in Guangzhou (both foreign and internal) are brought onto the same plane, a different mapping of their experiences is possible. In this mapping, precarity and liminality emerge as shared conditions that characterize both foreign and internal ‘migrant’ emplacements, thus critically problematizing the distinction between ‘locals’ and ‘foreigners’. Indeed, I argue that some of the difficulties Africans face in China, such as structural and legal impediments, renewing visas, immobility from overstaying, police harassment, and the impossibility of permanent residency, bear a striking resemblance to difficulties of many internal migrants: economic vulnerability, lack of belonging, social exclusion, harassment, hampered residential rights, and impaired mobilities. Indeed, the strict visa regulations affecting Africans could be compared to the hukou system used to control
internal migrants.\textsuperscript{43} While I am not suggesting that foreign and internal subjects occupy the same emplacements or have the same experiences (obviously linguistic and cultural factors need to be taken into account), this comparison is not unfounded and needs to be taken seriously by researchers trying to explain the difficulties faced by Africans in the city.

In fact, since 2008, foreigners in China have been categorized as ‘floating population’ (a common designation for internal migrants) and are supposedly subject to the rules and regulations controlling its management (Lan, 2014). It could then be said that Africans as a group (or ‘minority’ as Bodomo (2012) has called them) have been informally inserted into China’s complex systems of population control and, as a result, have been subject to the dynamics of surveillance used to police ‘Chinese’ ethnic minorities - dynamics that are best characterized by erratic but systematic control/repression. It is these dynamics that have been characterized by researchers, journalists and individuals (who are perhaps unaware of the experiences of other minorities) as racial profiling and discrimination aimed specifically at Africans.\textsuperscript{46} So, while the historical experiences of internal migrants in Guangzhou are beyond the scope of this chapter, this comparison serves two interrelated purposes: first, it contextualizes African presence in the region within the complex translocal mobilities of southern China (mobilities which have been thoroughly explored by Pun Ngai (2005; 1999) and Sun Wanning (2009) in their investigations of Chinese rural to urban migrations); and second, it equates the experiences of Africans with the precarity, liminality and unbelonging of internal migrants, thus challenging the common assumption that the difficulties faced by Africans in China are (or have been) unique.\textsuperscript{47}

Indeed, as part of a push to control this (African) ‘floating population’, the provincial and central governments have implemented a series of measures to gradually regulate and, as Lan (2014) suggests, hamper its growth. The most relevant of these measures are: a regulation requiring Guangzhou’s residents to report any ‘malpractice’ involving foreigners, such as illegal entry, overstaying, and working/doing business without permits (Lau, 2012; Lan, 2014); housing and business registration obstacles (Zhang, 2008); and the tightening of the visa extension system at the local level.\textsuperscript{48} It is these measures, along with partial geographical entrapment (most Africans need visas to enter other countries in the region) and, in some cases, economic hardship, that are identified by many individuals as factors exacerbating their difficulties in China.\textsuperscript{49}
7. Conclusion

By stressing the importance of transiency and mobility, but grounding African homing attempts within precarious emplacements in Guangzhou, this chapter has provided a more nuanced look into how these mobile (and sometimes simultaneously immobile) subjects inhabit their journeys. Moreover, the notion of emplacement, for example, is an anchor that grounds the experiences of individuals on the move while highlighting their multiple and diverse trajectories, stories, and positions. Furthermore, considering ‘emplacements within transiency’ arises from my perception that even while on the move and even when not attempting to ‘settle’, many individuals engage in processes aimed at humanising and personalising space: homing. Certainly, homing projects occur at different scales and with varying intensities. However, throughout the accounts of both individuals and collectives, I have found that these attempts to feel comfortable in an unfamiliar place are frequently conditioned by precarity. Hence, I argue that the notion of ‘precarious homing’ is crucial to understand the drives behind the emergence of the organisations that I have chosen to discuss in this chapter. Moreover, by putting forward these two notions, ‘emplacement within transiency’ and ‘precarious homing’, an attempt is made to avoid conceptualising people merely as ‘mobile’ subjects carrying globalisation or ‘culture’ everywhere they go and to ground research in (and emphasise the importance of) the lived experiences of individuals and the ways they negotiate (and intersect with) the story of the transnationalisation of capital.

In this chapter I have discussed how notions like ‘home’ and ‘citizenship’, in relation to individuals on the move, are being reconfigured in the context of Africans passing through Guangzhou. I contend that, in relation to transnational movement, the notions of ‘home’ and ‘citizenship’ cannot be ‘naturally’ correlated with stasis/origin and with the idea of the nation-state, respectively. Based on the patterns of African mobility displayed in the stories of the individuals I analyse, I argue that, loosely paraphrasing (and slightly modifying) Paul Gilroy (1991), for some people on the move, ‘home’ is no longer the place ‘where you’re from’ but neither fully the place ‘where you are at.’ In some cases, ‘home’ has to be (re)produced in that difficult ‘interval’ of movement; so, ‘home’ is where you (can manage to) make it. I argue that, as with many other individuals on the move, Africans in Guangzhou undertake homing projects while en route to yet unknown destinations. Moreover, as illustrated in
this chapter, people on the move are not necessarily poor, ‘wretched’ outsiders nor are they always misplaced. In many instances, even under precarious conditions, individuals find the necessary interstices in which they manage to ‘home’ themselves. To focus on these interstices (that I describe as precarious (transient) emplacements) is to acknowledge the importance of affective and material conditions structuring the current dynamics of transnational movement.
Chapter 4

Making it on the move: landscapes of aspiration in Guangzhou’s African music scene

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

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

[Song fragment]

I Believe (2012)
by Dibaocha

1. Exploring Guangzhou’s nightlife scene

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

As the argument on the phone abruptly ended, Dibaocha was clearly upset. ‘This is wrong, man. The dancers don’t want to come to the show,’ he told me. ‘You need to convince them to come,’ he commanded, handing me his phone. Surprised by his request, I felt I had no choice but to comply. After several attempts to call back, ‘Diana Dancer’ finally picked up the phone and said, in what I assumed was a thick Russian accent, ‘I told you, we will not go to your show,’ before promptly hanging up. I called back several times, but to no avail. Finally, Dibaocha asked me to call from my own number. This time Diana didn’t hang up, and as I introduced myself rapidly, Dibaocha started driving in the direction of the venue – Wave Bar in Zhujiang’s Culture and Art Zone (an area on the banks of the Pearl River renowned for its nightlife). Diana was adamant that she would not go to the show that night, saying that Dibaocha needed a manager – someone to help him organise his events. In one of the several conversations we had that night (Dibaocha kept making me call back), Diana made me promise that I would be the one to contact her in the future, instead of Dibaocha. In turn, I made her promise to try and find us some available dancers amongst her contacts that night.

The drive to the bar, which should have taken 20 minutes, eventually extended upwards over an hour, as Dibaocha didn’t know the way. As we drove down empty streets and criss-crossed the Pearl River several times, I started getting anxious, and told him to pull over and ask for directions. A few blocks ahead, we spotted a young man waiting at a bus stop on a lonely street corner. Dibaocha lowered the window, pulled over, and asked for directions in perfect Mandarin. The man seemed to know the place, but had trouble explaining how to get there. ‘Get in the car and take us there,’ Dibaocha commanded. Much to my surprise, without hesitation, the young man jumped in the back seat amongst the tutus and nurse costumes, and directed us to the venue. When we finally got to the bar (at around 1:30 am), it was almost empty. There
was a Chinese DJ and two Chinese dancers on stage, and another 30-odd people (including the staff) roaming around. The speaker volume was intolerably loud, so we sat on the terrace outside the bar, ordered a couple of beers, and waited. ‘A lot of people will come. Don’t worry,’ Dibaocha told me. I kept calling Diana, but she eventually said that neither her Russian friends nor some Colombian dancers she knew would be able to make it. At around 2:30 am, a group of Dibaocha’s Nigerian friends arrived and sat with us – there were two businessmen who lived in Foshan, a ‘middleman’ from Dongguan, and another singer from Guangzhou. To my surprise, Dibaocha introduced me as his ‘media man,’ and the person who would produce his first music video in China.

![Dibaocha's promotional leaflet](image)

I knew that Dibaocha was aware of my role as a researcher, so that night, I decided to play along. If he was performing his ‘showbiz persona,’ as he told me, I could perform my ‘media persona’. After all, before becoming a researcher, I had worked in media for a number of years. Initially suspicious, Dibaocha’s friends began inquiring about my music and video production skills. I must have performed well though, because after a few minutes, they were happily giving me suggestions about which dancers to use and the best locations to shoot Dibaocha’s video. They also encouraged me to get in contact with other singers who were looking for serious representatives. I felt slightly uncomfortable with the situation, but as Dibaocha kept going on about his soon-to-be produced music video, I followed suit. ‘With so many African singers in Guangzhou, you could make very good money here,’ the middleman from Dongguan, whose nickname was ‘Pounds-n-Dollars,’ told me.
By 3 am, only a few of Dibaocha’s ‘fans’ had arrived and without dancers, the show seemed doomed to fail. Nonetheless, Dibaocha appeared to be calm and was positive that people would still show up. An hour later, only 30 tickets had been sold, but Dibaocha’s friends had started pressuring him to get on stage. Finally (at around 4:30 am), he opened the night (or the morning) with one of his most popular singles – *I Believe*. A few minutes before getting on stage, he had told me that he was not happy about performing without dancers and that he was still waiting for some important people to arrive. As he started singing, a group of foreign students dancing on the stage failed to realise that a concert had begun.

* 

Subsequently, I attended several more of Dibaocha’s shows, and I have to point out that that night was certainly not his best. Indeed, many of his shows were packed to the hilt. Nonetheless, that first night gave me an insight into some of the difficulties faced by African musicians in Guangzhou: advertising and self promotion; negotiating with venue owners; booking dancers and/or back-up singers with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds; dealing (personally and financially) with the possibility of people not showing up; and, to some extent, fearing police raids. The doors that Dibaocha opened for me, however, led me deep into another layer of activities in the city: nightlife and entertainment. Through him, I got a glimpse of the thriving African music scene in Guangzhou; and found myself connected with Nigerian, Ugandan, Tanzanian and Guinean singers, artists and promoters, along with Chinese bar owners and music producers in Guangzhou. Later, this network also expanded to Nigerian music representatives in Beijing, Ugandan and Cameroonian singers in Wuhan, and so on. During my fieldwork, I learnt about the aspirations, anxieties, efforts, love stories, and businesses of many of these individuals. Indeed, my journey with Dibaocha took me into a micro-world where I met many individuals aspiring to become celebrities in China (and beyond) – individuals dreaming of ‘making it big’, transnationally.
2. Landscapes of aspiration: hope, desire and possibility

As mentioned in previous chapters, much of what has been written about Africans in China focuses on trade-related activities (see Muller & Rainer, 2013; Li et al. 2012; Bredeloup, 2012; Mathews & Yang, 2012; Haugen, 2011; Le Bail, 2009; Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2007). I believe that the sole and pervasive focus on trade reinforces notions of Africans in the city as merely profit-seeking subjects on the lookout for ‘comparative advantages’ (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2007: 101). In the prevailing economistic narratives, Africans in Guangzhou are universalised as a particular kind of subject of neoliberalism: mobile (diasporic) traders/exporters that come to China to buy things, export (ship or carry) them back to Africa, and then profit before returning to China – perfect cogs in the wheel of ‘South-to-South’ economic globalisation/development. While I in no way intend to deny the importance of trade for most Africans in the city (and I do believe that structural forces in the study of transnationality and mobility around this case study require attention), I argue that the overarching trading narrative (and its emphasis on structure) has left little (or no) space for issues of agency, emotion and aspiration to enter the debate. In other words, the explanations provided by extant research have failed to interrogate the ‘not-so-structural’ rationales behind trade: scant attention has been given to the personal drives, desires, and passions that often lead individuals to engage into transnational movement/activities. Moreover, I argue that knowledge production within this economistic narrative has precluded other types of imaginings and conceptualisations about African presence in the city, and has, at times, been problematic in terms of representation, as I will discuss later. It is my contention then that new narratives (or more diverse narratives) are needed – narratives that do not render individuals and their stories flat, or confuse their passions, desires and aspirations with their trading strategies and rational calculations. Hence, in an attempt to shift the focus away from the economic discourses that underwrite most literature on the African presence in China, this chapter will explore the widely overlooked area of personal aspirations.

While personal aspirations are often imbricated with economies and economic discourses, they are not necessarily economic calculations; and, it would be misleading or unfair to frame them as such. Having said this, my analysis of aspirations does not ignore or disregard the importance of economics. Indeed, the stories presented in this chapter show how certain economic forces traverse, articulate and constrain...
aspirations. In this chapter I follow the stories of three individuals involved in Guangzhou’s African music scene: Dibaocha (who I introduced earlier); Lo-D – another Nigerian singer; and Manivoo – a Ugandan singer and DJ. Throughout the chapter, I describe their distinct trajectories, entanglements and hopes, and analyse their attempts to become celebrities (in both China and beyond). Based on the personal stories of these individuals and other evidence gathered during my fieldwork, I illustrate how music and aspirations are not necessarily ancillary to trade, and/or secondary to economic considerations (as extant narratives would be inclined to suggest). Indeed, for some Africans in Guangzhou, trade is regarded (and utilised) not as an end in itself, but as a tool to achieve other (more important) mid and long-term objectives. In the case of Dibaocha, for instance, trade functions as a tool to support/fund his aspiration to become a celebrity – indeed, it is not the central rationale for his presence in China. In short, while he does trade, he does not think of himself as a trader.

Aspirations are crucial arenas where the rationales behind transnational movement are gestated, developed, reproduced and transmitted. In this chapter, they are conceptualised as the drivers (i.e. hopes and/or desires) caught between the burdens of everyday life, and the imaginations we have about of possible futures. Often, as Bunnell & Goh (2012: 1) suggest, aspirations give temporal direction to passions and energies and have the power to move and motivate people. Indeed, aspirations can be thought of as ‘navigational devices’ (Appadurai, 2004) that help certain individuals to work through a series of obstacles to achieve their goals or reach for their dreams. Put another way, aspirations can function as sense-making tools that give meaning and direction to our journeys. For many individuals, aspirations function as critical transformative drives that not only have the potential to help them find the necessary resources to contest and alter their living conditions, as Appadurai (2004: 59) suggests, but that unveil possibilities for new ways of being and becoming. In his essay on the ‘capacity to aspire’ as a ‘cultural capacity’ (in the context of Indian poverty), Appadurai (2004) suggests that rather than mere rational calculations produced by individual actors, aspirations form part of wider systems of ideas that are assembled contingently by a multiplicity of actors. Building upon Appadurai’s notion of aspirations as ‘never simply individual’ and as a product of the interaction of discourses, traditions, family matters, education, imagination, and beliefs about life, death and the self (‘the thick of social life’) (2004: 67), this chapter sets out to sketch
the contours of individual and collective ‘horizons of hope, desire, and possibility’ (Bunnell & Goh, 2012: 1) – or, what I call, the ‘affective landscapes of aspiration.’ By sketching out these ‘landscapes,’ I take up the task, recommended by Bunnell and Goh, of ‘conceptualising the cultural forces that drive people to build and rebuild their worlds in the face of often daunting challenges’ (2012:1). By doing so, I hope to provide a more complex and nuanced account of the lives and experiences of Africans in Guangzhou, and a better understanding (both conceptually and empirically) of how individuals ‘navigate their social spaces’ (Appadurai, 2004: 84), and guide their transnational journeys.

As aspirations may change with time, it is important to note that I am not constructing a typology of aspirations amongst African musicians in the city. While the night scene is a heterogeneous space where myriad aspirations intersect, the analysis I present here emerges from a certain point in time in the lives of certain individuals; as such, it is not an exhaustive representation of all kinds of aspirations that Africans involved in Guangzhou’s music scene may harbour. Nonetheless, the stories in this chapter do provide a window into the hopes, desires, and possibilities involved in an individual’s attempt to use their talent, knowledge and connections in China to build their future. By bringing the analysis of aspirations to the fore, I intend to (once again) provide a more accurate picture of African presence in Guangzhou and draw attention to the incessant frictions and negotiations between individual hopes and desires while on the move, and the constraints of structural imperatives.

Finally, as a common (although somewhat essentialising) saying goes: ‘Wherever there are Africans, there is good music – just like wherever there are Chinese, there is good food’ (Zheng, 2013). However, while there are many Africans in Guangzhou, and certainly plenty of good music performances going on every week, scant academic attention has been given to the city’s incipient but thriving transnational music and entertainment scenes. Moreover, while claiming that personal aspirations are critical drives encouraging individuals to move transnationally – and to engage in multifarious activities – could seem a rather obvious claim, looking into the available literature and media reports about Africans in China, in-depth ethnographic analyses focusing on aspirations are nowhere to be found. Looking at musicians and their aspirations is thus an attempt to contribute to the filling of these gaps. Before proceeding, it must be noted that this will not be a musicological analysis of African music in Guangzhou.
2.1. China as a platform: spaces of mobility and transnational possibilities in Guangzhou’s music scene

As I have pointed out several times already, the stories and trajectories of the individuals I met in Guangzhou are multifarious. The case of musicians is similar. There are those who were musicians for many years prior to their arrival in China. Others claim to have discovered their passion for music and other artistic pursuits after arriving in the country. Most of them are not only musicians; they perform a number of roles and juggle a variety of responsibilities (i.e. fatherhood, study and family businesses). While the most prevalent cases are those of individuals balancing music and trade, not all musicians ‘do business by day and take the stage by night’ though, as Qian reported (2013). A number of the individuals I met prioritise their artistic careers and devote most of their time (and sometimes money) to find a way to break through.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that while most musicians in Guangzhou share certain (albeit differentiated) degrees of mobility, they aspire to become more mobile. In their narratives of movement, the ability to move transnationally is equated with enhanced opportunities to fulfil their aspirations and attain a ‘good life’. Staying put (or immobile), on the other hand, is seen as a marker of failure and a waste of talent. Indeed, there are two common threads weaving the narratives of the musicians in this chapter together. The first, as I suggested earlier, is the use of personal (artistic) talent to unlock, what are imagined as, endless ‘transnational possibilities’. The second is the use of China as the place from where to enhance those possibilities and thus expand ‘spaces of mobility’. In the case of African musicians in Guangzhou, these spaces of mobility tend to be imagined as smooth routes connecting Africa and Asia, and are often conflated with the ability (or desire) to break free from social and institutional constraints imposed by nation-states upon human movement. This ‘breaking free’ is, in turn, seen as an essential step in the becoming ‘global’ (subjects) of musicians. The ability to move transnationally at will, can be seen, then, as both a tool for success and a marker of success. ‘To be able to be here (Asia), and there (Africa), and everywhere, is to be on top of things,’ as one of the musicians puts it.

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

3. Under a pagoda on the banks of the Pearl River: meeting Dibaocha

Early in 2013, interest in the African presence in Guangzhou soared, and a number of journalists from international media outlets contacted me. Among them was Sam Piranty – a freelance journalist who occasionally works for BBC Radio. Piranty, who wanted to interview me and get access to my list of contacts, appeared at a crucial moment. In the weeks before meeting him, I had tried to get in touch with a number of musicians in the city, but most of the contact details I had found online had lead me nowhere, and I was close to giving up on this part of my fieldwork. In the end, it was Piranty’s strong investigative drive (and his western media credentials) that put him, and ultimately me, in contact with a couple of music producers and singers, including Dibaocha.

The first time I reached Dibaocha was actually through Twitter, using a VPN to circumvent the so-called ‘Great Firewall of China’. Interestingly, many Africans in the city (along with other foreigners across the country and some Chinese) rely on VPNs to stay connected to social networks; and, it is through these networks (along with Chinese ones like WeChat) that they communicate. Dibaocha responded very quickly – only a few minutes after I had first activated my VPN and reached out to him. So, through the purchase of a cheap technology and an unexpected British
connection, my enquiry into the music scene in Guangzhou was instantly resurrected. After a couple more messages, Dibaocha invited me to his place that night.

I took Subway line 5 from Xiaobei to Xichang – a short trip of three stations. Based on the map I had, I assumed that Dibaocha’s place was a walkable distance from Xichang Station. After asking a woman selling herbal drinks and tea eggs for directions, I found myself on a polluted 45-minute hike during the peak hour of a very humid Friday afternoon. Just before fainting (as I sometimes do from the heat), I reached Dibaocha’s place – Fulibandao (富力半岛) – a gated community on an island in the Pearl River. As I passed through the main gate, I was somewhat taken aback by the size of the compound. It was composed of 30-odd high-rise apartment blocks, a couple of schools, a sports field, restaurants, shops and a couple of supermarkets. This island-community stood in stark contrast to most of the places I had done research so far. As I headed towards Dibaocha’s building, I crossed a couple of manicured gardens and passed by a massive pool bustling with children and elderly people. I noticed that, inside the community, Cantonese seemed to be the lingua franca – unlike in Dengfeng-Xiaobei and Guangyuan West Road where Mandarin is pervasive. As its Chinese name suggests, Fulibandao is, indeed, a bastion for the relatively well-off Cantonese middle class. It was later that I learnt that Guangzhou’s urban landscapes are sprinkled with dozens of these gated communities (Chiu, 2009; Breitung, 2011).

When I reached Dibaocha’s building, I tapped in the apartment number on a security device next to the thick metallic door. Through the intercom, Dibaocha asked me to wait for a few minutes, as he needed to put his youngest child to bed. When he finally came down, the first thing I noticed was his fashionable style. As we walked over to one of the shops to buy a couple of beers, I introduced my project and myself. Then, while looking for a place to seat, Dibaocha talked about the promotion of his latest album and sending his songs to a handful of record labels. He also said that, after eight years, he was sick of China and looking for a way out of the country. We finally sat under a small pagoda-like structure in the dark overlooking the Pearl River – it was the most peaceful place I had been for weeks. There was a light breeze coming across the river, and other than us, there was only the occasional runner or elderly person walking their dog that passed by. Dibaocha later told me that he had taken me there that day, so I could see part of his life: living in a nice, semi-private compound with peaceful spots to muse about life, music and the future.
As the conversation progressed, Dibaocha asked directly about my intentions. He complained about a number of journalists who had been misleading about their intentions, and then represented him as something that he was not. He also warned me that I could be the last person to ever interview him. After struggling for a while, I finally managed to convince him that I was not media, and that my engagement with him would be different from his previous experiences. He agreed to participate in my project, but told me emphatically that what I needed to understand was that he was a musician, and that while he was involved in several other activities in the city, his main drive was an artistic one. ‘I came to China to break into the Chinese markets with my music,’ he pointed out. Throughout my explorations of Guangzhou’s music scene, many of my contacts made similar remarks. They agreed to interviews under the proviso that I would not represent them in ‘untruthful’ ways. And, they were particularly concerned about being depicted as ‘immigrants’ struggling in China. In fact, the three individuals represented in this chapter identify themselves primarily as ‘musicians’, ‘singers’ or, more generally, ‘artists’ – regardless of other activities to which they are committed – and, they repeatedly asked me to respect that.55

As we walked back to the shop for a second round of beers, Dibaocha asked if I wanted to hear his music. I said yes, and we got into the front seat of his SUV. I listened to the songs that he had written and produced in Nigeria before coming to China and the songs he had written here. Altogether, Dibaocha has written over a hundred songs, and almost half of them were written in Guangzhou. He even wrote a
song for the Beijing Olympics back in 2008, but it was never produced. As we went through his playlist, Dibaocha explained that although he dreams of breaking into the Chinese market, he knows how difficult it is. According to him, Chinese audiences are not yet open to foreign styles. That first night, Dibaocha spoke extensively about his music and the experiences that he had incorporated into his lyrics. He also disclosed exactly what he was trying to do in China, and how his talent had helped him survive and succeed in the local African music scene.

Some of Dibaocha’s songs, as he explained, talk about ‘socialisation’ in China and the discrimination he has experienced on the streets. Dibaocha said that he has a great respect for Chinese culture, but emphasised that ‘the way China treats foreigners needs to improve.’ Some of his lyrics are an attempt to promote change in that direction. He also said that changes in the ways the Chinese government deals with foreigners would be conducive to moving the country forward.

Chinese have to understand that the future success of this country is very linked to people coming from abroad. We foreigners are contributing to the success of this nation. I’d like to push these ideas through my music. Anyone that brings benefit to your land must surely be well treated and go with benefit. (Dibaocha – Interviewee 4)

Just as I was getting ready to leave, Dibaocha’s phone rang. As I listened in on the conversation without really understanding what was happening, I noticed that he was getting very excited – almost euphoric. As he got off the phone, he explained that one of his closest friends had just been released from detention after being caught for overstaying his visa. Dibaocha was very happy that he had been released, as he had been involved in negotiations with the police for several days. ‘We have to go and celebrate his return to freedom,’ he said. So, we did. As I discovered later, Dibaocha’s more ‘stable’ status stemming from his marriage to a Chinese woman, along with his fluent Mandarin and straightforward personality, make him a central figure not only in the music scene, but amongst Nigerians in city. During his years in China, he has negotiated several times with the authorities on behalf of detained overstayers of distinct nationalities. Because of this, he now holds the title of ‘volunteer translator’ and his contact number and photograph are posted on the walls of several police stations around the city. As Dibaocha drove us to a bar near Xiaobei to meet his friend, he told me that China was not an easy place. ‘It’s a bit difficult, but it’s also a land of opportunities for us – the place to be for now,’ he said. ‘The problem is that
there are less and less opportunities each day, and the government is getting tougher with us. We may need to move out soon.’

[Dibaocha's volunteer ID. Above the image: 'City of Guangzhou, Kuangquan Street. Foreigners Service Volunteer.' Below the image: name, country of origin, and police department details – translated from Chinese (photo by author)]

3.1. *A singer is a singer is a singer: sailing away to China*

‘When you are born, your destiny is already there waiting for you. One thing is what your parents want you to do and the other is what you actually came here to do. I came here to be a singer,’ Dibaocha told me during our first formal interview, explaining how it was difficult for his parents to accept that he would not become a priest – a common expectation amongst Christian Igbo families in Imo State in south-eastern Nigeria, where Dibaocha was born. From an early age, Dibaocha’s passions led him to explore his artistic drives. Against his parents’ wishes, he dropped out of high school and found a way into Nigeria’s music and entertainment industries. Shortly after, he started working as a freelancer, writing scripts and songs for TV and radio stations in Lagos. Dibaocha kept working for a few years, hoping that someone would discover him as a singer. ‘With my talent, I would have become a star pretty quickly in another country, but in Nigeria it is not easy,’ he said. While his freelance work in Lagos was enough to keep him afloat, he started to realise that he was not on a path to affording
the kind of lifestyle that he desired. As a ‘breakthrough’ did not seem to be on the horizon, he decided that he needed to go abroad to be discovered.

At that time, there was a lot of talk in his family and social circles about Nigerians making it in China, then coming back and setting themselves up in Nigeria. Influenced by the things he heard, he soon found himself contemplating the possibility of restarting his life in China and making his music there. ‘In our country, we don’t have talent shows like Britain’s Got Talent, so you have to go abroad and look for your own opportunities,’ he said. Confident of his good advertising skills and strong entrepreneurial drive, Dibaocha was convinced that his chances of success would increase if he went abroad. He also thought that as China was such a vast country, he would certainly find someone interested in signing him on as a singer. When he did finally arrive in China in 2006, he realised that it was not going to be as easy as he had imagined. Prior to leaving Nigeria, he had planned to find a job and then start looking for contacts. His first reality check was when he realised that casual employment opportunities for foreigners in China are almost nonexistent. Jobless, but with the money he had saved in Nigeria, he signed up for Mandarin classes in a private language school, hoping that language would be the key to open doors for him.

In those early days, Dibaocha spent a lot of time around Dengfeng-Xiaobei, frequenting clubs and meeting people. As some Nigerians recognised him from his media-related activities in Lagos, his entry into Nigerian circles in Guangzhou was relatively easy. That gave him hope. Nonetheless, his contacts failed to put him in touch with the right people to kick-start his music career in China. ‘Then I realised that the game was different, and that there was no option for me to start making a living from my music. I tried my best, but it wasn’t easy’. These difficulties forced him to look for something else to do. As there were no employment prospects, he found himself doing business. ‘As a last option, and only for survival, I started trading with whatever I could find, just as everyone else around here,’ he admitted. On a trip to Beijing in 2007 (a year after arriving), Dibaocha met Cherrish – a woman from the northern province of Hebei. After maintaining a long-distance relationship for several months, Dibaocha finally convinced Cherrish to relocate to Guangzhou, and in mid-2008, they got married. After their wedding, they focused on trade, opening both retail and online stores selling hair, wigs, ornaments and children’s clothes to mainly African clientele.
It took them a couple of years, but by 2010 business was good, and Dibaocha felt he was getting on top of things. Using some of the profits from his trading activities, he reignited his musical aspirations. By late 2011, he had finalised (and self-funded) the production of his latest album — *It’s Real* — an album that was written/imagined in Guangzhou, produced in Lagos, and finally mixed and mastered by a Congolese producer back in Guangzhou. With his new album in hand, Dibaocha finally felt confident that he would be able to break into the Chinese market, and started planning a promotional campaign, along with the release and distribution in both Nigeria and China. The Nigerian side was relatively easy. At that time, Dibaocha still had contacts working in radio and was familiar with the distribution channels — so, with little effort, he got some radio play in Nigeria. The Chinese side proved to be more challenging, however. He sent samples of his songs to several transnational record labels (with offices in China), hoping that he would be contacted. As he got no response, he searched online for the addresses of the record labels, flew to Beijing, and spent two days visiting every single record company he could locate (i.e. Sony BMG, Warner Music, Universal), and leaving them his promo album and contact details. At that time, he believed that to be the way to break through. However, the way he became known in China came in an unexpected form. While he was in Beijing, Dibaocha also spent some time handing out his promo CDs to young people in the street. One of them (a Chinese university student), proceeded to upload the single, *I Feel Good*, to Weibo (微博) — a popular social networking site in China, and the post was shared several times. Soon after, Chinese media contacted Dibaocha and a couple of journalistic articles were written about his artistic aspirations in China (Xinhua, 2013). Following this, Western media also approached him, and some short radio and TV snippets about his life in China were produced.

Those first contacts with media made me feel that someday my musical angel will locate me. I need to keep trying. Everything I’m doing, everything I’m thinking is just focused on realising my dream. I’ve got this talent and I need to exploit it for the sake of my children. I know that I’m a legend in the making, although some of my friends think that I’m here wasting my time, but they don’t understand that having come to China was part of my path… China is not the end for me. This is just my starting point. (Dibaocha – Interviewee 4)
3.2. ‘I Feel Good’: becoming a central figure in the music scene

Encouraged by his incipient but increasing popularity, Dibaocha took a decision in early 2013 to do what he could to break into the Chinese market alone. ‘I realised that there was only one way to do it. I needed to make things happen myself. I couldn’t wait anymore for promoters to discover me’. Dibaocha’s solo attempt to break through took off simultaneously in several directions. Having realised that if he was going to make it in China, he needed to sing in Chinese (similar to Beijing-based, Nigerian artist, Hao Ge), he began writing songs in pinyin, and looking to organise collaborations with local Chinese artists. He also started promoting his music locally amongst Africans. Since early 2013, he has organised more than a dozen shows in the city’s main clubs. Dibaocha explained that while there are many talented African musicians in Guangzhou, the lack of venues or cultural centres impacts negatively on the showcasing of their talents, and the promotion of African culture in general. ‘I’ve been organising shows in which I bring singers from West and Central Africa to sing with me,’ he said. ‘It’s not only about me. It’s about opening doors for all of us Africans here in China.’ As most of these shows sell out (they are attended predominantly by Africans), Dibaocha plans to move them out of nightclubs and into bigger venues (if he can find them). At the time of writing, this has not yet materialised. Aside from these concerts, Dibaocha has also tried to organise China-Africa cultural events where young talent from both regions can exchange artistic experiences and knowledge, but so far, he has failed to secure sponsorship.

Due to his artistic engagements and endeavours, there are many people who see Dibaocha as a central figure in Guangzhou’s African nightlife. When I asked him about being a ‘big fish’ in the city’s entertainment, Dibaocha told me that while some
people might think of him as one of the main emerging figures, the only thing he is doing in Guangzhou is making his dream come true.57

[From China, Dibaocha has managed to position his music within the Nigerian music-scapes: ‘Go Down Low – Dibaocha versus Naija Allstars’, was released in Nigeria in 2013]

3.3. An apparent breakthrough

After the first (almost failed) concert, Dibaocha took me to all of his subsequent shows. For his friends, fans and acquaintances, I became a common presence. I did request, however, that he stop introducing me as his ‘media man’ – a request that he never took seriously. ‘You shouldn’t say no,’ he told me. ‘You can learn a lot here, and if your research project fails, you could make a living from us African singers in Guangzhou,’ he suggested once.

In November 2013, a group of Korean documentary-makers who I have been collaborating with asked me to accompany them to Guangzhou to investigate the foreign presence in the city. Their project, Open City, is focused on depicting the lives of ‘diasporic subjects’ living in Asia, and when they heard about Guangzhou’s thriving African music scene, they asked me to put them in touch with some musicians. Dibaocha was the first to answer my request. On a number of occasions, he had told me that Korea featured on his imagined map of success in Asia. As such, he was keen to have one of his shows filmed by a Korean documentary crew. Three weeks later, the Koreans arrived in Hong Kong and we took an afternoon train to Guangzhou.

After checking into our respective hotels (I dropped them off at the slightly more upmarket Tokai Hotel on Huanshi East Road before heading over to Dengfeng), we met up for dinner and then a drink in the Africa Bar. At around midnight,
Dibaocha arrived in his usual pre-show fervour to pick us up. ‘This is an important night,’ he announced. Not only were the Koreans going to be filming him, but Malcolm Clark – an Academy Award winning English film maker ‘working on a secret project’ – would also be there with his crew. Accompanying Dibaocha for the event were Joe, a Nigerian businessman looking for Chinese partners to invest in infrastructure development back in his country, and a bodyguard who would not share his name or answer any of my questions. Dibaocha often had small delegations in tow for his shows (including me), but that was the first (and only) time, I saw a bodyguard. When we arrived at Rich Club (柜族/贵族) – one of the oldest gay bars in Guangzhou that once a week morphs into ‘the most popular African club’ in the city – Clarke (the British director) was already there, and visibly displeased about the presence of another crew. Dibaocha told him that if he did not like it, he could leave. ‘I’m not interested in Europeans or Americans doing documentaries. There is nothing in it for me. I know that you’re not interested in my music, you only want to film me because I’m an African in China,’ he told Clarke, adding that if Clarke wanted to film that night, he would have to pay. Following their altercation, Dibaocha told me that he did not want anything to do with the ‘West’. As the British director and his crew left, Dibaocha told the Koreans about his intention to break into the Asian markets – hence his willingness to participate in Asian, or Asian-based, projects. He appeared adamant, however, about not collaborating with Western filmmakers or journalists:

My dream is to make it in China. I don’t give a shit about America. Everybody thinks that because I’m a Nigerian man, I want to go to the US. No, no, this is another time. I’m for making it big in Asia and in Africa. I’m not interested in what people were interested in before. The world has changed and America doesn’t move me. (Dibaocha – Interviewee 4)

Inside the venue, there were some 300 people crowded in and waiting for the show to begin. Most of them were Africans, but there were a significant number of Chinese and other foreigners. At around 4:30 am, (a few minutes before Dibaocha got on stage), Clarke and his crew came back, coughed up the fee, shot a few dirty looks at the Koreans, and installed their cameras. Dibaocha opened, as he usually does, with the single that he says depicts his journey best: I Believe.

I Believe
Life is strong that I know
Wisdom is all that we need
Knowledge is the power given our life meaning
That’s why we need to believe

Ocha sky say I believe
I believe
Ocha sky say I believe
I believe
Oh I believe ....I believe
Oh I believe .........I believe
Yoo Dibaocha come back again
I wake up every morning
I say my prayers because I know I'm going for a battle
I need to be stronger
For sure I know I'm a sinner.
Ask God for forgiveness
I keep my hands strength
Be good and be clean
Now I'm Dibaocha in money call me Ocha sky
Keep hand stronger and believe
Because the road to the success is rash and narrow
but only few can make it do you know ".
Do you know ?
With God by my side I'm one among them
that's why I pray every day and
In God I trust mmmm ...
I believe I can get to the top. Yeah

(Chorus)
I believe I believe I believe I believe
I believe I will make it some day
I believe I believe I believe I believe
I believe I will make it one day
Ocha sky say I believe I believe
Ocha sky say I believe I believe
Oh I believe I believe
oh I believe I believe

Check this again,
I try all my best to be best among rest
Now days ahead more trouble on the way
I fear not because The lord on my side,
my hand on my chest I believe I'm stronger
Never be a victim we all are victorious
call me Dibaocha dibaclean dibawite
Ocha sky, I'm mega super star you know

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

(Chorus)…

Life is an ocean of passion
while the road is ruff and tuff
you need to be strong
Because only those who know
where they are coming from
will know where they heading to ,
many heart dream for heaven
but only few can make it
Thank God my name is on the list you!
heeeey, ocha sky
I believe the sky will be my limit
Heey Ocha sky
this sky will be always my limit

(Chorus)…

Yoo I believe I believe I believe
I can get to the top
I believe I believe I believe
I will make it this time
I believe I believe I believe
I'm best among the rest
I believe I believe
Over the next hour, he performed most of the songs from his latest album while members in the audience climbed up on stage and ‘sprayed’ him with money. Dibaocha later told me that the crowd had been very welcoming and generous. For him, that night was a complete success, and it marked the beginning of a deluge of international media attention.

The central position that Dibaocha had carved out for himself in Guangzhou’s music and cultural scenes coincided with a revival in media and academic interest about ‘Africans in China’. During the six months in which I followed Dibaocha, I witnessed how some of his efforts appeared to be paying off. Documentary filmmakers and journalists from the United States, Denmark, England, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong, along with photographers from Germany and Slovenia, and a couple more researchers, all contacted Dibaocha within a couple of months. The sheer number of people contacting him was unprecedented. Indeed, 2013-14 seemed to be bringing a breakthrough in Dibaocha’s career. He received so many requests to film his performances that he was forced to assign each performance to a specific media team. Despite his earlier proclamations about not collaborating with western media, Dibaocha initially opened up to almost anyone interested. Before long though, he began to resent some of the ways in which he was being treated and represented. At one point, flooded with requests but seeing little benefit or return, he even considered charging media fees for interviews – as some highly mediatised Africans in the city do.
While late 2013 to early 2014 marked the height of Dibaocha’s romance with international media, he soon realised that the media attention was not translating into a breakthrough in Asia. He felt that media were only using his image to tell their stories about Africans in China, which was of little or no benefit for his career. Dibaocha told me that despite the media exposure, his strong online presence, and his centrality in the organisation of nightlife in the city, he felt that success was eluding him, and that was troubling. ‘After all, the Chinese dream might not break for me,’ he said. ‘Maybe I should go somewhere else in Asia, or go back to Africa. I need to keep moving and trying to fulfil this dream, for the sake of my children’. During the time I spent with Dibaocha, he spoke many times about the dilemma between his dream and his family. He felt that he needed to succeed as an artist, in order to leave a legacy for his children. Yet, at the same time, he worried that his urge to succeed could take him away from his children – either because of leaving China to seek better opportunities, or because of failing to be ‘a proper father to them’ by not realising his dreams. ‘This place is not my home. I’m just trying to make my dream come true,’ he acknowledged. ‘The only thing that keeps me here and gives me energy is that, thank god, I have a wonderful and very supportive family’.

3.4. Aspirations and family making

Most of the time, Dibaocha described the relationship with his Chinese family as harmonic. ‘Cherrish’s family really welcomed me, especially after they realised that I was an artist,’ he told me, explaining that every time he visits his wife’s hometown – near Zhangjiakou in Hebei province – he is treated as a celebrity. He also claimed that he felt more comfortable there than in Guangzhou. ‘There are many family gatherings there and the town’s authorities are always inviting me out for lunch. They think that I’m a big star and treat me accordingly. But, that’s because they don’t see many foreign faces around there.’  

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In the last couple of years, however, Dibaocha’s expenditures around trying to make his dream come true have created certain frictions. While Cherrish is generally supportive of his decisions, she sees his drive as a double-edged sword. On one hand, she admires his perseverance and sees it as a very important attribute in a man. On the other hand, she worries that his unbending determination to realise his dream could jeopardise their children’s futures (especially if it remains unfulfilled). Dibaocha’s perseverance/stubbornness to pursue his artistic dreams – and the financial investment it requires – have also striated his relationship with his mother-in-law. While she was initially very welcoming about her daughter’s marriage, she has grown disaffected with time. The most contentious issue, according to Dibaocha, is a cultural one: the family’s requirement that he buy property in China. He and his mother-in-law strongly disagree on this point. He contends that at this stage of his/their life, what he needs to do is invest in his career, not in buying property in a place where he does not belong. However, his mother-in-law believes that a man who does not provide a house for his wife and children is not a good man. ‘They need to understand what is really important for me,’ he said. ‘I cannot fail. I’m sure I’ll make it big here, and after that I might consider buying property, but not necessarily in China’.

3.5. Multi-tasking while on the move: serious entrepreneurialism

Dibaocha’s life in Guangzhou is multifaceted. Not only is he a musician, an event organiser, a father, a husband, and a foreign volunteer, he is in the process of becoming an important voice for Nigerians (and other Africans) in the city. One
evening in early 2014, Dibaocha called to cancel our dinner plans at the last minute; the reason he gave was that a ‘very important meeting’ would take place that night. When I inquired further about the nature of the meeting, Dibaocha told me he was going to a political meeting. ‘I’m now getting into politics, man. I will be running for President of the Nigerian community office in the upcoming elections,’ he said, hanging up before I could say a word. I was gobsmacked. Dibaocha running for the presidency of the Nigerian community was certainly something I had never expected. The more I thought about it, the more it started making sense though. Throughout my fieldwork, a number of people had said he was a good community organiser and a ‘natural leader’. As I began musing over how Ojukwu Emma, the current president of the Nigerian community in Guangzhou (whose activities I described in chapter 3), would react to Dibaocha’s challenge, I received the following message through Whatsapp:

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

The fact that Dibaocha highlighted his mastery of Mandarin as a good reason for voting him in as president, reminded me of something he explained during our first meeting. Dibaocha was aware that his linguistic skills, along with his legal status (holding a spouse residence permit), gave him a ‘capital that not many other Nigerians in the city have,’ as he puts it. By combining this ‘capital’ with his entrepreneurial drive, Dibaocha has managed to become an important figure. The possibility of him becoming a top community representative evinces how his mobilisation of this capital could improve his social mobility and thus broaden his opportunities. And, while Dibaocha sometimes seemed uncertain about his future, he always remained clear about one thing: whether in music, business or perhaps even politics, the key to his success is himself. As the case of Dibaocha shows, if attention is redirected to aspirations (and the associated entrepreneurial drives, community engagements, and entanglements), the widespread labels of ‘trader’ and/or ‘immigrant’ come across as partial and flat representations of the real lives and concerns of the individuals in this case study. I am not arguing, however, that Dibaocha is only a musician and not a trader. He is both a musician and a trader and much more. One day, perhaps, he will even be a politician.
4. A trip to Panyu: meeting Lo-D

Dibaocha was not the first musician I heard of in Guangzhou. While surveying the several ‘African markets’ around Guangyuan West Road in the early stages of my research, I often spotted posters depicting another Nigerian musician: Lo-D. Later on, as I attempted to break into the African music scene, I realised he was a popular emerging singer in the city and involved in music production in both Nigeria and China. I sent him several messages and called him a few times, but to no avail. When I did finally manage to get in touch with him via WeChat, he replied with a message implying that he was not interested in doing any interviews.

Eventually though, through my explorations of Guangzhou’s nightlife and music scene, I came across Lo-D. One evening, he and Dibaocha were both booked as the opening singers for Jose Chamaleon, a Ugandan musician who is famous across Africa, and who tours China every couple of years. That night, Dibaocha had asked me to photograph his performance, but as Lo-D came on stage first, I decided to document his part of the show too. A couple of days later, Lo-D contacted me and asked for his pictures. I thought that giving him the images would be an icebreaker. Indeed, he became friendlier, but he remained reluctant to open up about his artistic life and/or experiences in China. A couple of months later, (when I was on the verge of losing all hope of ever interviewing him), I sent him one last message. He called me right away and told me that he could not come to downtown Guangzhou (as he lived far away), but that I could go over to his place. While he was still on the line, I jumped into a taxi and gave the driver my phone. Lo-D gave him the directions in Chinese.
Rather than heading south in the direction of Panyu (the district where Lo-D lives), the taxi driver decided to take me for a long ride around northern Guangzhou. After an hour in the taxi looping Guangzhou, I finally reached the main gate of Lijiang Garden (丽江花园) – yet another gated community on an island. Lo-D met me at a 7-11 and walked me through a massive mall into an open area where his favourite Western restaurant-bar was located. In the bar, we bumped into two of Lo-D’s expat friends – one German and one Canadian – and ended up sitting together. During the course of the meal, the conversation gravitated around the pleasures of living in a place like Lijiang. ‘Here we have everything we need. If I have no shows, I don’t go out of here for days,’ Lo-D said, as he and his friends listed off the facilities in the gated community: cinema, pools, tennis courts, barbecue areas, Western restaurants, along with schools, supermarkets and gyms. Indeed, Lijiang Garden is a mega-compound – it is several times bigger than Fulibandao (where Dibaocha lives), and home to more than 50,000 people. As Lo-D’s Canadian friend kept rambling on about the compound’s private security, expat life in China, and Panyu’s blue skies – ‘something you never see in Guangzhou,’ I remember him saying – I asked Lo-D if there was somewhere we could go to have a more private conversation.

Before moving though, Lo-D said that there was something important he needed to tell me. In the past year, he had been interviewed a couple of times, and every time he felt cheated. On one occasion, he had spoken to a Chinese journalist for
about 10 minutes in a bar, and the following day, his picture was on the front page of
the China Daily News portal. ‘I didn’t consent to that, and the ways in which she
represented me were very upsetting. I’m a foreigner in China, you know. I need to be
cautious’. Lo-D told me he understood that my project was a university one, but that
he still needed to make it clear that he (and many other Africans he knew in the city)
were following the news and were not happy with the ways in which media had been
talking about Africans in Guangzhou – ‘there have been a lot of generalisations and
myths by people who don’t really live here or see our lives,’ he said.

As we settled the bill and finally left Lo-D’s expat friends behind, he told me
there was a quiet spot by the river that he had been visiting ever since he arrived in
Guangzhou four years ago. As we walked over to the river, we passed through an open
courtyard flanked by four, spacious two-storey houses – the kind of upper-middle class
housing I had only read about, but never seen in China. As I looked through one of
the windows, I saw what looked like a large extended family having dinner around a
luxurious dining table. A couple of children were crawling under the table playing on
tablets, and on the other side of the room, two women were clinking wine glasses next
to a man playing the piano. From an expansive, white sofa next to the piano, a fluffy
St. Bernard puppy stared out at me. ‘It’s like another planet, right?’ Lo-D asked me
jokingly when he saw how astonished I was. I asked him if he lived in a place like that.
‘I know this place is different; it’s not like the places you do research in, right?’ he
replied, evading my question.

Lo-D is originally from Enugu – the capital of Enugu State in southeastern
Nigeria. Unlike most other married Africans in the city who wed Chinese women
‘migrating’ from other provinces, Lo-D’s wife is a local Cantonese speaker from
Guangzhou. After moving back and forth between Guangzhou and Enugu for a few
years (mainly to visit her), Lo-D finally decided in 2011 to settle in Guangzhou, start a
family, and continue his musical career there. As I knew that Lo-D had recently
become a father for the second time, as soon as we sat down by the river, I asked him
about being a father.

I never expected that I was going to be a father in China. I knew it was going to
happen abroad, but didn’t know where. I come from a family of people that have
gone abroad. My father studied in Tanzania and the US, and on my mother’s side,
there is a long history of people travelling. When I was younger, my plan was more
traditional: going to the US. But maybe God didn’t want that for me and I ended up
here in China, instead. A long time ago, I wrote a song about having a child abroad,
and when I had a baby here, my mother called me to ask if I remembered that old
song. Music is spiritual, you know. Sometimes you write and sing about your own future. (Lo-D – Interviewee 11)

While Lo-D sees many differences between Nigeria and China, he said that there was no big difference being a father in either country.

A man is a man and a woman is a woman, in Nigeria and in China. It is about how you relate to each other. As a man, you have to be in charge. A man has to control the family, here and in Nigeria. If you’re not in control, you’re not a man. Becoming a father here, I have realised that it is not money that makes people happy, but having a family – that’s the same everywhere, and that’s the most important thing I have and why I’m here. (Lo-D – Interviewee 11)

During both the formal and informal conversations I had with Lo-D, he always highlighted the importance of his family. In his view, everything gravitates around family and love – love for his children and love for his wife. While Lo-D, like other musicians in Guangzhou, aspires to become a celebrity in China/Asia and Africa, his aspirations come second to family concerns.

4.1. Transnational (re)production

Unlike many other African musicians in Guangzhou, however, Lo-D is not necessarily trying to start or restart his career in China. Rather, his musical engagements in the country are a continuation of several projects and activities in which he was involved in Nigeria. For almost a decade before moving to Guangzhou, Lo-D was the manager of his own music studio in Enugu where he produced music for a number of artists. Then, eight years ago, he decided to merge his passion for music with his professional skills and become a self-produced singer. After arriving in China, he continued with both production and singing. In different ways, these engagements connect him, simultaneously, to both Nigeria and China. ‘I’m a producer and a singer; that’s how I make my living. I’m not a trader by day, singer by night, as they said in that Chinese newspaper. I’m not even a trader, even though I hang out with many of them.’

Although most of the music Lo-D produces in Guangzhou is distributed back in Africa, he does produce a number of songs for what he calls ‘the Chinese market’. Recording predominantly takes place in a small studio that he has set up in his Lijiang Garden apartment, and Lo-D often collaborates with Chinese producers (for styles like techno, R&B and hip-hop). For songs that require more particularly African styles (Afrobeat or Highlife, for example), he often collaborates with his brother in Nigeria.
For these songs, the final mixing and mastering is always done in Guangzhou though. ‘Once finalised here, my African music is ready for distribution in West Africa. The other styles are the ones that appeal to Chinese audiences and that I use in my shows here in Guangzhou,’ he explained. Indeed, Lo-D has a very clear understanding of the distinction between what works in his Chinese shows, and what works in African markets.

Guangzhou’s nightlife is amongst the best in China – trailing only behind Beijing and Shanghai. According to Lo-D, Guangzhou’s nightlife is highly competitive and clearly segmented along Chinese, African and international lines (‘international’ catering for expats and students). In the early days of African presence in Guangzhou, most African music shows took place in a limited number of venues – and mainly within what Zeng (2010) termed ‘purely foreign community bars.’ Nowadays, however, Africans are involved in myriad music shows in a variety of venues that attract diverse audiences. As Africans in Guangzhou remain a significant foreign presence, the number of Africans involved in different segments of the city’s nightlife has gradually increased. Since 2011 African singers, dancers and drummers have become more of a staple than a rarity in the city’s nightlife. Indeed, Lo-D’s music and shows in Guangzhou traverse and connect the segments he mentioned; and he performs several
times each week. Most nights, Lo-D sings in ‘purely Chinese’ bars. He also regularly performs in ‘international’ spaces like expat bars and, to a lesser extent, collaborates with other African musicians for African shows. In conjunction with the earnings from his music studio in Nigeria, Lo-D’s multiple performances mean he makes a ‘good living’.

Lo-D also aspires to break through in China. However, rather than attempting to succeed with a top-down approach like other musicians in the city, his attempt seems like a more active and focused one. From his incursions into the Chinese segments of Guangzhou’s nightlife, he has acquired a sense of what kind of music Chinese audiences like to hear and what they expect him to play. ‘To be successful amongst Chinese, you have to conform to what they are expecting. It is because of this that I mainly sing R&B and hip-hop in Chinese bars. From time to time, I bring in Afrobeat or Highlife, and they also like it,’ he said. Following this strategy, Lo-D also seeks out Chinese artists to sing with. As other Africans in the city, he knows/believes that the key to success in China’s entertainment markets is to collaborate with Chinese and sing in Mandarin.

In the relatively short amount of time that Lo-D has been in Guangzhou, he has carved out a niche for himself. Moreover, his multiple engagements and connections in the city, have been opening some doors to other parts of Asia. In early 2014, Lo-D received an offer to travel to Indonesia and perform there. While he thinks that travelling and performing across Asia is an important step in the pursuit of his dream to make it in the music industry, Lo-D told me that the most important thing
for him is to see if he can balance his career (and the transnational possibilities that it might open) with his local responsibilities as a family man.

I always aspired to become something big – to go everywhere with my music. That will be my dream come true. At the moment, things are in the making, and my dream is coming true in China. But I need to be cautious and move carefully. If I maintain my direction, and if I do the right thing, good things will come to me. It’s already happening. Soon, I’ll be able to get on top of everything. (Lo-D – Interviewee 11)

While Lo-D’s aspiration to become famous keeps driving him, he thinks of Guangzhou as a place that has opened up myriad possibilities and a place from where he could better structure his career and have a good life. Along with his music studio in Nigeria, the multiple shows he organises weekly in Guangzhou and his family keep him busy and satisfied. ‘So far, so good,’ he told me last time I asked. ‘At the moment, I’m done with my new album and looking for a good hand to shoot my video,’ he added. This is Lo-D’s first production to be fully written and produced in China.

![Rich Club Advert](image)

[Lo-D’s welcome-back show, after a short visit to Nigeria, 2013]

5. Becoming a musician (and other things) in China: Manivoo

During my fieldwork, I heard several times that there were some emerging African singers who had started their careers in China. I managed to get a few contacts, but
most of them were in cities like Wuhan, Beijing or Shanghai. Eventually though, through a Tanzanian promoter in Hong Kong and a Ugandan singer in Wuhan, I got in touch with Manivoo – a young Ugandan who decided to become a singer after arriving in China, and who is very active in different segments of Guangzhou’s entertainment scene.

‘I've always been moving,’ was one of the first things Manivoo told me. ‘Before coming to Guangzhou, I was in Pretoria, and before that, in Philadelphia and Kampala’. When I asked him what had brought him from Pretoria (where he was residing temporarily) to Guangzhou, he said that he had wanted to go to a place where he could become something different, and that Africa and the ‘West’ did not offer him that. ‘At that time, I didn’t know anything about China, but I thought that if I worked hard, this country could be the place I was looking for. So, I went online and searched for “China’s richest city”, and the first result was: “Guangzhou”,’ he explained. As he had read that people were doing business in the city, his first idea was to start a career as a trader in China. Nonetheless, his parents were not very supportive of his early entrepreneurial drives; and instead, pressured him to continue his education. Manivoo was convinced that China was the place to be, however. So, in order to link his parents’ advice with his own interests and aspirations, he came up with the proposal of moving to China to study Mandarin. ‘Many people in Africa speak French and many others speak English, but who speaks Chinese? Very few do.’ Using this argument, he convinced his parents that learning Mandarin would guarantee increased educational, professional and economic opportunities in his future. And, as he was determined to go to China, his parents had no choice but to accept. In 2011, with economic support from his family, he left Pretoria for Guangzhou.

Not long after arriving in the city, however, Manivoo started modifying his plans. While he kept studying the language, his focus shifted to other activities. ‘When I arrived, I discovered that there were many opportunities. Studying Chinese was not enough, so I looked for something else. I got in touch with people in the entertainment business and started doing jobs for them.’ In those early days, most of the ‘entertainment’ jobs he was offered required him to don African tribal clothing and play the drums for Chinese audiences. Manivoo told me that while wearing tribal clothes did not upset him, he was looking for something else, and soon moved out of drumming. Through the connections he established there, however, he started working occasionally as a model, alongside foreigners from all over the world. At some point
during the modelling, one of the promoters asked if he was capable of rapping; and although he had never rapped in public before, he took up the challenge. This exposure, along with the animated reactions he got from Chinese audiences, gave him the confidence to rap more often during those particular events.

During Manivoo’s first year in the city, his interpersonal skills and connections with people in the entertainment scene, led him to become an agent/promoter for African models and musicians. And, as he was spending a lot of time around African and Chinese singers and DJs, he learnt from them. ‘I learnt the most from the Chinese DJs,’ he said. ‘Their technical skills are very good, but they lack emotion and rhythm. So, as soon as I became good enough, I took over my teachers and got some good contracts. Suddenly, I was making money from something I had always loved – music’.

As Manivoo began rapping and DJing more frequently, he started musing seriously about becoming a musician. ‘I have been writing songs and singing since I was a child, but in Africa and America I never really got the chance to look into that passion. I realised here that this could be the place to do that’. Eventually, Manivoo made the necessary connections to start rapping in more formal music shows (rather than just modelling events), and by early 2013, he had managed to become financially independent from the wages earned from his musical endeavours.

Before coming to China, becoming a musician was only a latent aspiration for Manivoo, but by his second year in Guangzhou, his artistic aspirations had switched
from being a ‘plan B or C in life, to plan A,’ as he put it. Manivoo’s parents, however, were not very pleased with his change in plans. So, in order to appease them, Manivoo enrolled in a computer science degree at a university in Guangzhou. ‘I’m only studying as a plan B, in case things don’t work out. It’s only for the papers,’ he told me. ‘My family don’t want me to sing, but this is my passion. I always knew it, but in China I got convinced and it’s happening,’ he added.

Everything I’m doing now is aimed at getting to a position from where I can move forward with my artistic career. This is the most important thing for me at the moment. I know that I’m on my way to make it. I have travelled to so many places to do shows: Shanghai, Macau, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Tianjin. I have met people I never imagined I could meet. It is all like a dream that came to me, but its real. It’s happening all around me. (Manivoo – Interviewee 12)

Encouraged by the connections and mobility he gained in Guangzhou, Manivoo is in the process of transforming his artistic aspirations into a more serious endeavour. Last time I spoke to him, he told me that he was writing songs and looking for collaborations with Chinese artists and other African artists. He was also looking for a producer for his first formal music video. As with many other musicians in the city, making a music video (and uploading it to Youku.com – a video platform) is seen as a crucial step in the path of success in China. Manivoo is convinced that he will make it in China. ‘I’m patient. I’m going slowly. In China, I’ve come to realise what I have. It’s a hobby, but it’s also a talent and I want to make good use of it’.

However, if success eludes him, he has other plans. ‘One of my main dreams is to be able to help people. I don’t only want to become a celebrity for the sake of becoming a celebrity. I’ve seen my parents helping people and I want to live that life too. It’s a good life,’ he told me, explaining that his father has political connections in Uganda that he could use if he goes back.

Whenever I go back there, I will come with the experiences and knowledge I gained in China: languages, a degree, and my music. In the future, I could easily become a member of the parliament. See, this whole thing is not only about singing. Singing connects people, and singing in China is and will be the way for me to get where I want. My biggest example is Wyclef Jean, who could have become president of Haiti after being a singer. I could do something like that starting from China. My mother once told me that although I was the little one, I would bring the biggest things for the family, and I have stuck to that. I know it will happen. (Manivoo – Interviewee 12)

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

6. Conclusion

While the aspirations of the musicians portrayed in this chapter are to some extent similar (in that they relate to artistic success), their individual (dis)positions and abilities to achieve them are not. Each individual has different capacities (and opportunities) to materialise their dreams or aspirations. In the end, the extent to which they do so depends, in part, on their personal skills, connections and knowledge, and in part on their distinct degrees of mobility. In his analysis on the ‘capacity to aspire’ as a ‘cultural capacity’, Appadurai (2004) contends that while aspirations about the good life exist in all societies, the capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed, and those better off have a
higher potential to fulfil their aspirations (68). As with most of the ‘more settled’ and ‘semi-settled’ Africans I met in Guangzhou, the individuals in this case study did not leave their countries to escape dire conditions, nor did they move abroad only to explore economic opportunities. Each one took the decision to move transnationally in order to improve their lifestyle, culturally and/or socially, and each one has used or thought of China as a platform from where to explore their potentials. Prior to arriving in Guangzhou, each of these individuals had their personal ideas about success and making it in China, but, and perhaps more importantly, they already knew (in varying degrees) how to mobilise connections and resources to increase the possibilities of fulfilling their aspirations. In Appadurai’s logic, while these subjects are not the ‘rich and powerful’ back in Nigeria or Uganda, their ‘middle class’ origins allowed them a higher capacity to aspire (a capacity which does not necessarily equate with a capacity to fulfil). Put another way, while each individual’s knowledge of the relationship between aspirations and outcomes is still evolving, these individuals have had experiences that have taught them how to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general opportunities and options (Appadurai, 2004: 68). And, it is these experiences that have been used to bolster their transnational aspirations and lives – as evidenced in the case of Dibaocha using trade to restart his career; or in Lo-D’s transnational production (of music and livelihood).

Aspirations, and the capacity to aspire, are also reconfigured by transnational journeys. While these individuals may have long aspired to become musicians, their journeys and the experiences of other places have opened up new horizons of hope, desire and possibilities – some of these horizons more immediate than others. As the stories in this chapter show, the initial ideas these musicians had about mobility (moving to China) tended to be conflated with the opportunities to be ‘discovered’ or ‘become something different’ (becoming through mobility/movement). However, as soon as they found themselves on the move, and headed somewhat in the direction of artistic success in China, they felt the need to become more mobile. In this sense, mobility seems like a paradox. For individuals that aspire to be transnationally mobile, attaining a certain degree of mobility leads to a desire/requirement for heightened mobility. So, although an individual may already be (to some degree) mobile, enhanced opportunities to realise their dreams are conflated with an even heightened degree of mobility. As Uteng (2006) suggests, being mobile is a real and genuine opportunity. However, being more mobile brings more opportunities and thus is a requirement for
someone looking for transnational artistic success – failing to become more mobile (to expand the spaces of mobility) increases the chances of failure. Take Dibaocha’s (im)mobilities, for instance. Although he considers himself privileged to be able to move between Nigeria and China at will (a mobility that has produced genuine opportunities for him), he feels trapped by the obstacles (immobilities) that his passport generates – so, while he can move in and out of China at will, he can only go to Africa. Most other Asian destinations he is interested in exploring artistically require visas for Nigerians and he has been systematically rejected from entering Hong Kong, Macau and South Korea, for example. Dibaocha indeed has a heightened awareness of the complex connection between success and mobility. While he knows that his partial immobility hampers his artistic pursuits, he hopes that by breaking fully into the Chinese market, other spaces across Asia will finally open for him – and his partial immobility would, in that case, fade. Hence, mobility can be thought of as a capacity/capability (susceptible of being acquired through efforts) intrinsic to the materialisation of aspirations (Kronlid, 2008). In this way, being mobile is both a requirement and an opportunity to ‘become something else’ – and to ‘make it’ in China.

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

> My problem is that I can never give up. Pursuing my dream is something I will do here or anywhere until I see this life no more. Unfortunately, I ended up in entertainment – a very difficult industry. It has cost me a lot of wasted years and large sums of money, and I have not yet achieved what I want. But I know that something will come. (Dibaocha – Interviewee 4)

During the last few months of my fieldwork, Dibaocha hinted many times that going back to Nigeria, to pursue his dream there, was becoming a possibility. When I asked him about his children and wife, he explained that his main concern was his family, but that if he went to Nigeria, they would not follow. Dibaocha’s story shows
that even when individuals have more developed capacities to mobilise resources towards the fulfilment of their aspirations, the precarity and liminality conditioning individual attempts to build futures from transnational spaces are still difficult to overcome.

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By bringing the analysis of aspirations to the fore, and highlighting the individual entanglements involved in fulfilling those aspirations, this chapter has aimed to do three things. First, widen the lens through which African presence in Guangzhou can be analysed, by moving beyond the overarching influences of economic discourse. While this chapter focuses solely on the case studies of musicians, this kind of analysis could easily be extended to other realms of African presence in Guangzhou. The subsequent stories that might emerge could unveil other rationales for African presence in China that, in tandem with trading activities, would build a more comprehensive narrative about what Africans are doing in China and, more importantly, the future prospects for the continued presence of Africans in the country. The second aim of this chapter was to problematise the centrality of the ‘traders’ label in the narratives of Africans in Guangzhou. This was done to take heed of Meeteren et al.’s (2009) argument that by not taking aspirations into consideration, researchers often end up imposing simplistic labels on individuals on the move or migrants. My particular contention is not that trade is not important, but rather that the discursively articulated centrality of trade blurs other rationales behind transnational movement. So, based on the importance placed by the individuals I met in Guangzhou on their aspirations as rationales fuelling their transnational journeys, I have attempted to ‘repatriate’ – to use Appadurai’s term – issues of agency, emotion and aspiration from under the shadow of economistic narratives. The third aim of this chapter was to explore the lives and imagined trajectories of these musicians, in order to provide an ethnographic account of how the promising, but risky, geographies of their landscapes of aspiration have stretched across new, distinct and distant territories. And, concurrently, offer an insight into the affective and emotional dimensions associated with the transnational mobilities that inform African presence in the city.

Finally, as with many other cases of migration/movement, to simply say that African presence in China is a consequence of how modern societies are ‘on the move’
(Lash and Urry, 1994); or of how transnational traders seek to profit from globalisation, is not enough. For a more thorough understanding of why Africans are moving to China and what are they doing there, looking at the aspirations behind and within movement is essential.
Chapter 5

Embedded transnationality: problematic mobilities and the burden of methodological nationalism

‘we believe that a study that begins with the history and activities of individuals is the most efficient way of learning about the institutional underpinnings of transnationalism and its structural effects.’ (Portes et al., 1999: 220)

1. Producing ‘immigrants’, imposing labels

In mid 2014, I attended the seminar of a fellow researcher in Hong Kong who has been investigating ‘African immigration to China’. One of the main arguments was that China lacked the institutional arrangements to manage the influx of immigrants; and that instead of developing an immigration framework, Guangdong’s local government was engaging with some kind of ‘anti-African immigrant campaign’. During the questions at the close of the session, the speaker was asked how appropriate it was to call Africans in Guangzhou ‘immigrants’, given not only the fact that there are no formal/legal paths towards settlement (as she had pointed out), but that, according to most literature, Africans in the city see themselves as being en route to another place and are not necessarily attempting to settle in China. An academic in the audience further questioned to what extent it was useful to bring in conceptual/theoretical frameworks from Euro-American experiences of immigration to provide explanations about African presence in southern China. The researcher’s answer astounded me: ‘I call them immigrants because there is no other word to describe them, and I use these frameworks because I need to connect with the existing literature.’
Her answer was, of course, a response in haste. However, it made me think more deeply about how knowledge concerning individuals on the move is produced, and just how African presence in Guangzhou has been construed and represented. Since early on in this research project, I resisted the import of European and American theoretical constructs/frames to aprioristically provide explanations. Clearly not everybody shares my enthusiasm for disallowing theory to determine both the outcomes of research, and the representations of research subjects. Indeed, some researchers have prioritised the need to engage with western theoretical frameworks, and to produce a particular type of knowledge, rather than engaging in sustained ethnographic work, and producing painstaking analyses of local and historical elements revealed through fieldwork.

The case of the Hong Kong researcher is not an isolated one. Take for instance the description of the sociospatial formations emerging as a consequence of African presence in the city provided by Li et al. (2008) and Zhang (2008) (see Chapter 1). In an attempt to galvanise the existence of an ‘African enclave’, these authors chose to engage with the literature (histories, concepts and theoretical frameworks) on spatial forms of separation from American sociology (i.e. enclaves and ghettos) – in particular, that from the so-called Chicago School approach to urban sociology (see Zhang, 2008). Undoubtedly, American urban sociology can be useful to theorise urban developments and social organisation outside of the United States; however, by prioritising this theoretical engagement, the specific local histories and dynamics informing the emergence of the ‘urban villages’ (and surrounding neighbourhoods) that they construed as ‘African enclaves’ were overlooked, and the interactions taking place in those spaces between transnational and transprovincial individuals (as I discussed in Chapters 1 and 3) were neglected. Moreover, the wealth of literature on the formation of urban villages in Southern China (see Wu et al., 2013; Wu, 2009; Cheng, 2012; Liu et al., 2012; and Lin, 2011) was disregarded. As a consequence of this, Li et al. (2008) and Zhang (2008) provided theoretically engaging but somewhat inaccurate representations of what happens on the ground. Indeed, as I argued in previous chapters, the notion of an ‘African enclave/ghetto’ is empirically difficult to support.

In a similar vein, subsuming the heterogeneous factors informing contemporary human movement between Africa and China under the label of ‘immigration’ fails to account for the diversity in trajectories, rationales for travel, and
individual aspirations that I have highlighted throughout this dissertation. My argument is that the multiple patterns displayed by Africans on the move in China problematise frameworks that uncritically locate individuals moving transnationally within the categories of ‘immigration’ and ‘settlement’. Moreover, framing African presence in Guangzhou through western discourses of immigration does not correspond with the lived experiences of individuals, let alone the institutional and legal realities of residing in China. By extolling the narrative of immigration, extant research reproduces a gaze that tends to conflate Africans on the move with notions of rupture, displacement and illegality – notions commonly associated with the analysis of immigration to the global North (see Lan, 2014; and Haugen, 2012).62 However, the conditions, experiences and rationales that push individuals to risk their lives crossing the Sahara and the Mediterranean to reach the coasts of Italy or Spain, for instance, are significantly different from those that lead individuals to board flights in Lagos, Addis Ababa or Nairobi, and fly to Guangzhou. Failing to make this distinction is not only theoretically misleading but also unfair in terms of representation. So while, as I highlighted in Chapter 3, there are plenty of West African overstayers in Guangzhou, the widespread notion of a ‘wave’ of (undocumented) Africans immigrants invading the city is not only difficult to maintain – it is inaccurate. What the ‘immigration’ label does is flatten out the multiple types of movement and emplacements that characterise the journeys and sojourns of Africans in China.

In previous chapters, I have highlighted some of the methodological shortcomings of previous research about this case study. These shortcomings are bolstered, to different extents, by the transient, unstable and evolving dynamics of African emplacements in the city, and by the subsequent methodological difficulty to fixate individuals on the move within specific categories (i.e. settled, itinerant and so on). As I mentioned when discussing the multiple trajectories, emplacements and rationales for Africans presence in Guangzhou (Chapter 3), there are myriad questions associated with the abovementioned difficulty that are hard to resolve (but that are commonly asked to/by researchers): i.e. Are Africans attempting to settle in China? Are they immigrants trying to assimilate? Are they mobile migrant traders? Are they transmigrants or itinerant transnational entrepreneurs? Are they nomads, commercial migrants, or students-cum-traders? Are they establishing enclaves? Are they taking jobs from Chinese? Can they be thought of as a single ‘African community’? Are they segregated or are they forming new hybrid transcultural communities? And so on.
Instead of seeking to answer some of these difficult questions, however, many researchers appear to eschew complexity, and instead privilege the imposition of labels from ‘existing literature’ to *explain* what happens on the ground – as in the cases discussed above.

### 1.1. Aprioristic versus grounded approaches

The conceptual and methodological choices taken by the aforementioned scholars bring a tension between two distinct forms of knowledge production in qualitative research in social sciences to the fore: the tension between the production of knowledge through the deployment of ready-made hypothesis or presuppositions (derived from pre-established theoretical frameworks) and then tested through a case-study; and with the development of empirically and locally based explanations that may (or may not) connect with existing literatures, and may (or may not) contribute to the formulation of *new* theoretical frameworks. In short, a tension between what I call ‘aprioristic’ and ‘grounded’ approaches.

Research stemming from the presupposition that Africans in China are ‘immigrants’ is a good example of what I mean by ‘aprioristic’ approach. This way of producing knowledge is a legacy of methodological approaches – rife in social sciences – that tend to take the existence of social phenomena for granted, and then set out to list, identify and describe the features that best adhere to certain expectations. Within this approach, fieldwork is often merely an attempt to fit the phenomenon within the existing frames of a particular field or area of study. I argue that this approach leaves little (or no) room for the empirical to challenge the theoretical. In the case of Africans in Guangzhou, prioritising the engagement with existing theoretical frameworks and generalisations has not only disregarded the search for a better understanding/explanation of the multiple types of movement/emplacement taking place but, more importantly, has concealed how these may have the potential to rework social relations and challenge (mis)representations.

In a ‘grounded’ approach, however, theoretical insights and frameworks are formulated as a final outcome of critical reflection on the data emerging from the case study, instead of the other way around (Alasuutari, 1996). A grounded approach, as I conceptualise it here, emerges from the complex interplay of fieldwork and theoretically informed perspectives. As should be evident by now, this is the choice I made in this project. The insights, descriptions and terms that I present throughout
this dissertation emerged out of an inductive approach in which a dialectical exchange between empirical observations and theory took place. Rather than setting out to prove a theory (or to find evidence to engage with existing literature), my intention was to assess to what extent the lived experiences of people inform and/or challenge theoretical assumptions and presuppositions. In this way, my insights are intended to provide alternative viewpoints on the case, rather than be exhaustive and definitive explanations. So, while I did not start this research with a hypothesis/presupposition to be proven (or satisfied), I did set out to do fieldwork informed by certain assumptions and theoretical notions. The main assumption – that stemmed from my years living in China prior to embarking on this project and from a literature review I produced early on – was that rather than immigrating into China, Africans were transnational traders constantly moving back and forth in circuits of trade, and that their journeys and intentions were being misrepresented. However, through sustained contact with a number of individuals in Guangzhou, and by participating, to varying degrees, in their lives and activities, I realised that the case study was more complex than what I had previously imagined, and that my assumptions and theoretical notions were somewhat inadequate. Indeed, through the interplay between old/new theoretical notions and empirical observation that takes place in a grounded approach, the observer’s perspective evolves and expands, and the field of possibilities to make better sense of the specifics of a case study widens. In the case of Africans in Guangzhou, this approach revealed a different picture: one in which notions like immigration/enclave lack empirical support and, perhaps more importantly, one in which focusing on (or bringing to fore) multiple trajectories, patterns of movement, and modes of emplacement contributes to a better description of the lived experiences of individuals. In short, I contend that insights produced by a grounded approach are more likely to uncover the specific local and historical features of a socio-cultural formation, and provide viewpoints that can further the understanding of the complexities of contemporary transnational movement.

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It is from the basis of this grounded approach (and the multiple rationales, trajectories and emplacements it highlights) that I argue that a more comprehensive understanding of African presence in Guangzhou can emerge from thinking in terms
of (transnational) ‘African mobilities’ converging in China, rather than in terms of ‘African immigration to China’. This distinction is not only a semiotic one. For, as noted above, depending on the perspective a researcher takes, the lived experiences of individuals, and their rationales for movement, are represented differently.

Thinking in terms of African mobilities moves beyond the categories of migration and trade, and allows for a plethora of other types of movement (including exploration, adventure, travel, itinerancy and even tourism and nomadism) to be considered (de Bruijn et al., 2001). However, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, the geographies of transnational mobility register more than human movement alone. Non-human and non-material things such as ideas, values and aspirations can move, impact on locales, and transform as a result of the movement of people (de Bruijn et al., 2001). Hence, focusing on African mobilities not only requires the tracing of human forms of mobility in their transnational expansion out of Africa and into Asia, but also the tracing of the continuities implicated in the mobility of (non-human/non-material) forms (i.e. ideas, values, aspirations and forms of organisation).

Hence, to better understand the multiple forms of mobility that characterise the present transnational conjuncture (the backdrop of African presence in China), we need to analyse these ‘forms of mobility’ concomitantly with what de Bruijn et al. (2001) call ‘mobility of forms’ – and the ways in which the interplay between both forms impacts on the lives of individuals. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, in this day and age, people on the move do not just leave their places behind carrying certain items to attempt to home themselves elsewhere, but they attempt to reproduce certain cultural forms as they journey to other places. The grassroots forms of organisation and representation (Chapter 3), and the emergence of a music scene (Chapter 4) can be thought of as examples of these mobile forms. Thus, throughout this chapter, I argue that within the logic of forms of mobility/mobility of forms, it is possible to conceptualise the multiple (hybrid) African formations analysed in this dissertation as ‘forms’ moving along the lines of transnational flows of trade, culture, aspirations and geopolitics. The notion of ‘mobility of forms’ highlights the existence of heterogeneous sociocultural formations that are in constant movement – much like the buoyant assemblages of relationships that I mentioned in Chapter 1. As they move, however, these forms generate a multiplicity of (dis)connections and (dis)embeddings, and have the capacity to both transform locales and be transformed by the interplay of
local, translocal and transnational factors. I contend that bringing multiple forms of mobility (including immobility) to the fore (along with the mobility of forms) fosters and provides: more inclusive imaginings and conceptualisations about individuals on the move (that go beyond sedentaristic approaches and methodological nationalism); more nuanced and complex understandings about African presence in Guangzhou; and, ultimately, a better description of the specificity of the mobile (yet grounded) sociocultural formations emerging in the current transnational moment.

In order to mobilise these ideas, in what follows I first present a brief account of multiple forms of African mobility suggesting that African presence in Guangzhou needs to be framed as a continuation/expansion of trans-African forms of mobility. Following that, I claim that the forms of African mobility organising African presence in the city are best characterised by focusing on aspirational mobilities and entrepreneurial drives. After that I present a review of how methodological nationalism has historically been a burden in theorisations about individuals on the move. I then suggest that as a whole, the multiple trajectories and emplacements in the city can be conceptualised under the umbrella term of an ‘entrepreneurial form’. Finally, after that I put forward a discussion about how the multiple forms of mobility converging in Guangzhou need to be analyse concomitantly with a ‘mobility of forms’

2. African mobilities in transformation

2.1. Africa as a continent ‘on the move’

Mobility is deeply engrained in African societies with a history stretching from: the precolonial cosmogonies of wanderers in search of places to establish villages (Van Dijk et al., 2001); the pilgrims travelling to and from Mecca and forming some kind of floating population along the way (Abu-Manga, 1999); the circular movement of the Igbo and the seasonal journeys of the Fulani in West Africa (Chukwuezi, 2001; Hampshire, 2002); the traditional ‘dwelling on the move’ experienced by many groups across the Sahel (Kane & Leedy, 2013); the movements, displacements and resettlements triggered by colonialism (Amin, 1974); to the contemporary intra/intercontinental, multidirectional paths explored by individuals from all over the continent. Indeed, it is difficult to understand African social life without taking the perspective of movement into consideration (de Bruijn et al., 2001).
While there are both historic and contemporary patterns of African mobility characterised by serious ruptures in society, it is misleading to construe contemporary African mobilities exclusively through the narrative of geographical displacement – i.e. as a consequence of conflict, violence, poverty and/or ecological disasters. In fact, there are longstanding calls for thinking of African mobilities beyond notions of rupture and displacement and dichotomies such as tradition versus modernity (Van Binsbergen & Meilink, 1978). However, as noted earlier, most media and scholarly analysis of African mobilities are still mired by these perceptions. Not only do they mainly focus on African journeys towards the ‘Global North’, but they routinely reproduce a Western gaze that looks at Africans on the move through the lenses of refugee migration and illegal immigration.

African mobilities are, nonetheless, much more complex than what media portrayals suggest, and are, in fact, epitomised by intranational and trans-African patterns of movement, rather than by intercontinental, out-of-Africa journeys. Indeed, domestic and regional African mobility is far more important and sizeable than the flows to Europe, America and the Gulf region combined (Kane & Leedy, 2013). Within these trans-African patterns of mobility, you can find, amongst others, Beninese and Ghanaians in Nigeria (Mberu & Pongou, 2010); Sahelians in the Congo Basin (Whitehouse, 2013); Nigerians and Congolese in South Africa (Morris, 1998); and East African refugees in Kenya and Ethiopia (Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000; Wangalwa, 2014). Research on African patterns of mobility has shown that the patterns often go beyond the logic of migration and settlement, and that sedentary ways of life cannot be taken for granted (de Bruijn et al., 2001). In some societies being mobile is an integral part of the life trajectories of many individuals (Salazar, 2012), and in some cases, not being mobile may be considered an anomaly. Research has also shown that, in many instances, these patterns of mobility are characterised by varying degrees of transiency (i.e. itinerant circuits of trade, rural-urban circulatory mobilities, and travelling cultures) (see Chukwuezi, 2001; de Bruijn et al., 2001).

There are indications that mobility in Africa has been constantly increasing (Akokpari, 1999). This increase is marked by the decline of old forms of mobility and the emergence of new patterns (Tacoli, 2001). Nonetheless, as with previous patterns, new ones have also posed great challenges for scholars attempting to identify and categorize them (Van Dijk et al., 2001). This is, in part, due to: the constant political
and economic changes across the continent; the complex interplay between contemporary and past forms of mobility; and changing conditions internationally.

Although African Studies scholars have long highlighted the multiplicity, diversity and complexity of African mobility, this knowledge has garnered little consideration in the analyses of African presence in Guangzhou, or indeed, other parts of Asia and the world. Extant narratives have failed to link African presence in China to the wider cultural patterns and formations leading individuals into transnational movement; and, have tended to remain comfortably within the narrative of the ‘rise of China’ as a magnet attracting foreign migration. Indeed, there has been little effort to assess the extent to which the African mobilities converging in Guangzhou are an extension/expansion of the historic and contemporary mobility patterns in Africa. Clearly, a better understanding of the multiple forms of mobility behind African presence in Guangzhou requires the consideration of trans-African forms and patterns of mobility. It is my contention then that the analysis of African presence in Guangzhou not only requires the dual lens of the ‘rise of China’ and the ‘extension/expansion of African mobilities’, but careful deliberation over the contribution of African economic growth and stability to the levels of mobility that can be seen.

Recent research suggests that African economic development has triggered rather than constrained mobility, and that it is not the poor from the poorest countries who engage in mobility (Saur & Pelican 2014). This has meant that a degree of transnational mobility (both within Africa and to other parts of the world) is now integral to the lives of millions of people on the continent (de Bruijn et al., 2001). Indeed, higher incomes and the increased availability of resources may well be in the process of awakening hitherto dormant aspirations (Saur & Pelican, 2014) and entrepreneurial drives, thus propelling certain types of individuals to undertake transnational journeys. In light of these developments and the increased availability/affordability of international travel, for instance, African mobilities are now embedded in business, educational and cultural networks that span the globe in multiple and varied directions (Saur & Pelican, 2014).

2.2. Aspirational mobilities and entrepreneurial drives

As I have highlighted frequently in this dissertation, most of Africans in Guangzhou are far from being displaced or destitute; rather, they are purposeful individuals – often
from middle-class backgrounds – who entertain multiple aspirations and have chosen to embark on transnational journeys in an attempt to fulfil them. Hence, I contend that the mobilities connecting Africa and China should be seen as a continuation of aspirational forms of mobility that lead individuals with more developed capacities to aspire (as noted in Chapter 4) to mobilise their social, cultural and financial capital towards the materialisation of their aspirations. Indeed, they are akin to other transnationally mobile middle-class individuals who are motivated by aspirations that are not exclusively about economic advancement, but about attaining a better lifestyle by pursuing particular types of culturally and socially desirable livelihoods (see Benson & O’Reilly, 2009).

Moreover, I maintain that these aspirational forms of mobility can be informed by multiple ‘entrepreneurial drives’. I conceptualise these drives as desires and passions (emerging from wider systems of ideas) that are shaped by individual dispositions, skills and attitudes, and which are then crucial in the pursuit of aspirations. In English, the term ‘entrepreneurial’ is mainly associated with business activities, and research on ‘transnational entrepreneurship’ has often conflated the term with highly mobile (and relatively successful) individuals - i.e. ‘emigrant entrepreneurs’ that move between the Asia Pacific region and North America (see Ong, 1992). However, the way I use ‘entrepreneurial’ here alludes to the meaning embedded in the original word in French (entreprendre): to undertake (an activity). Hence, by ‘entrepreneurial’ I refer to the differentiated capacities that certain individuals have (and acquire) to undertake particular projects, which may or may not be business-related. Individuals often embark on these projects by means of designing strategies with the intention of obtaining certain form of improvement, however.

Entrepreneurial drives manifest and function differently for each individual. Nonetheless, these drives feature prominently in most stories of the individuals I met in Guangzhou, regardless of their emplacements and activities. From individuals involved in trade, music or religious congregations, to those establishing restaurants or community organisations, entrepreneurial drives are critical energies organising these engagements. It must be noted, however, that by highlighting the entrepreneurial drives informing the aspirational mobilities converging in Guangzhou, I do not conflate African journeys/stories with success. Rather, I see these entrepreneurial drives as undertakings against precarity – strategies to survive in difficult and liminal environments. Put another way, these differentially emplaced entrepreneurial subjects
are ‘risk takers’ (not necessarily ‘winners’) who may (or may not) fail to reach the objectives they set up for themselves. Indeed, entrepreneurial drives do not necessarily lead to the fulfilment of aspirations.

However, rather than ruminating over the possibilities for success or failure, I put forward the notion of ‘entrepreneurial drives’ to highlight what I consider as a distinct feature of contemporary African mobility (and particularly that between Africa and China): the self-making orientation (or the do-it-yourself narrative) embedded in the notion of ‘entrepreneurship’ (understood as the undertaking of a journey, project or adventure). The distinctiveness of this pattern of mobility is epitomised by the fact that most of the Africans I met in Guangzhou have embarked on transnational journeys of their own free will and with the intention of exploring and/or fulfilling their potentials. Indeed, I contend that as a whole, the multiple entrepreneurial drives structuring this form of (aspirational) mobility can be conceptualised as components of a transnational ‘entrepreneurial form’. I argue that it is this entrepreneurial form that best characterises the multiple cultural and economic rationales and dynamics subsumed under the umbrella term of African presence in Guangzhou. Later in this chapter, I will return to the discussion of this entrepreneurial form when I discuss the ‘mobility of forms’.

### 2.3. Transnational journeys as processes of becoming

There is a complex relationship between aspirational mobilities, entrepreneurial drives, and transnational journeys. While some individuals engage in familiar professional activities while on the move (particularly, in the cases of long-term transnational traders), I met myriad individuals during my fieldwork who ‘discovered’ their entrepreneurial drives once they were on the move – and namely, when the situation demanded it. Many of these individuals were able to shift roles, strategies and even aspirations, to undertake certain activities. Arguably, as evidence in this dissertation indicates, aspirations and entrepreneurial drives are not fixed and can be (re)configured as a result of individuals embarking on transnational journeys. Take some of the cases presented in previous chapters for instance. There was one who arrived in China to teach, and ended up becoming a trader and eventually a community representative; and another who came to study and ended up becoming a singer/DJ with superstar aspirations. There were also those who set out with artistic or sporting aspirations, and ended up in business; and those who arrived without commercial skills and eventually
opened restaurants, hairdressing saloons, and cargo offices. Hence, a transnational journey between Africa and China is not only an opportunity to explore potentials and fulfil aspirations but, perhaps more importantly, a way of ‘becoming something different’ – and in many instances, this becoming requires becoming entrepreneurial (either by developing inherent skills, or by acquiring new ones).

Interestingly, most Africans I met in Guangzhou not only think of themselves as ‘businesspeople’ and ‘entrepreneurs’ (labels that contrast with the possible emplacements or positions they could have occupied had they gone to Europe, for example) – they often see their journeys as a form of ‘investment’. This resonates with Foucault’s ([1978] 2008) understanding of the *homo-æconomicus* as an ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (226) for whom investing (and risking) material and affective resources is seen as a technology to obtain some kind of improvement (230) – not necessarily economic, but also personal and cultural (i.e. experiences, languages, skills and so on). Through the use of this technology, some individuals attempt to break away from (or resist) social, local and national ‘class-like’ constraints. This is exemplified by those instances in which individuals see their transnational journeys or undertakings as a way of ‘jumping the queue’ – namely by obtaining a fortune abroad and/or building themselves a name, so that when they return ‘home’, they can set themselves up on a larger scale than what was previously possible (Saur & Pelican, 2014). Thus, in many cases, transnational journeys can be seen as a transformative process that opens up possibilities for new ways of being and becoming.

Nonetheless, the journeys undertaken by these transnationally entrepreneurial individuals do not necessarily emancipate individuals from the moorings of systems of governmentality or regimes of mobility that regulate and control subjectivity and human transnational movement – as I have highlighted through the use of notions like precarity and emplacement (Chapter 3). The type of transnationally entrepreneurial subjectivity that I am striving to highlight here should not be equated with highly mobile subjects operating efficiently and fluidly (at will) within transnational contexts, as in the case of Ong’s (1992, 1999) ‘emigrant entrepreneurs’. Rather, what the evidence from my fieldwork suggests is that, throughout their transnational journeys, individuals are not only precariously grounded in particular locales/localities, but that their attempts to materialise their aspirations are profoundly curtailed by varying regimes of mobility (Schiller & Salazar, 2013) and the sociomaterial conditions that inform/organise the places through which they journey. Indeed, it is these regimes and
conditions that often contribute to the precarity and immobilities that I discussed in Chapter 3 (and to a lesser extent in Chapter 4). Nevertheless, what I want to accentuate here is that the types of aspirational mobilities and entrepreneurial drives I have discussed do indeed generate genuine opportunities that would otherwise not exist (obviously, each individual exploits these opportunities in their own way). In short, not all material and affective investments pay off as expected, and, in many cases, individuals remain on the move for years (even decades) attempting to ‘make it’, and often with little success in realising their aspirations.

Finally, by bringing to the fore the aspirational mobilities and entrepreneurial drives that I claim characterise African presence in Guangzhou, I have endeavoured to address the longstanding call for a change in perspectives (decentring narratives of victimisation, rupture and displacement) when analysing African mobilities (Van Binsbergen & Meilink, 1978; de Bruijn et al., 2001). Furthermore, I believe that this framing contributes to the development of a new cultural understanding of individuals on the move – an understanding that casts the structural factors that push individuals to move as inextricably intertwined with cultural expectations of self-realisation and transformation through movement (as discussed in Chapter 4). As I have been arguing thus far, the dynamics informing the case study in this research project are best understood if aspirations, desires and entrepreneurial drives are brought into the equation.

3. Migration and the burden of methodological nationalism

3.1. (dis)Locating individuals ‘on the move’ within the logics of Migration Studies

By now, it should be clear that the notions of migrant/immigrant fail to account for the variety of contemporary forms of human (and non-human) mobilities. Traditionally, migration has been narrated as a tale that has a single point of origin and a single destination – a tale in which an individual moves from a ‘poor’ country to a ‘rich’ one, or escapes a ‘dangerous’ country for a ‘safe’ one. Migration has historically been theorised from within the framework of European modernity, and mostly understood as a consequence of the flows and dynamics (i.e. connections and disruptions) resulting from colonialism and (post)coloniality. In this way, human movement has routinely been framed within the binary logics of centre-periphery and
origin-arrival. These logics are best exemplified by: individuals moving from the colony, or former colony (a periphery), to the metropolis (a centre), or to other more affluent colonies of the same former metropolis (i.e. Indians in England or other parts of the Commonwealth); and individuals from the economic or cultural periphery moving to the economic or cultural centre (i.e. Mexicans in the United States, Chinese in Australia, or Southeast Asians in Hong Kong or the Arabian Peninsula). Migration, in these cases, is construed as a move from a less developed country/place to a more developed one – from a periphery to a centre.

I contend, however, that explanations of human movement informed by these logics, and that frame human movement as a response to experiences of hardship or imaginings about finding El Dorado – which inform traditional push-pull theories – are no longer enough (Salazar, 2012). They fail to capture the multi-directionality, and the ‘turbulence’ (Papastergiadis, 2000), that characterise contemporary human movement. The case study of Africans in Guangzhou is a testimonial to how the aforementioned ways of explicating human movement have lost currency. Not only do the territorial, linguistic and cultural discontinuities between Africa and China suggest that human movement between the two is an atypical phenomenon, but China is certainly not a ‘centre’ to which Africa is a ‘periphery’. Moreover, Africans in China do not fit into the logic of the international division of labour (bodies moving from the ‘global south’ to the ‘global north’) so widely alluded to as a description of the mechanisms behind human mobilities. As I have highlighted throughout this dissertation, most Africans in China are not necessarily victims of the push-pull economistic mechanisms that researchers in Migration Studies tend to identify as the crucial determinant in the movement of people across borders. Furthermore, the patterns of (and rationales for) movement that I have described here indicate that individuals on the move are not necessarily seeking to settle in a ‘promised land’.

As Wimmer & Schiller (2003) noted, a great majority of theorisation around migrant subjectivity emerges from paradigmatic centres and case studies (i.e. Western universities and research centres looking at immigration from/to specific places). As such, these theorisations tend to respond to research agendas sanctioned by ‘receiving states’, and are often organised around the notion of settlement; thus producing particular types of knowledge about individuals on the move. As mentioned earlier, these theorisations tend to assume human movement is a consequence of ruptures and displacements (that threaten both sending and receiving societies) and remain
conceptually focused on forms of permanent settlement, thus paying little attention to transient modes of mobility (Collins, 2011). While focusing on settlement may be an accurate way to tackle issues associated with transnational mobilities in Europe and North America, when these theoretical frameworks are expanded, and uncritically imposed upon cases of mobility in different contexts, they become problematic. Indeed, contemporary approaches to human movement emerging from Western paradigmatic centres not only privilege the perspective of settlement, but they are profoundly shaped by methodological nationalism.

Methodological nationalism is the (social) scientific tendency to equate society with the nation-state, and to assume that states are ‘natural’ units of analysis and comparison (Wimmer & Schiller, 2013; Beck, 2003). Forms of analysis based within this methodological orientation tend to confine the study of social, cultural and political processes within the geographic boundaries of a state, and to draw all sorts of ‘natural’ comparisons. Indeed, the epistemic structures of Social Sciences have been historically aligned with the experiences of modern nation-state building (Wimmer & Schiller, 2013). In this way, while different phases of nation-state formation have influenced the ways in which people on the move have been conceptualised, as Wimmer & Schiller indicate, perspectives informed by methodological nationalism have been resilient and remained deeply embedded in the way knowledge about people on the move has been produced in Social Sciences. Methodological nationalism, for instance, has been crucial in establishing the view that each territorially based state has its own stable population, and then contrasting the notion of these stable populations with individuals on the move (portrayed as marginal individuals uprooted from one society and dumped in another) (2013). Unsurprisingly, methodological nationalism has been a determinant in the emergence of modern Migration Studies, and influenced both research design and output in the field.

While I argue that methodological nationalism tends to thwart the understanding of the dynamics informing the multiplicity of contemporary forms of mobility, and I believe that avoiding the use of the nation-state as ‘natural’ unit of analysis results in a deeper understanding of the movement of individuals across space (Kivisto, 2003; Glick Schiller, 1994), methodological nationalism is not only a perspective or an obstacle (as it is sometimes portrayed) that can be easily removed. Indeed, it is a complex historical formation that touches on multiple disciplines and, as such, it is difficult to overcome. Rather than doing away with this methodological
orientation, the task at hand is to identify the extent to which its reductions are helpful (as explanations) and to avoid those that tend to flatten out the diversity of experiences and voices (Wimmer & Schiller, 2013). While it is important to overcome the shortsightedness of methodological nationalism, it is equally important to bear in mind that nation-states are still crucial formations that, while not central, have to be accounted for when discussing transnational mobility. Indeed, as Beck (2003) suggests, the critique of methodological nationalism should not be mistaken for the thesis of the end/decline of the nation-state.

So, while it is possible for frameworks informed by methodological nationalism to accurately explicate certain patterns of movement in particular contexts, it should not be assumed that these frames, as discursive tools, have the power to explain all types of human movement. In the case of Africans in Guangzhou, for instance, a methodological nationalism oriented approach would suggest a focus on how members of a particular nationality organise and negotiate their presence in China. However, as I have shown, in this case study, national distinctions do not have much currency when collectively negotiating everyday life on the ground. Likewise, but from another perspective, the methodological distinction between internal (national) and foreigner ‘migrants’ (see Chapter 3), for instance, portrays the experiences of Africans as unique. However, removing the methodological nationalism lens shows how the history of China is a history of mobilities and that foreign and internal individuals on the move occupy similarly precarious emplacements. Certainly, focusing on the nation-state, and on nationality as an absolute force organising different types of migrant experiences obfuscates the understanding of migrant flows (Papastergiadis, 2000).

Before proceeding, I want to make it clear that I am not trying to make a case against the notion of the ‘migrant’, or against decades of tradition in Migration Studies. I am not claiming that the simultaneous and multiple transnational/translocal attachments and commitments generated by the intensification of interactions in contemporary global human movement mean that we now live in a ‘post-migration world’. However, I do endeavour to highlight the need to problematise what could be termed ‘methodological immigrationism’ – the need to locate all those (predominantly non-‘Western’ subjects) whose life journeys have take them in and out of their countries within the frameworks of (im)migration, assimilation and settlement (a practice rife in traditional streams of Migration Studies). In the context of transnational mobilities, for instance, methodological immigrationism tends to represent non-
‘Western’ subjects as immigrants (associating them with labels such as: ‘from below’ or ‘low-end’ (see Smith & Guarnizo, 1998; and, Mathews et al., 2014)) while characterising ‘Western’ subjects as expats or transnationals. In short, should we keep talking about ‘immigrants’ considering there is little evidence to suggest that ‘settlement’ (arrival) is still a central feature in geographies of transnational mobility, as Papastergiadis (2000) contends? A critique of methodological immigrationism would entail a redefinition of what is an ‘(im)migrant’ (i.e. what are the relationships of power embedded in the discursive production of this label?), and to what extent is this notion still valid to denominate all those on the move. To assume that most Africans in Guangzhou (or China), for instance, are (or desire to become) ‘immigrants’ is not only a point of resentment amongst some Africans living in Guangzhou, but, more importantly, a legacy of sedentaristic, methodological approaches that assume settlement is normal, but distance, change, instability and placelessness are abnormal (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 208). In a way, this legacy evinces how the experiences of ‘others’ (non-‘Western’ subjects) have long posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition (Mbembe, 2001).

Finally, not only are new routes being established, but the multiplicity of contexts through which individuals now journey has resulted in the emergence of new modalities of movement. These new modalities and their interplay with diverse contexts (beyond the Euro-American imaginary) compel researchers to think of creative ways to generate new (situated, localised and historically specific) theoretical frameworks to more accurately explain mobility from outside the theoretical heartland of the paradigmatic, immigrant receiving centres (Collins, 2011).

4. Grounding the transnational: multiple forms of mobility and mobility of forms

4.1. Transnationalism and the condition of transnationality

Transnationalism has always been associated with individuals on the move. The term was first used in the early 1900s to resist rationalistic models within classical frameworks of international migration and highlight the existence of cultural ties between migrants and their home countries (Quayson & Daswani, 2013: 12). Usage of the term then disappeared for several decades, before re-emerging in the early 1990s as a reaction to and critique of some of the practices in Migration Studies scholarship.
highlighted in the previous section – in particular the foci on settlement and assimilation. Seminal work, in what later came to be known as the field of ‘transnational migration’, stated that a new type of migrant experience was emerging – one in which the lives of migrants were not sharply segmented between host and home societies (Basch et al., 1994: 5). This early research suggested that migrants were forging and sustaining ‘multi-stranded’ social relations and simultaneously linking societies of origin and settlement – it was this process that was termed ‘transnationalism’ and a ‘transnational analytical framework’ emerged soon after. Crucially for the understanding of transnationalism, Basch et al. (1994) pointed out the need to distinguish transnationalism as a sociocultural phenomenon (sets of practices and processes) and transnationalism as an analytical framework (or a scholarly research agenda). As a process, ‘migrant transnationalism’ as Vertovec (2009) calls it, is an evolving and multidimensional set of assemblages comprised of the interactions between localised practices, individual and collective strategies, and global flows of human and non-human things. As an analytical framework, transnationalism was intended as a critical tool to understand the lived experiences of those whose actions and behaviours challenged previous confluences of geography, space and social identity (Basch et al., 1994: 8). Indeed, the challenges posed by this analytical framework to previous ways of thinking about individuals on the move contributed greatly to the understanding of different forms of mobility, so it is no coincidence that a huge body of literature about transnational migration (from several disciplines in Social Sciences and Humanities) has been built on top of Basch et al.’s arguments.

4.2. The paradigm of transnational migration

Nonetheless, the transnational analytical framework has struggled to disassociate itself from some problematic assumptions underlying the very types of knowledge production it was criticising. Early work on transnational migration, for instance, was overwhelmingly concerned with migration between the United States (construed as a core/centre) and places like Mexico and the Caribbean (peripheries). As Featherstone (2007: 384) indicates, initial investigations mainly focused on ‘receiving’ countries, and, much like previous Migration Studies research, were unable to go beyond the research agendas that funded them and that required construing people moving as immigrants (or, candidates for settlement). Over the last two decades, Migration Studies has morphed into Transnational Studies and brought many of the distortions Migration
Studies scholars had been reproducing for decades into the ‘transnational analytical framework’. Examples of these are the unwillingness or incapacity to cast aside the distortions created by the ‘world systems’ perspective and the assumption that what they now call ‘transmigration’ only occurs in a south to north direction. Furthermore, this transnational perspective insists on privileging the role of the state as a key point of reference and as an absolute force in regulating different types of migrant experiences. Within this logic, activities undertaken by individuals on the move are assumed to be evidence of how states are connecting – although, many of these activities occur beyond the reach of the state. By remaining within this perspective, a great deal of theorisation about individuals on the move has failed to account for the types of movement that do not fit into linear or circulatory migration models. In short, transnational studies are still mired by the binary distinction of sending and receiving states; and contemporary mainstream transnational perspectives on human movement have not been able to avoid the dichotomies and assumptions resulting from decades of methodological nationalism and methodological migrationism.

Contemporary notions of transnationalism go beyond the exclusive movement of people and goods across borders, and they do not have one singular common origin. Theorists in an array of fields have, at overlapping times, grappled with the issues surrounding the magnitude of the changes in contemporary social, cultural and economic processes. Two main (and somehow convergent) perspectives emerged almost simultaneously. On the one hand, the abovementioned scholars led by Nina Glick Schiller (Basch et al., 1994), alongside Portes (1996), Rouse (1992), and Smith & Guarnizo (1998), structured the field of transnational migration. On the other hand, Cultural Studies and Anthropology scholars such as Bhabha (1990), Hannerz (1996), Appadurai (1990, 1996) and Aihwa Ong (1999), provided alternative visions of transnationality by theorising transnational cultural flows, hybrid subjectivities, and entrepreneurship. These interventions further highlighted the notion that transnationalism, either conceptualised as a sociocultural phenomenon or as a perspective, is constituted by complex and multilayered sets of processes. Moreover, the convergence of these two main perspectives has highlighted the increasingly difficult task of distinguishing between human and non-human forms of transnational movement. Aihwa Ong (1999) made this clear when she referred to transnationality as a condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space. Indeed, Ong’s theorisation attempted to close the gap between the political economy approaches in
Migration Studies and the more anthropological perspectives on transnationality. In this way, she contributed to the understanding of the regimes of truth and power that govern transnationality.

4.3. *A paradigm versus a paradigm?: Mobility and methodological nationalism*

It is mobility – and, in particular, relational approaches to mobility – as I have been arguing, that best describe the complexities of contemporary human behaviour under conditions of transnationality. Unsurprisingly, as humans and things have become more mobile during the last decade, some fields within the Social Sciences and Humanities have made a ‘mobility turn’ (Urry, 2000; Cresswell, 2006). Yet, while mobility has brought the multiplicity and diversity of things moving to the fore, and highlighted the importance to differentiate between types of movement, it has also been criticised for overemphasising the fluidity of ideas, capital, goods and people, rather than painstakingly showing ‘the concrete consequences that such fluidity carries for different people in different positions and localities’ (Kalir, 2012: 313). Moreover, as Kalir suggests, while privileging the analysis of all sorts of ‘people on the move’, the gaze of researchers has remained largely stagnant. At the root of this stagnation, Kalir argues, lies a pervasive methodological nationalism that still shapes research (2012: 312).

4.4. *Forms of mobility | Mobility of forms*

My approach to transnationality, however, is not one that emphasises fluidity. Indeed, my efforts to ground different forms of mobility and give prominence to the lived experiences of those who practice mobility at different paces, grades, and positions should be clear by now. As such, my approach to the analysis of transnationality is one that is grounded in the intertwining of mobility and emplacement (Collins, 2011). I attempt to bring together the movement of people, the things they do (imagine and aspire for), and the localised implications of those actions. To clarify, my approach to transnationality relies on the interplay between urban spatialities, mobilities and materialities – an approach that has the intention to better understand how the ‘transnational condition’ affects the lived experiences of individuals on the move (in terms of knowing, being and becoming).

As I highlighted earlier, the constellation of forms of mobility converging in Guangzhou can be collectively conceptualised as components of a transnational
‘entrepreneurial form’. As components of this mobile form, however, these multiple forms of mobility do not lose their distinctiveness (they can be traced to different origins and have their own characteristics), and they remain inherently independent. However, when brought together, they give rise to the materialisation of a visible sociocultural formation – what I have discursively presented as ‘African presence’ in the city. Put another way, this entrepreneurial form is a collage of multiple forms of mobility that organise and articulate mobile forms as they converge. The entrepreneurial form in Guangzhou, for example, encapsulates several other forms and formations best exemplified by micro-communities, trading associations, artistic scenes, and religious congregations (among other practices) that are (re)produced when individuals travel.

The forms of mobility constituting the mobile form are transnational, not only because they imply the border crossing of thousands of individuals or have the potential to transform the nation-state or national identities, but because they emerge from longstanding historical flows that may trans-cend nation-state centred histories, divisions and identities. Likewise, mobile forms are transnational not only because they move in relatively unruly ways across nation-states, but because the ideas, customs, desires, passions and aspirations fuelling the entrepreneurial drives that constitute the form are not nationally based/produced. Indeed, these transnational mobile forms are unruly, chaotic and self-organising forms that, while travelling through space and time, are grounded and embedded in (and through) localities and locales. So, while mobile forms such as the entrepreneurial form can be conceptualised as buoyant assemblages of relationships, they are also place-based (socially embedded), but not place-bound (territorially embedded). As such, they can be grasped from particular sites of social interaction (or platforms) and on different scales. Indeed, not only the multiple forms of mobility converging in Guangzhou require a conceptualisation through emplacement to be better understood, but also the mobility of forms requires emplacement, or grounding.

Different voices from within the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences have called for analyses of transnationality to be grounded in the everyday experiences of those who move (physically and metaphorically) in transnational ways. Contrary to the common assumption that the only way to study transnationality is to follow people, money and things through routes connecting locales in multiple countries, I contend that transnational processes can also be examined from a ‘local’ multi-scalar
perspective. Indeed, transnationality entails much more than only the movement between countries, and as such it can be analysed through a grounded/emplaced perspective. I found my grounding in what I conceptualise as the ‘discursive sites of the transnational’ – sites which are spaces, practices, things and aspirations where the multiple forms of mobility and the mobile forms I described above converge with pre-existing formations. I locate these sites of the transnational in neighbourhoods (spatialities); things and practices (materialities); grassroots forms of organisation; and ‘individual’ aspirations.

At the spatial level (by spatialities, I mean the multiple relations involved in the production of space), I located transnationality at two levels: firstly, in the longstanding economic flows that, throughout the last three or four decades, functioned as drivers of the necessary urban and political transformations that resulted in Guangzhou becoming a site of heightened mobilities. And secondly, in the contemporary interactions at the urban level between multiple (human and non-human) actors: individuals, organisations, institutions and so on. Materialities and spatialities are certainly difficult to analytically separate; and in urban spaces, they are often intricately enmeshed. However, I contend that the emergence of certain things and practices (that I analysed in Chapter 2) is informed by transnational materialities – the relationships and histories that expand (and can be traced) in transnational ways. The grassroots forms of organisation and placemaking processes conducted by individuals and collectives in Guangzhou are great platforms from which to analyse how transnational movement requires (and generates) diverse forms of organisation. Finally, focusing on aspirations provides a window to the drives, desires and imaginations of individuals, and how they negotiate these against the regimes of mobility that regulate during their transnational journeys.

I contend that, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, these sites offer possibilities to critically observe and analyse how the complex material, political, affective and emotional geographies of transnationality unfold and expand. Moreover, I argue that these sites exemplify how situated frames beyond the centrality of the nation-state can be used to understand transnational processes. These sites can also help make sense of configurations of belonging, identity and spatial practices during transnational journeys. Grounding transnationality generally means expropriating it from the sphere of the ‘global ecumene’ and bringing it down not only to the levels of the region, city, locality and neighbourhood, but to the body and the passions, drives,
desires and aspirations contained within it. Certain transnational connections are scattered and embedded in a plethora of activities and practices that usually go unnoticed when the nation-state is at the centre of the analysis. In this vein, I contend that ‘transnationality’ is a central dynamic to the forms of mobility and mobility of forms that organise African presence in Guangzhou. My intention throughout this dissertation has been to locate the sites where those scatterings and embeddings occur, and to analyse how the condition of transnationality operates at several dimensions and scales of this presence, and ultimately in the lived experiences of Africans on the move in China.
NOTES

1 A mistaken assumption, as Africans had demonstrated in the streets of Beijing in 1986 (Snow, 1988) and in Nanjing in 1988-89 (Sullivan, 1994).
2 Citizens of the ROK, the U.S., Canada, Russia and Japan were the top five nationalities involved in "three illegal" cases in 2011, according to the exit-entry administration of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau. More than 20,000 "three illegal" foreigners were dealt with nationwide in 2011, according to Yang Huanning, vice-minister of public security (China.org.cn, 2013).
4 Mostly phones, motorcycles, garments, steel products and machinery carried out predominantly by individual exporters.
5 I resided in Guangzhou for a total of 8 months in three legs, and I undertook several other short visits to the city throughout these three years. Visits usually lasted from 3 days to one week.
6 While there is a significant presence of black Arabic speakers in the Maghreb countries, not many of these individuals are found in Guangzhou.
7 Overstaying a visa is considered a criminal offence in China. The most recent draft of the reform to the People’s Republic of China Exit-Entry Administration Law states harsher penalties for overstayers (fines and detention); the possibility of deportation; and bans from re-entering the country for 1, 5, or 10 years. (China Law for Expats, 2013; China Law & Practice, 2013).
8 I lived in Beijing for four years from 2006 to 2009 and travelled extensively throughout the country. After a short break in Australia, I came to Hong Kong in 2011.
9 This ‘mega-city’ includes Foshan, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Zhuhai, Shenzhen and even Macau and Hong Kong.
10 Foreigners could stay for longer in the country but they were usually contained in approved housing complexes.
11 Prior to this time, foreigners in the country were only allowed to live in approved residences.
12 It is a widespread practice in China that all foreigners register their places of abode. Generally, individuals renting houses are supposed to go to the police station within 24 to 48 hours after they have finalized their contracts. In the case individuals lodging in hotels, the responsibility for filling in the registration form lies on the hotel administration. The failure to register could potentially generate administrative penalties. The requirement to carry passports at all times is something that in all my years living in China I have only seen in Guangzhou.
13 Huaisheng Mosque is said to have a history of 1300 years making it one of the oldest mosques in the world and a clear indicator of a long history of Guangzhou as a centre of trade and exchange with the Middle East (Steinhardt, 2008).
14 As the changes in the unofficial names of the building suggest, African arrival apparently displaced Middle Eastern traders from the building and surrounding spaces. People working in the area report that prior to 2004, most traders in the Dengfeng-Xiaobei were ‘Arabs’. This coincides with academic reports suggesting that African traders, that had traditionally traveled to place like Dubai to acquire the goods that Middle Eastern middlemen had bought in China, finally made the move to southern China (see Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009).
15 That many people consider as China’s ‘Immigration Department’.
16 On one occasion, as I was discussing something with Frank, an Angolan man, Dimitri, another Angolan I had previously met, arrived to the restaurant where we were eating. As I introduced them, Frank spoke to Dimitri in Portuguese. With a hint of embarrassment, Dimitri confessed that he was Congolese but that in China he passed as an Angolan, as he had entered the country with an Angolan passport he had acquired illegally. Another example of the difficulty of defining nationalities is that of Hazard, a young Nigerian that had been in China twice before with a Nigerian passport. This time around, he came to China with a Sierra Leonean passport, as his mother is from Sierra Leone. A couple of weeks before I met him, he flew from Lagos to Freetown, got a passport, had his Chinese visa stamped, and set out for Guangzhou. He reported that entering China with a Sierra Leone passport was easier than with a Nigerian passport. A small number of Africans enter China with European or, to a lesser extent, North American passports.
17 To actually locate the figures of these individuals on the move is quite a difficult task. China has a transprovincial floating population of more than 200 million people (Li & Wu, 2014: 121).
Guangdong province, according to Fan (2002: 111), the 1997 Temporary Population Survey reported a population of some 10.7 million migrants. However, this survey failed to estimate all those who did not register with local authorities. While the exact figure of these transprovincial migrants in Guangzhou is difficult to establish, according to the last national census (in 2010) they reached the 4.7 million mark (Li & Wu, 2014: 128). This massive influx of people on the move has historically complicated the demographics and the urban geographies of the PRD.

18 Since the decentralisation of economic and financial administration and decision-making in the 1980s, the conflict of interest relating to land between cities and urban villages has intensified (Lin, 2011: 3589).

19 Historically, Dengfeng/Xiaobei have been associated with ‘dangerous’ and marginal individuals. Pang & Yuan (2013) recover part of this association from an old Guangzhou ballad: 东山少爷，西关小姐，小北烂仔，河南地痞 (‘wealthy young masters live in Dongshan, young ladies in Xiguan, hooligans/have-nots in Xiaobei, and gangsters in Henan’).

20 In those days, the different networks that traded in both areas were scarcely interconnected. Hence, traders in Tianxiu knew that there were Nigerians in Guangyuan West Road but they seldom interacted. In fact, in terms of connections between Africans in the city, both areas were relatively isolated from each other.

21 Here I propose to use the notion of ‘subeconomies’ to refer to subordinate economies dependent on the interactions of wider economies. On a daily basis, these smaller economies weave supply and service networks that cater to the needs of those involved in the activities in the area. Many of these subeconomies, tend to share and struggle over marginal spaces – pushed there by a dislocation between local legislation and practices on the ground. In other words, some of these subeconomic practices are more ‘informal’ than others and some venture into the realm of ‘illegal’.

22 A type of para-police renowned in China for their thuggish practices.

23 An electronic sign in the lobby of the hotel displays the following message in English (verbatim): “Do’s and Don’t’s for foreign friends: 1. Do not go to the unfamiliar places with the female strangers in order to avoid from being stolen or robbed during the sexual lure. Prostitution and whoring are illegal in China. 2. Don’t change money with the stranger on the road in order to avoid from being changed false. It is illegal to change money privately. All the aliens who need to change money must go to the bank to manage. 3. It is illegal to addiction, traffic in drugs, make drugs, conceal drugs. The public security department will fight the behaviour of addiction; traffic in drugs; concealing drugs strongly. And the aforementioned behaviour will be punished immediately. 4. It is illegal to defraud or cheat others. The aliens must get the legal trade qualification and do business in the principle of sincere. The aliens who without legal status or legal trade qualification and cheat others in trade taking the advantage of other people’s trust will be punished by the law strictly. Dengfeng police station.”

24 This is an exclusively Hui microindustry. According to my contacts in exchange stalls around the village, all exchangers in the area respond to the same and only ‘boss’, who organises and controls the whole exchange economy from his office outside the village. These exchange activities started after the intensification of foreign presence in the area, in 2006. While there are some reports of fake money, and the police cautions against exchanging money informally, most transactions use real money. It is indeed easier and faster to exchange money in the street than in banks, where foreigners are normally barred from exchanging.

25 Part of the documentary is available at: http://youtu.be/2KCBcjlFJ9M

26 This was a questions that I repeatedly asked in my interviews: Do you believe that there is an ‘African community’ in Guangzhou? I wanted to see what people felt/thought. Many responses were positive, but they were generally nuanced by locating the ‘community’ within national or regional African identity registers.

27 An underlying assumption in this chapter is that the changing and evolving materialities in and around Dengfeng, Xiaobei and Guangyuan West Road (i.e. the appearance of new objects, practices and subjects, and the materialisation of multiethic spaces) are not only a consequence of African presence but an emergent property of the assemblage enabled by the connections and interactions between several diverse groups or communities of Han, Angolans, Hui, Malians, Uyghurs, Turks, Arabs and Nigerians, amongst others, and their cultural, economic and linguistic logics, habits, practices and traditions.

28 For years, Africans in Guangzhou complained about the lack of African foods and food products.

29 Since 2013, the Uyghur population in Dengfeng has grown, and there has been a resurgence of grilled lamb skewers.

30 China is the world’s largest wig, toupee and hair-exporting power (Berry, 2008).

31 In the late 1990s, Chinese hair, along with Indian, Korean and Indonesian hair (much of which passed through Guangzhou), was consumed across Europe (Jones, 2001).
Guangzhou’s International Football League is a local amateur league in which foreign and Chinese teams play. While most of the players in this league are amateurs, a fraction of them are former (or failed) professionals (from diverse countries), who are looking for soccer related and/or business opportunities in China. For the last two seasons, Owners F.C. has not enrolled in the league as they have not been able to collect the necessary funds to register.

As noted in the introduction, the term ‘mobility’ is preferred above migration. I believe that the concept of migration fails to account for the complexities of the geographical mobilities involved in this case study. Moreover, following de Bruijn et al. (2001), I contend that as mobility is an umbrella term encapsulating a plethora of types of movement (i.e. travel, exploration, migration, tourism, nomadism, pilgrimage and trade), it is more accurate to talk about ‘African mobilities’ in China, rather than ‘African migration’ to China.

This six-months at a time permit was in existence prior to the significant Exit-Entry administration reforms that were put in place in late 2013.

A focus on transiency aids in mitigating the anxiety to determine/fixate numbers and nationalities of such a mobile, dynamic and diverse population. Recent scholarship has also highlighted, in different terms, transient and recurring dynamics (see Li et al, 2012, ‘restructuring ethnic enclave’; and Bredeloup, 2012, ‘recurrent commercial form’).

Once in China, Nigerians, along with several other African nationalities, find it relatively difficult to exit the country. Unlike other foreigners, they are not allowed to do ‘visa runs’ to places like Hong Kong and Macau.

Tony estimates that there are around 700 or 800 Nigerians with valid long-term residence permits in the city. These permits are usually obtained either through marriage to a Chinese or as a consequence of having considerable commercial investments.

In 2012, a reform to the Entry-Exit Administration Law was passed. However, no clear framework for ‘immigrant’ settlement was indicated (China Law & Practice, 2012). Hence, most foreign emplacements in the country remain transient emplacements. The lack of a comprehensive reform that would incorporate immigrant subjectivities is not surprising at all. Indeed, I claim that the hopes of many foreigners are predicated on a translation ‘problem’. China’s policy for regulating the influx of foreigners – the ‘Entry-Exit Administration Law’ (中华人民共和国出境入境管理法) – is often mistranslated as the ‘Immigration Administration Law’. In the very name of the law, the assumption is made that those foreigners who enter China will, at certain point in time, leave (exit) the country.

After the 2012 demonstration, several black anti-riot police vans bearing the English acronym ‘SWAT’ remained in the area for several weeks.

In 2009, African community leaders and the representatives of the local Public Security Bureau signed what was informally known as ‘amnesty agreements’. These agreements were meant to be applicable to every African overstayer who voluntarily surrendered to the police. Coloma (2010) reported that by mid-2010, some 400 Nigerian overstayers had taken advantage of the agreement and left the country.

African students demonstrated in the streets of Beijing in mid-1986 against what they saw as an ‘oppressive environment’ and ‘unfriendly people’ (Snow, 1989).

Before trading in Guangzhou, Emma traded from posts in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

The Nigerian Embassy estimates that during the last decade around 400 Nigerians have been incarcerated in China (Usman 2013). The primary reasons are drug-related offences and fraud (rather than residing illegally in the country).

Methodological nationalism is the practice of systematically using the nation-state as the cornerstone of social science analysis (see Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003; and Beck 2003).

Hukou is the prevailing system of household registration in China. This system was designed to ground individuals to the locales where they were presumed to belong, thus making it difficult for individuals to migrate to other parts of the country at will. Not having a hukou from a particular place complicates the access to services and benefits in that locale (i.e. health, education, welfare).

It must be noted that in the areas where Africans and ‘Chinese’ interact, Africans are not the only ones being stopped for police checks. Police or the Chengguan constantly harass many internal migrants as well, Uyghurs in particular. Other foreigners, such as South Asians and Middle Easterners, are also subject to police checks, although to a lesser extent.

It is important to note that although ‘internal’ and ‘foreign’ migrants, traders, and/or entrepreneurs share certain degrees of precarity, transiency and liminality, their journeys and experiences are generally regimented by multiple and distinct systems of control and surveillance. In short, while I am not arguing that Africans in the city do not suffer some particular forms of discrimination, my intention is to highlight that the ‘discrimination’ issue is more complex than is often assumed.

Prior to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the Chinese government started to gradually tighten visa controls. Since 2013, most foreigners have been required to exit the country to apply for new visas;
However, nationals of many African countries have increasingly been barred from applying for visas in secondary countries like Malaysia and Thailand or from making ‘visa-runs’ to places like Hong Kong or Macau, and in many cases, are only allowed to apply from their home countries. Lan (2014: 3) argues that these measures are part of a wider anti-immigrant/anti-African campaign.

Many individuals who obtain Chinese visas with relative ease in their countries find it quite difficult to extend their travel documents once in China. The impossibility of easily extending a visa heightens the risk of overstaying and/or being stranded in the PRC – a relatively common occurrence amongst young West Africans (Nigerians and Cameroonian, in particular). Indeed, there is a discrepancy between Beijing’s granting of visas for the sake of good relations with African states, and the impact of African presence at the local level in Guangzhou (Lan, 2014: 2).

Pinyin is a phonetic system for Romanising the Mandarin pronunciations of Chinese characters.

During the course of my fieldwork, I met many people in Guangzhou from several countries. However, my relationship with Dibaocha gradually evolved to be one of the most significant. We spent a lot of time together and he opened up to me in several ways – not all of them depicted in this chapter. Dibaocha spoke openly and sincerely about the entanglement in which he lives and invited me in to many areas of his life. I must admit that I was struck by his incredible resilience and by what appears to be a relentless drive to ‘make things happen’. With him, I learnt about the meaning of something he calls ‘never-give-up-ness’: or the ‘problem’ of not being able to give up. At the time of writing, we still communicate several times a week through social media, as I do with a few other contacts. Working with Dibaocha also showed me a different side to research: namely, that in which, as the relationship deepens, you are required to do things that you would normally only do for your friends.

During my fieldwork, I met and interacted with several journalists and documentary makers that were working around Africans in the city. As I shared contacts and information with them, they shared their contacts in return. This exchange between academics and media people is representative of the ways in which knowledge about Africans in the city has been produced.

The Great Firewall of China, also known as the Golden Shield Project, is the name given to the vast and sophisticated surveillance architecture that the Chinese Ministry of Public Security has set up to control and police the Internet (Mackinnon, 2011).

VPNs are private networks (usually fee-paying services) that provide access to remote servers outside China. These devices facilitate the circumvention of blockages and grant access to Facebook, Youtube and other social networks that are blocked by the country’s servers. Following Piranty’s advice, I acquired a VPN which became crucial for contacting and communicating with musicians and many others.

Here I use the term ‘musicians’ in a broad way, to encapsulate singers, live performers, DJs and MCs.

Hao Ge (郝歌 – Uwechue Emmanuel) is a Nigerian born singer who rose to fame after his participation in the 2007 Lunar New Year Gala, a popular show seen by hundreds of millions of people on the eve of Chinese New Year. Emmanuel is one of the most notable foreign singers in Chinese mediascapes (Wang, 2011).

It must be noted that while Dibaocha is indeed a prominent figure in Guangzhou’s Sino-African nightscapes, he is not the only prominent musician in the city. There are several other individuals that organise their activities away from Dibaocha’s endeavours. However, according to many of the musicians in contact with Dibaocha, he is, indeed, one of the most frequent event organisers in the city.

While some of the men I met through Dibaocha were serious businesspeople, I also met people like Abner, who told me that he had come to China looking to develop a documentary about Israel’s lost tribe in Nigeria: the Igbo Jews. According to Abner, he had the money to produce it, but he needed a director. He also told me that he was an Israeli national and that had many investments in Tel-Aviv.

Later, Dibaocha dismissed Abner’s story as a hoax he repeatedly used.

‘Spraying’ is a traditional practice in Nigeria, and other West African countries, in which audience members simultaneously offer money to the performer (by sticking notes on the forehead of the artist) while they receive recognition for doing so (Rock, paper, scissors, 2011).

Dibaocha’s experience with his Chinese family resonated with comments that I heard from many Africans who have had experiences in less ‘cosmopolitan’ urban spaces in the country. While most of them were at some point asked about the colour of their skin, many of them have anecdotes of being treated (exoticised) as music and/or basketball stars, when they were not.

In a way, this quest for cultural and social improvement is similar to what Benson & O’Reilly (2009) call ‘lifestyle migration’.

The meanings, motivations and aspirations that lead Africans in Guangzhou into movement and travel cannot be cast in a discourse of rupture. A great number of the individuals I met perceive their journeys as forms of continuity.
As more and more people explore transnational ways of living, and concentrate in certain places along their journeys, the networks they establish tend to lower the risks and costs for others to follow – thus enabling broader fragments of the African population to set on the transnational move and to explore diverse locations (Massey et al., 1998).

Time and again I have been asked about what kind of low-paid labour are Africans undertaking in China. There seems to be a lingering assumption about Africans attempting to become blue-collar or farm workers. In a conference in 2013, a Korean academic of migration was adamant in suggesting that Africans were working in the fields of China, growing food, and displacing Chinese from low-paid jobs. This is far from reality. In all my years in China, I have never meet one single African looking for a job growing vegetables. Actually, one of my Sudanese contacts here once told me: ‘the future is in the Chinese economy, we Africans all come to do business here, and we bring a lot of money and expertise in trading. Americans my age, on the other hand, come to China to teach English to children. Who do you think will profit more from China’s rise?’

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## Appendix

### Interviews

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Type of communication</th>
<th>Remark</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1. Mrs. Deng</td>
<td>Guangdong Province</td>
<td>15-09-2012</td>
<td>Recorded interview; Personal communications</td>
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<td>2. Tony Ekai</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>3-11-2012; 14-09-2013</td>
<td>Recorded interview; Personal communications</td>
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<td>3. Chuck C.</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>4-11-2012</td>
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<td>4. Dibaocha</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
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<td>5. Hugo</td>
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<td>7. Biafra</td>
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**Informal conversations**

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* Plus several informal long conversations  
** Two or more non-recorded conversations through different means