

Africans and Other Foreigners  
in South China's  
Global Marketplace

The World in  
**GUANGZHOU**

Gordon Mathews with  
Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang

The University of Chicago Press  
Chicago and London

## CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments* vii

### **1 Introduction** 1

What This Book Is About  
Impressions of Guangzhou  
A Brief History of Foreigners in Guangzhou  
Foreign Places in Guangzhou  
How This Book's Research Was Done

### **2 Foreigners in Guangzhou** 29

"The Chinese Dream": Stories of Eight Foreigners  
Rich Foreigner, Poor Foreigner  
Race and Money  
Foreign Communities: Japanese and Nigerians  
The Power of Rumor  
Foreigners' Attitudes toward China and Chinese

### **3 African-Chinese Relations** 55

African Traders in Guangzhou: An Overview  
Business Deception and Cheating  
Quarrels between Africans and Chinese  
Chinese Views of Africans  
African Views of Chinese

- 4 Low-End Globalization 81**  
Low-End Globalization/High-End Globalization  
How Low-End Globalization Works: Sourcing, Money, Copies, and Customs  
Accounts of Low-End Globalization  
Low-End Globalization's Circuits
- 5 Legal-Illegal in Guangzhou 115**  
Two Paths, Legal and Illegal  
Visa and Passport Worries, Jail, and Deportation  
Police  
Accounts of Overstayers and Friends
- 6 Logistics Agents, Middlemen, and Cultural Brokers 139**  
Logistics Agents  
Middlemen  
Cultural Brokers  
Accounts of Logistics Agents, Middlemen, and Cultural Brokers
- 7 Religion in a Foreign World 165**  
"I Believe in God but Chinese Believe in Gold"  
Islam in Comparison to Christianity  
Christian Churches  
Accounts of Religious Seekers  
Religion: Implications
- 8 Romance, Love, Marriage, and Families: A Chinese Barack Obama? 195**  
"African Chinese"  
The Travails of Chinese-African Romantic Relationships  
Children  
Accounts of Marriages  
Conclusion: The Larger Significance of Africans in China
- Notes 221*  
*References 231*  
*Index 241*

## Introduction

# ONE

### What This Book Is About

There are certain cities in certain eras that stand out as magnets for those across the globe who have dreams. New York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was such a place, with immigrants at Ellis Island awaiting their chance to pursue the American dream in a new world far from the European villages and slums into which many of them were born. Today, one such place is Guangzhou, the urban center of the world's manufacturing powerhouse, the Pearl River Delta. Guangzhou today is a city that for its global opportunities attracts foreigners the world over.

Guangzhou has a large population of foreigners, but how many is unclear. China as a whole had some 594,000 immigrants living in the country in 2010, according to the national census,<sup>1</sup> less than 1 of every 2,000 people in the country. Guangzhou numbers are all over the map. One recent report estimates that from January to August 2014, Guangzhou, a city of some 13–14 million people, hosted 3.05 million inbound or outbound foreigners, with 86,000 foreigners having registered residence in the city.<sup>2</sup> Another website estimates that about 500,000 foreigners are in Guangzhou at any given time.<sup>3</sup> There are 34,000 permanent resident foreigners, according to one

website,<sup>4</sup> 47,000 according to another,<sup>5</sup> and 120,000, according to a third.<sup>6</sup> Exact figures are impossible to ascertain, both because official figures are secret or unknown and also because many foreigners in Guangzhou are illegal residents of the city. It's safe to say only that while Guangzhou has a large number of foreigners, whether legal or illegal, counted or uncounted, it still is a very tiny number within a huge Chinese population.

These foreigners are a wide range of people, from Japanese and European corporate employees to traders from all over the world exporting Chinese goods to their home countries and regions. Guangzhou is a major center for the purchase of cheap knockoff goods exported to South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and particularly the Middle East and Africa. The developing world entrepreneurs of Guangzhou, especially the Africans who make up their largest number, play an essential role in making this trade possible.

In this book, after looking at the range of foreigners in Guangzhou, I explore the lives and trade of African entrepreneurs in Guangzhou. In 2013–2014, I stayed in Guangzhou's Xiaobei area, the working center and leisure haunt of much of its African and Arab population. I considered these entrepreneurs through the lens of “low-end globalization”<sup>7</sup>—not the globalization of multinational corporations with all their lawyers and advertising budgets, but of traders sending relatively small amounts of goods under the radar of the law, bribing customs agents on different continents, and getting these goods back home to stalls and street vendors. This is globalization as experienced by the majority of the world's people. Guangzhou today may be the best place in the world to investigate low-end globalization because it is the metropolitan hub of Guangdong Province and the Pearl River Delta, China's industrial heartland, and is the central metropolis in the world where the goods of low-end globalization are bought and sold.

But how can low-end globalization effectively work in Guangzhou? It doesn't operate through contracts and laws, but rather on the basis of reputation and interpersonal trust. How can this be maintained cross-culturally, with people whom you don't know? To paraphrase a Somali trader, how can you trust someone who doesn't speak your language and knows only a few words of English, who doesn't share your religion, or have any religion, and who drinks and smokes as you do not? Beyond this, how does low-end globalization work within China today, a state moving by fits and starts from societies like Kenya and Nigeria in their laxity toward laws to societies like those of Western Europe, Japan, and the United States? What is the ultimate significance of low-end globalization as practiced in Guangzhou today?

This leads to a second set of questions. The Africans profiled in this book do not merely trade in Guangzhou; they live there as well, most for weeks or months, but some for years, and a few for a decade or more. Some Africans stay, legally or illegally, marrying Chinese and having families. What will happen to them in the future? China in the past sixty years has been largely monoethnic and monocultural;\* but now, in its southern city of Guangzhou, it is international and multicultural. What does this mean for the long term? Might China, in fifty or a hundred years, become a truly multiethnic, multicultural society? Might we see, generations hence, China's own version of Barack Obama?

This book doesn't explore these questions for a while. In this introduction, after a brief glimpse at Guangzhou at present and in history, I depict some of the foreign neighborhoods of the city, and discuss how this book's research was conducted. In the book's second chapter, I provide portraits of a number of foreigners who have settled for the time being in Guangzhou and consider the interplay of "race," nationality, and money in their lives. I then consider, in the third chapter, African-Chinese relations in Guangzhou, focusing on Africans not only because they are a large foreign presence, but also because sub-Saharan Africans, due to their skin color, may represent the quintessence of foreignness to many Chinese. In chapter 4 I examine low-end globalization, the trade engaged in between China and the developing world, and analyze how this is practiced between the African and Arab traders in south China and their Chinese suppliers. In chapter 5 I consider overstayers, those who live illegally in Guangzhou: how do they survive and pursue profits while staying a step ahead of police? In chapter 6, I look at the role of middlemen, particularly the African logistics agents who serve as cultural ambassadors between China and their ethnic and national compatriots. In chapter 7 I examine the powerful role of religion in these traders' lives, whether Islam or Christianity, and the moral anchor that religious belief provides them in an uncertain foreign world. And finally, in chapter 8 I look at romance and relationships between Chinese and Africans, to ask, will China ever become truly multicultural? Or will the African and global presence in Guangzhou soon enough fade away?

I'm an anthropologist, but I did not write this book in the way that most anthropology books today are written. In earlier eras, anthropologists such as

\*China has fifty-six minority nationalities recognized by the government, making up some 8 percent of the population. However, China remains overwhelmingly shaped by its 92 percent Han Chinese population, and so it seems legitimate to refer to China as monoethnic and monocultural.

Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead wrote books for a public audience; today almost all anthropologists, with a few notable exceptions, write for one another, in a specialized, scholarly form. While the topics their books deal with may be of wide interest, the way they are written makes them typically all but unreadable to those beyond a small group of professional anthropologists and their students. I believe that this is a great loss—after all, if engineers or surgeons write in specialized language, their findings can still help the world through the buildings they construct and the operations they perform; but if anthropologists write in specialized language, they may only be ignored. I have deliberately kept academic argumentation and citation to a minimum in this book, generally confining it to endnotes (which, if you are so inclined, I hope that you will peruse at length), and have placed the words of the different traders and entrepreneurs we spoke with at this book's front and center. I do offer my own interpretations; but the words of the people that Lin Dan, Yang Yang, and I interviewed are most important, for they are from a world that almost all readers will have never encountered. Whether this book succeeds in reaching a public audience is for readers to determine, but this is its aim—to help, in at least a small way, to democratize anthropology, and make it comprehensible and interesting to anyone who may want to read it.

### **Impressions of Guangzhou**

When one travels to central Guangzhou by subway train or taxi from the Baiyun airport, or by high-speed rail from the Lo Wu border in Hong Kong, the first impression may be of a well-developed city with towering hotels, glittering department stores, massive highway overpasses, wide tree-lined boulevards, and clean, fast, and modern railways and subways. It appears to be a quintessential prosperous urban metropolis of the developed world.

For those who have mental images of China from an earlier era, of Mao suits and massive throngs of bicyclists, the city of Guangzhou today may come as a shock. When I first traveled to Guangzhou in the early 1980s, I saw a city of dark low-rise buildings, unworking toilets, and outdoor Ping Pong tables. I was struck by the lined faces of those I saw in the city's markets—"third-world faces," I thought then, as opposed to the softer, rounder faces of the people on the streets in Hong Kong. I traveled to Guangzhou again in the mid-1990s, and went, by chance, to one of the city's first McDonald's restaurants. I remember being told *sotto voce* in English by one employee and then by another that they longed to leave China and live in the U.S. or Europe—that dream is what led

them to McDonald's. Charlotte Ikels's book *The Return of the God of Wealth* gives a comprehensive picture of Guangzhou in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a city undergoing a massive shift from ubiquitous state control to the workings of the free market, a city in which the springing up of skyscrapers, commonplace today, was just beginning.<sup>8</sup> The Guangzhou of today is only intermittently visible in her book, not because of any failings on her part, but because Guangzhou has changed so precipitously in the last two decades.

This first impression of Guangzhou as a glittering modern city gives way to some extent upon gazing at the city more closely. Particularly in the neighborhoods portrayed in this book, such as Xiaobei, a different picture emerges. One still sees a lively city of bright lights and neon, but also a remarkable tableau closer to the ground: beggars seeking alms to the sound of Koranic chanting emanating from their boom boxes; Hui Muslim money changers holding wads of U.S. dollars; Arabs smoking water pipes and sipping mint tea after hours in sidewalk cafés; and perambulating Africans, outnumbering the Chinese on the street, out and about and celebrating at 2 a.m. Guangzhou, at least in these areas, appears to be a world city rather than a Chinese city. As more than one Chinese have reported to us in Xiaobei, "I feel like I'm a foreigner here!"

Ikels's 1990s portrayal of an area of Guangzhou quite close to those portrayed in this book is remarkable for another reason: no foreigners appear in her book. Guangzhou began fully opening up to foreigners only in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with Guangdong Province's economic development and China's entry into the World Trade Organization. Chinese population statistics, however incomplete they may be today, did not even include foreigners until 2010.<sup>9</sup> Ikels mentioned no foreigners because their number was negligible in the early 1990s; today no book purporting to fully discuss Guangzhou could neglect them.

The feeling of a foreigner newly arrived in Guangzhou very much depends on where they are from. An Iranian told us, "Comparing Tehran to Guangzhou is like comparing a 1950s car to a new Mercedes Benz." A Yemeni said, "Moving to Guangzhou is like moving from the past to the present, like coming out from a cave." Another Middle Eastern trader said, "The highways, the metro—we have no metros in Bahrain, you know? . . . And the girls here—with not much clothes on! The first day, the second day, you're surprised at short skirts, but you get used to it." A Kenyan gave a more analytical view, comparing China to his own country: "You . . . have to be impressed with Guangzhou and with China. The infrastructure, the town planning. The government can provide for a billion people, with a rail network, roads, recreational facilities, parks—things that are lacking in Africa. All the time I've stayed here, I've not experienced a single electricity



blackout. Yes, I want Kenya to become like China!” A West African trader with long-term residence in the United Kingdom had a darker view: “Africans who come to China straight from Africa see it as wonderful, and they want China to be like that. But those who have lived in Europe or the U.S. don’t like China much. For me, after the United Kingdom, China was like ‘the world turned upside down.’ The laws aren’t followed in China. Contracts are like toilet tissue.”

All of this reflects China’s place in the world as both a developing country less than six decades past starvation for tens of millions of its people,<sup>10</sup> to now the world’s second largest economy, a superpower that is on many fronts competing with the United States for world supremacy. Guangzhou, as one of China’s richest and most foreign large cities, exemplifies this transition.

### **A Brief History of Foreigners in Guangzhou**

Long known as Canton, Guangzhou has been for almost two millennia a center of commerce between Chinese and foreigners, “the maritime gateway to the Chinese empire.”<sup>11</sup> Roman merchants were reported to have come to Canton; by the Tang Dynasty, African slaves were also present,<sup>12</sup> as well as Arab traders.<sup>13</sup> In this era, of Canton’s population of perhaps two hundred thousand, tens of thousands were foreigners,<sup>14</sup> including Persians, Malays, and Sinhalese. Trade flourished through the twelfth century but declined thereafter; in 1367, the first Ming emperor forbade all private Chinese trade with foreign countries. Trade revived with the coming of European traders, particularly Portuguese, in the early sixteenth century,<sup>15</sup> and the Dutch in the early seventeenth century. By the late eighteenth century, “the port was a raucous world of Portuguese, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, pidgin English, Malay, and Indian languages, peppered with words from all of Europe and Oceania.”<sup>16</sup> Canton had again become a thoroughly international city.

The Chinese imperial government sought to keep the impact of foreigners in China to a minimum through a 1757 decree limiting all foreign trade to a zone in the city of Canton crowded with trading posts and foreigners’ residences called “factories,” or *Hong*, where foreigners could trade and reside during trading season in spring and autumn, spending the remaining months each year in the Portuguese colony of Macau. The Chinese merchant guild known as *Cohong* had the responsibility for arranging all customs payments, ensuring the proper behavior of the foreign crew, and handling all cargo and communications; Chinese “linguists,” speaking pidgin and translating documents, were also on hand to aid in communication between the foreigners and the *Hoppo*, the superintendents

in charge for foreign trade, who “were notorious for their venality.”<sup>17</sup> Foreigners were not allowed to learn Chinese, just as Chinese (apart from the linguists and other official figures) were not to learn foreign languages. Canton’s port fees were among the highest in the world in the eighteenth century, but this did not stop foreign vessels from coming; to take just one sighting in 1784, “there were no fewer than forty-five vessels lying at anchor . . . stretching in a row three miles long.”<sup>18</sup> Up until the mid-eighteenth century, when it was replaced by tea, silk was the dominant Chinese export.

American and British traders in Canton in the early decades of the nineteenth century left many accounts of their experiences of south China as seen from the limited perspective of their foreigners’ perch in the factories. One scholar notes from such accounts that the Chinese merchant intermediaries for these foreigners were not simply venal, but were “a source of invaluable advice on many matters such as . . . the state of the market and the niceties of Chinese regulations.”<sup>19</sup> The thirteen foreign factories were well appointed, several chronicles have stated—but one prohibition was on the presence of females, with foreign-Chinese romances, unlike today, strictly forbidden.

Hunter, in his nineteenth-century account of his life in Canton from 1825 to 1844 describes how, in American ships, “large quantities of Spanish and Mexican dollars were yearly imported to make up the deficiency arising from comparatively little other import cargo”<sup>20</sup>—Westerners had nothing that the Chinese wanted at anywhere near the same quantities that the West wanted Chinese products such as tea. The British answer to this trade imbalance was to import opium. The Opium War, beginning in 1839, was basically fought to force China to not enforce its opium laws, enabling Great Britain to import opium into China, creating legions of addicts and thereby helping to alter its trade imbalance vis-à-vis China.<sup>21</sup> This led to the founding of Hong Kong and also to the opening up of various Chinese ports to foreign trade aside from Canton. This resulted in a century of foreign occupation of China by European powers and later by the Japanese and contributed to the ongoing Chinese distrust of the Western and foreign world, and a sense of the national humiliation of China that the current Chinese government often plays upon to boost patriotic fervor.

After the second Opium War in 1857, a foreign enclave was built on Shamian Island in Canton, ceded partly to the British and partly to the French, with Western architectural designs that subsequently helped shape the city as a whole.<sup>22</sup> By the early twentieth century, Shanghai more than Canton emerged as the center of foreignness in China. Canton had a reputation in the first half of the twentieth century as “the epitome of Chinese xenophobia,”<sup>23</sup> with many intellectuals

advocating independence from foreign influence; but one commentator sees this view as mistaken, arguing for a “strong Western influence” in Cantonese popular culture.<sup>24</sup> But with the Communist revolution of 1949, an expulsion of the foreign did indeed take place: “as China closed its doors to the capitalist world and turned inward after 1949, there was no role for a go-between with the outside.”<sup>25</sup> The Communist government changed the city’s English name from Canton to Guangzhou. Foreigners were expelled from Guangzhou in 1950–1951, and Guangzhou’s internationalism vanished. It was only in 1978 and Deng Xiaoping’s reforms that the door began to be opened once more, but it really wasn’t until two decades later, with the Pearl River Delta’s emergence as the world’s factory, that many foreigners began actively coming into Guangzhou.

This history shows most obviously that the presence of foreign traders and seekers as described in this book has a very long historical precedent. But there also are some more particular parallels between the past and today. As Vogel has noted, “Over the centuries the Cantonese have been remarkably successful in carrying on large-scale trade while keeping the personal and cultural contacts with foreigners to a bare minimum.”<sup>26</sup> This was readily apparent in the era of the factories, with the foreign traders on their small stretch of riverbank, and their Chinese contacts taking place entirely through the *Cohong* and their linguists. It is also true today among the African and Arab traders discussed in this book—while Chinese authorities do not restrict who they can interact with, there remains a remarkable gap, with many of these traders reporting that they have no Chinese friends (except, perhaps, a girlfriend, in contrast to the foreign traders of two hundred years ago).

Another similarity concerns trade imbalance. The British in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries could find no product of their manufacture that the Chinese sought, and so turned to opium. This continues today in a different form—while China relies on Africa for many of its raw materials, it supplies manufactured goods. The traders described in this book, like some of the traders described above, take their money to China and send back goods. Occasionally some African traders have remarked to us bemusedly, “Why do I have to come halfway around the world to buy mobile phones/clothing/building supplies/furniture? Why can’t my own country make these things at a cheap price?” They might answer by discussing the perfidy of Western colonialism or the incompetence of their own country’s government; or they might simply shrug at the strange paths of globalization, as also might the traders in Canton two hundred years before them.

## Foreign Places in Guangzhou

While foreign corporate workers and professionals may go to Beijing and Shanghai when they travel to China, most traders don't travel to those cities when seeking to do business. The best city for trade, and particularly for low-end trade, is Guangzhou, accounting for about one-fourth of China's foreign trade in 2013—although trade figures are necessarily imprecise, particularly within the realm of low-end globalization.<sup>27</sup> Shanghai and Beijing are both great commercial cities but neither have the massive prevalence of factories that Guangdong Province has, nor do they have the large-scale presence of foreign traders. The only other city in China remotely rivalling Guangzhou as a magnet for the business of developing world traders is Yiwu, in Zhejiang Province, a seventeen-hour bus ride from Guangzhou, with a massive International Trade Mart and a reputation for being a center for trade in small goods and kitchenware. Other suppliers for the goods that traders seek are clustered in cities close to Guangzhou: Foshan, known among traders for ceramics, Dongguan for shoes, and Shenzhen for electronics. But above all is Guangzhou itself, known particularly for garments, but where virtually every product imaginable, from solar lighting to heavy equipment to furniture to electronics to shoes to school bags is available from suppliers.

Guangzhou is a vast city with many different neighborhoods, most of which foreigners never go to. There are only a very few neighborhoods where foreigners hang out; different ethnic groups in Guangzhou do business and engage in entertainment in different areas of Guangzhou.

Zhujiang New Town (珠江新城), the most upscale of these neighborhoods, is a number of miles and subway stops from the neighborhoods featured in this book; it is Guangzhou's high-end foreign business center, where many European, Japanese, and Latin Americans live and where many Chinese also come to enjoy a foreign environment. It has luxurious shopping areas and apartment complexes where foreigners in particular live; its bar area fully opened only after 2012 with the opening of a new subway station. Now the neighborhood's night scene is extraordinary in its activity; once inside its bars, it seems to be no longer China but little different from similar upscale bars throughout the developed world. One foreign denizen of the area told us, "The other day, I saw an African man coming out of a Land Rover. I'd never seen that before here—my jaw dropped. That was a first in this area!" Most Africans and South Asians don't go to Zhujiang New Town because it is so expensive. A English citizen of Nigerian Igbo

ancestry recently moved to Zhujiang New Town, he told us, because he prefers to stay in a place without many other Nigerians: “I don’t understand them; they’re too aggressive,” he said. He would rather stay in Zhujiang New Town because he can consider himself European there rather than African. He is able to do this because he has money. Indeed, there are a few African traders, and a larger number of Arab traders, who rarely show up at the neighborhoods described below and throughout this book. They have the money to stay at five-star hotels and, because of the large size of their orders, may deal directly with factory suppliers who may wine and dine and provide them with limousine service for a week. These large-scale traders certainly exist, but aren’t the primary subject of this book.

Another upscale neighborhood for foreigners is Taojin (淘金), where the resplendent Garden Hotel is located, adjacent to the Japanese Consulate, along with various bars and, in 2011–2014 anyway, an array of sex workers, some Colombian, some Central Asian, awaiting customers on walkways and street corners. There is a Latin Grill and a twenty-four-hour Starbucks nearby, a few signs in Spanish put up by freight forwarders pursuing the Latin American market, and various other freight forwarders from around the world, in offices that are typically plush and corporate. African friends who were overstayers loved the outdoor bars of Taojin, not least because the police, they reasoned, would never check anyone’s ID and immigration status if they were drinking alcohol at such expensive places.

The center of foreignness in Guangzhou to be discussed in this book, the center of “low-end globalization,” one subway stop away from Taojin, is Xiaobei (小北), which is Arab and African in the ethnic composition of foreigners—some living there on a long-term basis, and many more working and congregating there or staying for a few days or weeks in the many dozens of hotels in the area, large and small, expensive and extremely cheap.<sup>28</sup> Let me now describe the area through a quick walking tour as of fall 2013.\*

When one walks down Huanshi Middle Road (环市中路)—a large thoroughfare of eight lanes, with three highway overpasses snaking above it and at some points railroad tracks as well—from Taojin toward Xiaobei, the character of the buildings and their businesses slowly changes.<sup>29</sup> If you are walking on the Garden Hotel side of the street, you will pass fancy hotels such as the Asia International Hotel, and then find yourself in a stretch of street that contains eight or

\*While as of this writing in early 2017 the areas described here still exist, there have been significant changes over the past several years; today this area is more ordered and policed, and, to anthropologists’ eyes anyway, considerably less interesting.



FIGURE 1. Map of Taojin, Xiaobei, Guangyuanxi (map by Samson Wong)

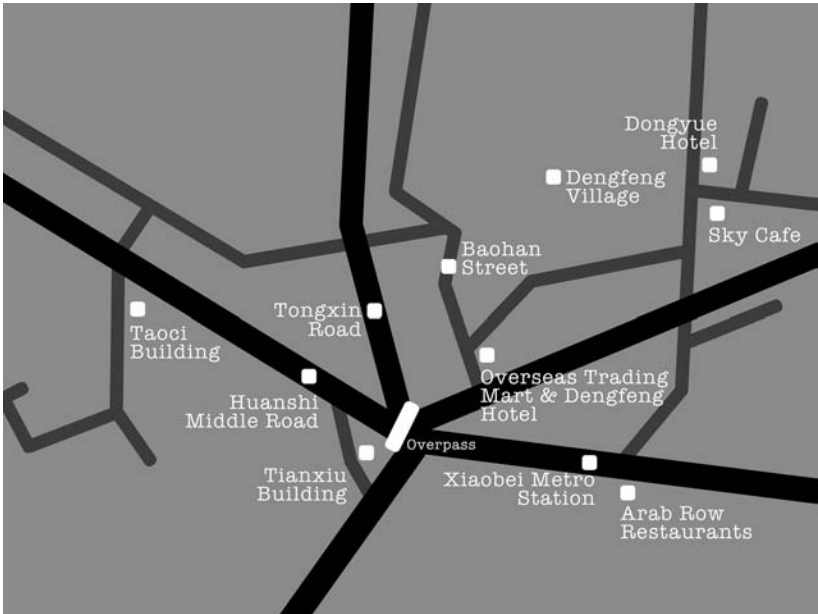


FIGURE 2. Map of Xiaobei (map by Samson Wong)

more Turkish and Middle Eastern restaurants with names such as Ali Baba and later on the street, in what some call “Arab Row,” restaurants such as Andalus, Bosphorus, and Al Rafidien, that once you enter may seat you on resplendent couches to take your repast.

Outside the Arab restaurants are an array of vendors, both Chinese and of the Uyghur ethnic minority.\* Uyghurs sell, in the evenings, slices of massive six-by-four-foot cakes; others sell animal furs, including the skins of large cats. Still other vendors, Chinese, sell stun guns; one vendor, a cute young Chinese woman, called it a “shocker,” offering me numerous models and strengths for all my family and friends. Other Chinese vendors offer pest-ridding electronic devices, with mice in cages awaiting a demonstration of these devices’ prowess. In the midst of this, better-dressed Chinese pass out cards in Chinese, English, and Arabic for law firms looking for clients—China visa consulting, among other matters—or handing out brochures advertising goods from construction materials to fruits for export to apartments for rent. In the middle of Arab Row there is an Indian men’s club with women standing outside in slinky costumes: odd indeed on this street with its Muslim *halal* grocery stores, none of which sell alcohol, but fitting the area’s ethnic mix as well as the activities of some Arab and Middle Eastern traders under cover of darkness.

This row of restaurants serves food from and employs Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians, Yemenis, and Turks. Sub-Saharan Africans are to be found patronizing these restaurants on occasion—I’ve never heard of anyone being refused admission or service on the basis of ethnicity—but the ethnic division is quite apparent. When we’ve spoken to various proprietors of these businesses, some tell us that they don’t like Africans much: “They’re poor. They can’t afford to come here,” or, more pointedly, “They’re all here illegally. And they’re drug dealers!” The Africans, based on the other side of Huanshi Middle Road, say in turn, “I don’t like Arabs! They’re terrorists!” Much has been written about Chinese racism toward Africans, but Arab-African antipathy, as well as Indian-African antipathy, although not much mentioned in the context of Guangzhou, also definitely exists. Nonetheless, these different communities exist side by side though only rarely interacting—we’ve not heard of fights breaking out between them. Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Indian traders typically engage in a larger scale of busi-

\*Uyghur are Turkic-speaking and Muslim. There are some ten million Uyghurs in China; most live in Xinjiang Province in western China, but thousands now live in Guangzhou. They are different in appearance from Han Chinese in Guangzhou because of their Muslim garb and their Caucasian visage.

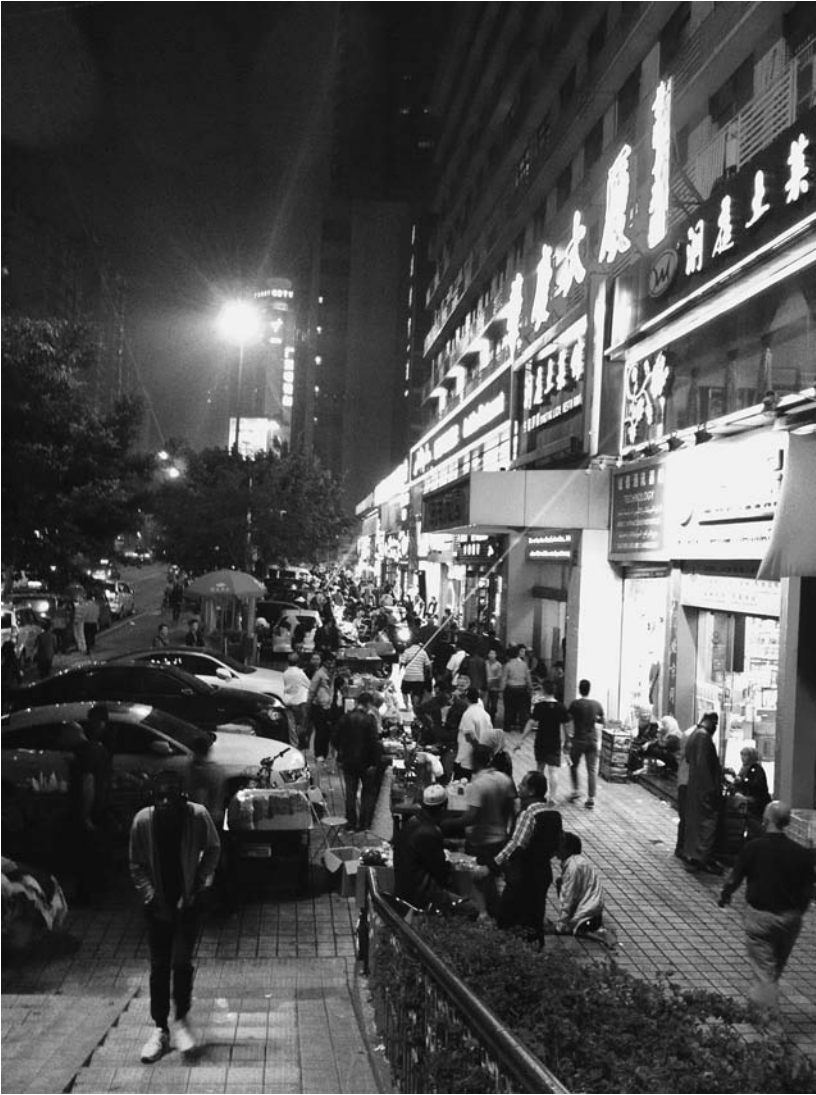


FIGURE 3. “Arab Row” and its vendors (photo by Gordon Mathews)

ness than do African traders. Why some work in Xiaobei as opposed to the more upscale areas mentioned above is unclear—perhaps due to the nearby wholesale markets of garments, leather, and shoes, and perhaps also due to the nearby presence of the Xianxian Mosque (先贤清真寺), where they can go to worship (although there are other mosques in Guangzhou where they also might worship). Others have offices in areas scattered throughout Guangzhou.



Continuing our tour, you may then walk up the stairs of the overpass at the intersection of Xiaobei Road and Huanshi Middle Road, over, under, and beside train tracks and different levels of highway and expressway. You can only cross at this intersection by elevated walkway, where there is an extraordinary cavalcade of vendors and passersby of every ethnicity. On one given night, there is a woman with a large handwritten sign saying, “My son needs an operation. It costs 400,000 RMB\* to cure him. Please give money!” in Chinese, English, and Arabic. There are also Chinese beggars, most prominent on sunny days but often present at night too, prone, with twisted limbs. This might be a good begging spot because of the prevalence of Islam and the importance it places on giving alms. There are also sex workers, East African, immediately recognizable by their tight-skirted business garb. There are Chinese photographers present, specializing in taking pictures of Arabs and Africans seeking to show themselves silhouetted against the Guangzhou cityscape. And there are other vendors of goods selling plastic railway sets, shirts, shoes, watches, and dolls, including a dancing Kim Jong-un. There are a number of different ethnic groups on this passageway, Chinese, Uyghur, Arab, and sub-Saharan African, with the former two groups selling and the latter two buying, but members of these different groups almost never interact except to bargain, buy, and sell. When the police come, the sellers pack up their wares in the blink of an eye and then blend into the crowd of passersby.

One set of stairs descending from this overpass leads to the Tianxiu Building (天秀大厦), a huge complex of three towers, each thirty-two stories. In its lower four floors it is a warren of shops catering to African and Arab customers, selling everything from wigs and hair extensions, jewelry (real and imitation), and electronic goods to West African-patterned fabrics, sex toys, and washing powder. The Tianxiu Building is famous as ground zero for African trade; one seeking to understand such trade could do far worse than just hanging out in the lower floors day after day watching and listening. The three of us have seen innumerable friendly or indifferent transactions, but also, in a human-hair wig store, a four-hour bargaining session over a mere 60 RMB. And we have witnessed, in a cosmetics stall, a Chinese clerk in hot pants and bra bargaining with a Middle Eastern woman in black hijab, with the two exchanging not a word, but only taking turns pounding away at the calculator in negotiating their wholesale prices.<sup>30</sup>

\*RMB, the Chinese *renminbi* or *yuan*, is a currency often referred to in this book. In 2013–2014, there were, on average, 6.15 Chinese RMB per US\$1. This woman is thus seeking roughly US\$65,000.



FIGURE 4. Interactions on Huanshi overpass (photo by Gene Parulis)

And in the Moka Café, the downstairs coffee shop, we have watched and listened to innumerable discussions and calculations in Arabic, French, Igbo, Swahili, Somali, Urdu, and very often in English, the primary language used between these different groups, over topics ranging from the fluctuations of exchange rates to the price of gemstones and sex workers to the costs and benefits for Muslims of having one, two, three, or four wives.

The higher floors of the Tianxiu Building consist of dilapidated apartments, a hotel for traders, and an array of trading companies and electronic showrooms. Block B, designated for business, contains the hotel, and is the plushest block. Blocks A and C, designated for residential purposes, are more desolate but contain a surprising number of African restaurants. Block C has a Senegalese restaurant on the twenty-ninth floor, a Tanzanian restaurant on the twenty-seventh, then, on down, a Cote d'Ivoire place, another Senegalese restaurant, and a Nigerian restaurant, as well as several Malian guesthouses. All these are unlisted but apparently do a brisk business—once inside, each is its own world. We spent a long afternoon in a Congolese restaurant, eating stew and talking with the Congolese proprietor (“I didn’t like China at first because people are always busy, even on Sunday. In Kinshasa, people will relax and talk to you, but not here!”) and her two Chinese cooks whom she had taught, in rudimentary Chinese, to cook Congolese food.

Outside the building once again. We've seen on its surrounding sidewalks an old Chinese man asleep on cardboard on a chilly night with several well-dressed young African traders walking past and mocking him for his poverty; and we've seen an African sex worker loudly rebuffing a customer's proffered offer: "no money, no honey!" We've seen young Africans apparently fresh from the airport walking wide-eyed, beholding this massive Chinese cityscape with its flashing billboards, and high-rises, the likes of which they have never before encountered; and we've seen Chinese apparently fresh from the train or bus station similarly wide-eyed, coming to this building to see a mass population of foreigners unlike anything they've ever beheld.

Almost adjacent to the Tianxiu Building is a place called Lounge Coffee, where the dominant language among customers is French. This is where traders from Guinea, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Niger, Chad, Mali, and the Congo, among other countries—much of Francophone West Africa—hang out. Indeed, in the Tianxiu Building area as a whole, French is commonly spoken as well as English, but across Huanshi Middle Road, the dominant language of traders is English. As a trader from Burkina Faso said, "In terms of language, English is the only language that can get by in trade. I'll try to speak Chinese, and they'll speak English to me," and somehow they can communicate.<sup>31</sup> Also nearby is the Taoci Building (陶瓷大厦), which in 2005 was one of the two major buildings frequented by African traders, along with the Tianxiu Building. In 2010, there was a major crackdown on stores selling copy goods, and some two hundred Chinese shops were shut down, including many in this building. It's quiet now—just convenience stores and closed shutters. Copy goods are ubiquitous everywhere else in the area, so why this building in particular suffered such a fate is unclear. A thousand yards beyond the Taoci Building on Huanshi Middle Road is the Xianxian Mosque, which on Fridays and particularly during holy days such as Eid, is packed with thousands of worshippers: Uyghur, Arab, Pakistani and African. A few hundred yards past this is the main Guangzhou Railway Station.

One point not to be forgotten is that a block or two beyond the sites mentioned above, faces are all Chinese; the foreign world has reached its geographical bounds, although pockets of residential foreignness exist at various points around Guangzhou and its environs, from Xiatangxi (下塘西) to Nanhai (南海). Anyone who rides a bus around the city of Guangzhou will realize that foreigners in the city compose no more than a drop in the bucket of the total population—one can ride for hours without seeing a single foreigner. Maps of Guangzhou reveal the same—the areas reported on in this book are tiny specks in the vast megalopolis that is Guangzhou, larger than any American or Euro-

pean city by most measures. Foreignness is here, and is remarkable, but must not be exaggerated.

Returning to the walk, we go back to the overpass to cross Huanshi Middle Road. Directly across Huanshi Middle Road from Arab Row and kitty-corner to the Tianxiu Building, there is, after descending from the overpass, an open section of pavement where Ughyurs have set up galleries for passersby to shoot at balloons for a fee. Next to that is a Xiaobei subway station entrance, and next to that, a building with a large McDonald's restaurant: a place where young African traders are often to be found, sitting side by side with young Chinese customers, although they only very rarely talk, knowing no common language. There is some debate among Muslims as to whether McDonald's is *halal* (permissible to consume under Islamic law), but at least for those patronizing McDonald's, the debate has been decided. In this building, there is also a Yemeni restaurant, one of the few restaurants that Africans and Arabs patronize in common, and a pizza place serving alcohol to African Christians, less restricted in their daily habits than are Muslims. Within this building's arcade are shops on the lower floors catering to the Arab and African inflow of traders, selling goods ranging from stationary to pharmaceuticals to exercise machines. In one of these shops, we had discussions with a young Chinese clerk asking her why she didn't smile at her customers, but only frowned and ignored them. She earnestly asked why that was important—after all, if her African customers wanted the products of her store, they would buy them, without needing any extra enticement from her, she felt. On higher floors are a dozen or more cargo offices of African and Arab entrepreneurs, all officially fronted by Chinese, and also a private law office, African and Arab Legal Aid Service, charging far more than a government office would charge for the same services.

And then back out the building, past the shooting gallery, to walk through an underpass full of Uyghurs selling bread and roast meat and Han Chinese selling toys and watches, with a constant stream of pedestrians wandering through.

The underpass opens onto a large plaza dominated by the Overseas Trading Mart (越洋商贸城) and the New Don Franc Hotel/Deng Feng Hotel (登峰酒店). A prominent feature both of the underpass and of the plaza in 2013 was the large numbers of Uyghur sidewalk vendors appearing in the late afternoons and evenings. There were also dozens, sometimes hundreds, of Hui and Dongxiang\*

\*The Hui and Dongxiang are two other Muslim Chinese minority nationalities in Guangzhou; unlike the Uyghurs, from Xinjiang Province, they are predominantly from Ningxia and Gansu provinces. Hui are more "Chinese" in appearance, while Dongxiang are more Uyghur in appearance; both speak their own languages.



FIGURE 5. Vendors and customers in Xiaobei underpass (photo by Gene Parulis)

money changers in the plaza, gathering in the late mornings to exchange dollars and RMB; we have seen money changers walk away with four-inch-thick piles of US\$10 and \$20 bills. Traders go to them rather than to banks not only because their rates are competitive but also because no passports need to be shown. For overstayers without legal residence or for those who don't want to deal with the bureaucracy of Chinese banks, these money changers do their business.

Uyghurs (known by Africans and Chinese alike as “Xinjiang people”) are sometimes viewed as thieves by both Chinese businesspeople and African traders. A Chinese Communist Party official told me informally:

Nobody trusts the Uyghurs—everybody thinks they're criminals. The Uyghurs fight, and they stick together. And they carry knives. But they're a minority group, and so they're not easy to control. When you buy something from the Uyghurs, they tend to cheat us Chinese people, Han people. People are afraid of them.

I had a computer stolen from my backpack (as related in chapter 4) in the underpass, and after appealing to several Uyghur food sellers, I saw the Uyghur thief brought to be beaten before my eyes. I'd hoped to get to know these Uyghurs better, but not long thereafter, on March 1, 2014, there was a horrific massacre in



FIGURE 6. Vendors in front of New Don Franc Hotel (photo by Linessa Dan Lin)

Kunming Railway Station, with twenty-nine Chinese murdered by Uyghurs, no doubt linked to the longstanding tension between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang Province. Later, Guangzhou Railway Station itself experienced an attack by knife-wielding Uyghurs, after which there was a government crackdown and all the Uyghurs vanished from Xiaobei, to practice their trades elsewhere. I never saw most of them again.<sup>32</sup>

The Overseas Trading Mart is one more warren of shops for African traders linked to a hotel, the New Don Franc Hotel. It differs from the Tianxiu Building in that it is stretched more horizontally than vertically—one walks on and on over two floors, past shop after shop after shop, all catering to sub-Saharan African traders from virtually every country: we've spoken with traders from Sierra Leone, Gambia, and Rio Muni, as well as the better represented countries: Kenya, Nigeria, the Congo, and Angola. The Tianxiu Hotel could seem, with a squint, to be luxurious, but at New Don Franc Hotel there are occasional cockroaches to fend off. The complex is surrounded by streets full of Chinese merchants, with an open plaza full of vendors in front.

From this plaza runs Baohan Street (宝汉直街), a walkway that is an extraordinary cavalcade of intercultural mixing, perhaps the most international



FIGURE 7. Baohan Street scene (photo by Gene Parulis)

street in all of China. There are a large number of self-proclaimed Islamic restaurants, and a few “African” restaurants on the street—meaning that they serve alcohol and thus are presumably Christian rather than Muslim. Partly because of the jet lag experienced by traders newly arrived from Africa, Baohan Street comes alive only in the evening, and it seems to never end—it is full of people until



FIGURE 8. Baohan Street scene (photo by Gene Parulis)



close to dawn many nights, with African traders intermingling with merchants hawking their wares on the street.

However, in 2015, Baohan Street was fully repaved, with a Chinese police station prominently visible, and with street vendors, most of whom had been Uyghur, gone, although some still do business in shops rather than on the street in different nearby locations.<sup>33</sup> I asked a Chinese merchant running a store on Baohan Street in June 2015 how he felt about these changes. He was ambivalent:

The street has become safer now. My phone was stolen two years ago on this street, by Xinjiang people who were pickpockets. But on the other hand, when there were vendors on the streets, there were more people here, more African customers. Because of the police crackdown, and because immigration controls have gotten stricter, there are fewer customers than before. My business isn't as good as it was.

Behind Baohan Street is what is known in China as an urban village, part of the old Deng Feng village, in a dark but perfectly safe web of passageways some eight feet wide, where directions are impossible. The walkways are set between three- and four-story buildings whose owners now rent to migrant workers because rents are comparatively cheap. Africans come here to make international phone calls from stalls set up for that purpose, and also to buy food; there are tiny shops interspersed throughout this warren. Some Africans also live here.

Once you emerge from the winding alleyways of the village, you are suddenly on a large street with a river channel in the middle; there are several Indian restaurants, as well as large hotels and trading marts. The Yueyang Trading Mall, apparently originally intended for Indians but now predominantly African, is here, as is the Dongyue Hotel, where I spent many nights, occasionally hanging out at its bar talking with Indian traders about their business and sometimes dodging sex workers (I recall one unforgettable proposition in an elevator: "Hi, I'm Julie from Kazakhstan. Wanna fuck?"). I asked an Indian man why there were now so few Indians, unlike a few months earlier, and so many Africans. I was told, "Oh, the Indians have all gone off to better hotels; when the Africans come in, the Indians leave," in an ongoing movement of ethnicity and social class. This is not unlike the shifts in population in so many American urban neighborhoods over the years and decades, but in this case those who move are temporary visitors, changing neighborhoods over weeks and months. Also in this neighborhood is the Sky Café, a bar and African restaurant with outdoor tables, which broadcast World Cup matches in 2014 at 12:00 midnight, 3:00 a.m., and

6:00 a.m. to a packed audience whenever an African team was playing. A table was broken in the café after a particularly egregious penalty was called against the Nigerian team.

Nearby Baohan Street is Tongxin Road (童心路), a tree-lined residential area with a dozen small hotels catering to traders as well as many apartment buildings that rent to Africans. In most neighborhoods in Guangzhou, foreigners can't legally register to live, but here they can, although rising rents drive many out. Stores here are interestingly mixed, with some catering to Chinese only and others making a specific pitch for African customers in their names, such as the Nairobi Hotel and the Africa Mart. The hotels for traders can all be readily ascertained, regardless of their Chinese or African names, by the loads of boxes in their lobbies awaiting transport to warehouse, airport, or seaport. Further up Tongxin Road is a nongovernmental organization specifically devoted to Africans. This area—known as “Volvo” among African traders, since there is a car repair service with the name “Volvo” prominently displayed—is also reputed to be a hangout for drug dealers.

There is one more key area, known as Sanyuanli (三元里) on the maps and in the scholarly literature and as Guangyuanxi (广园西) by the African traders who work there, at Guangyuan West Road; in this book I call it Guangyuanxi. It consists of several packed market buildings across the street from one another. It is to the north of the main Guangzhou Railway Station, and a bit more than two miles from Xiaobei. Xiaobei contains people from all over Africa, as well as the Arab world and the Middle East, with somewhat more Muslims than Christians; Guangyuanxi, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly Nigerian Igbo and Pentecostal Christian. Xiaobei is most vigorous as an evening market, but Guangyuanxi is livelier by day. There are several large trade marts in Guangyuanxi: the Tong Tong Trade Mart (通通商贸城) in a large yellow building, bookended by McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken; the Tian'en Clothing Market (天恩服装城), the Tangqi Building (唐旗外贸服装城), and the Canaan Market (迦南外贸服装城), as well as the Ying Fu Building (盈富外贸服装城), all with Nigerian Igbo traders.

When we began this research, most of the stalls in these buildings, selling clothing and shoes and some other goods, were fronted by Nigerians. But in August 2013, intensive police raids against overstayers began. Many of the Nigerians in Guangyuanxi were overstayers whose very presence was an offense. Once the police began raiding in earnest, Guangyuanxi became Chinese, with stalls run by either Chinese employees or by the girlfriends of Nigerian overstayers, who would stay away to be safe. The Africans now to be seen in Guangyuanxi are

typically either customers or legal merchants; the area once as bustling African as Xiaobei has now become quieter. Guangyuanxi was long a highly interesting place for research, because so many people there were overstayers, because of the strong Christian presence (with impromptu preaching in the aisles of its marts), and also because of the romantic interest between young Chinese women and Nigerian men, not nearly as apparent in Xiaobei. For anyone interested in seeing the potential birth of a multicultural China, Guangyuanxi was the best place in China to go. It was active until 2014, but is largely dormant as of this writing.

One final site is the Canton Trade Fair, a twice-yearly event taking place in a vast exhibition center in a different area of Guangzhou. The traders who go to the fair are mostly Asians and Caucasians, with few of the people one sees in Xiaobei and Guangyuanxi. The big effect of the trade fair on Xiaobei in November and April is a massive increase in hotel room occupancy and prices—particularly at somewhat nicer hotels—and a huge run on restaurants. One week we went to a Turkish restaurant on Arab Row and found it empty. A week later, at the height of the fair, it was absolutely jammed, with scarcely a seat to be had. Several weeks later, it was again empty.

### **How This Book's Research Was Done**

This book's research was done collectively, while the writing was done individually. In 2006–2009, I did research in Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong, a center of South Asians and Africans engaged in low-end globalization.<sup>34</sup> Some of the traders I came to know there also did business in Guangzhou, and so I accompanied them to the city. Yang Yang—known to African traders as Nicole\*—began doing research among undocumented Nigerian traders in the Guangyuanxi neighborhood in 2010, supervised by me. She earned her M.Phil. degree in 2011; in March of 2012, she began accompanying me to Guangzhou on weekends to do research with the idea of eventually writing a book together. In July 2013, I received a research grant that gave me a year off from teaching in Hong Kong, enabling me to spend the 2013–2014 academic year in Guangzhou. At that time Dan Lin—known to African traders as Linessa—had begun her Ph.D. research on Chinese-African relations in Xiaobei, supervised by me; it made little sense for us to do research separately, given the fact that we were in Guang-

\*Many students in Hong Kong have both Chinese names, used in a familial context, and Western given names, informally used by their social acquaintances and also in a professional context.

zhou together studying the same small population (even though her thesis topic morphed into something considerably different from the topic of this book<sup>35</sup>). For several months, the three of us did research together, until in the fall of 2013 Yang's work pressures in Hong Kong made it impossible for her to continue. Thereafter, Lin and I continued together until July 2014; I continued thereafter in weekend visits to Guangzhou.

This book is thus based on research Yang conducted in the summer of 2010 and continuing until the fall of 2013; research by Lin from the summer of 2012 until the summer of 2014; and research by me beginning in the spring of 2012 and continuing until the summer of 2014 (with occasional visits thereafter). This manuscript was written by me, incorporating some of Lin's field notes and a few pages of Yang's M.Phil. thesis, along with my own extensive field notes. Most of the field work upon which this book is based was conducted by at least two or sometimes all three of us. (I paid Lin for much of her research with me, but did not pay Yang other than expenses.) I have agonized over how to incorporate Lin's and Yang's names in this book. Finally, acceding to my editor's arguments, I describe their contribution not as "and" but as "with" on this book's cover, but insisted that their names be prominently featured, as well they should be. This book could not have been written without them. From now on in this book's pages, I refer to Lin Dan as Linessa and Yang Yang as Yang.

Field work among African and Arab traders in Guangzhou has been described by some researchers as particularly difficult, with interviewees showing hostility toward anthropologists of Chinese ethnicity, thinking they may be Chinese government spies or journalists seeking to denigrate Africans. This was the experience of Yang when she began her research in Guangyuanxi—she was told to go away when she tried to interview in the summer of 2010 and was able to conduct research only when one African merchant, seeing her disconsolate state, decided to help her. But an older white man and one or two young Chinese woman together seemed to diffuse tensions. Yang and I were talking outside the New Don Franc Hotel in the spring of 2013 when a cargo agent approached us, saying, "You are speaking in good English. I haven't heard good English for a long time. . . . You are anthropologists writing a book? Let me help you: I have a chapter I can add to your book." And indeed he did, although you who read will never know his name.

Adding to the draw of English is the more particular lure of young Chinese women speaking English. Both Yang and Linessa were offered proposals of marriage on numerous occasions, in part because they spoke such good English, the language of business in Guangzhou between Chinese and Africans

or Arabs. These proposals were both from African Christian men seeking first wives (or girlfriends) and African and Arab Muslim men seeking second wives; both sought Chinese women who could help them in business endeavors. Yang, Linessa, and I would sometimes sit in the Xiaobei McDonald's speaking in English; I would leave to use the restroom only to return to find Yang and Linessa surrounded by African traders who had heard them speaking English and longed to get to know them better. I would then draw these young men into conversations about their livelihood and lives. This may seem a questionable mode of anthropological research, but it worked. Yang and Linessa were saved from overt romantic advances by my presence, and I was able to talk with young African traders because of their presence.

We always carried recorders with us and always awaited the opportunity to ask the person we were talking with if we could record. When we could not, we would afterward go to an unnoticed spot to record our own conversations of what we had heard and correct each other for whatever misunderstandings we might have. My transcriptions of these recordings—some 470,000 words in all—are the basis for this book, with some additional transcriptions by Linessa. Quotations in this book derive from recordings of the people we interviewed; paraphrases derive from our subsequent recorded reconstructions of conversations.

We readily identified ourselves as anthropologists—I gave out dozens of copies of my earlier book on Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions to Guangzhou interviewees to let them know what we were doing—and so typically if we were observed recording, no problems resulted, in that the people around us either knew what we were up to or didn't care. One interviewee did once become upset when I was recording him in a restaurant: "Everyone can see this! Don't you understand that the Chinese police can see what you're doing? They're watching you." In fact, although I was several times asked for my passport to see if I was legally in Guangzhou, Chinese authorities apparently never knew or did not care that we were doing research on the sensitive topic of Africans and other foreigners in Guangzhou.

I have enormous gratitude toward the people we spoke with, who gave us so much of their time and lives. But at the same time, I believe that it is essential to remain critically detached. To paraphrase a Nigerian Christian minister at an academic conference we attended in China, "You can write about Nigerians in Guangzhou, but it has to be only positive things, not negative things." I disagree. I write with empathy about the traders we came to know, as I hope will shine through in these pages, but I also have the obligation to tell the full truth as I struggle to interpret it, wherever that may lead. My obligation is to my inter-

viewees but also to my audience, to tell interviewees' stories as fully and deeply as I can understand them.

Two final points. First, this research is focused primarily on foreigners. Although Chinese voices appear with some frequency, the locus of investigation has been foreigners' experiences of China, particularly Africans, as, in a sense, they are the epitome of foreignness in China.<sup>36</sup> Second, this research has been conducted so as to not feature prominent people—officials, heads of organizations, and so on. This is because there has been much popular writing on Africans and other foreigners in Guangzhou that reflects official narratives, which sometimes have minimal accuracy. To avoid this, we have stayed very close to the ground in our interviews, speaking with people who are unknown (with the exception in chapter 7 of a husband-and-wife pastor team who are identified with their permission). I thus have sought to shape an accurate portrayal of low-end globalization in Guangzhou and of African-Chinese and foreign-Chinese relations in China's most multicultural city.