

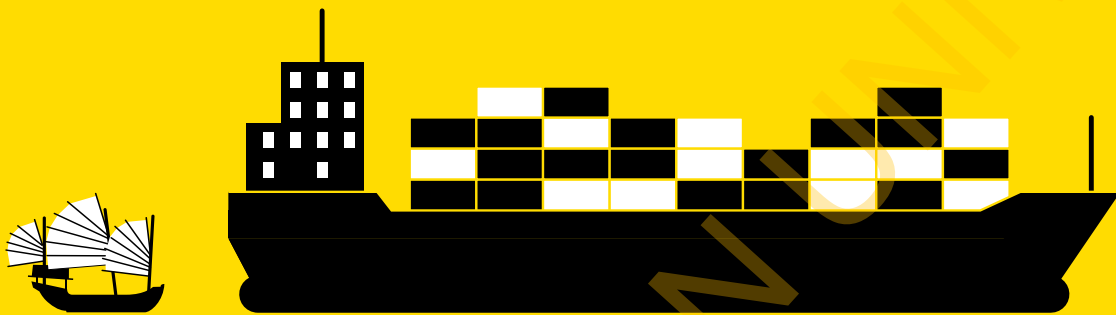
AFRICAN —



Past, Present, Future

ASIAN

Patrick Ziltener
and Christian
Suter (eds.)



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Past, Present, Future

Patrick Ziltener and Christian Suter
(Eds. for the World Society Foundation)

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About the World Society Foundation

The World Society Foundation (WSF) was established in 1982 by Peter Heintz with the aim of encouraging and supporting research on world society, that is, its emergence and historical evolution, its structure, its dynamics, and current transformation. Until 2003, the main purpose of the Foundation's sponsoring activities was to finance entire research projects focusing on the various processes of social integration and disintegration within worldwide systems—world culture, world economy, world politics, and intergovernmental systems—and on how global processes affect the perceptions and actions of individual and collective actors worldwide. Its current sponsoring policy is to provide award programs for research papers and to support international conferences on world society topics. In accordance with this new policy, the Foundation has introduced its WSF Award Program for Research Papers on World Society and held a series of international conferences (2007, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021) in order to maintain a network of excellent scholars interested in transnational and global research topics. The World Society Foundation Award honors outstanding research papers on world society that address a specific topic announced by the Foundation in its Award Program. The World Society Foundation also publishes the book series "World Society Studies." The World Society Foundation is domiciled in Zurich, Switzerland. The current members of the Board are: Mark Herkenrath, Hans-Peter Meier, and Christian Suter (President). Former members of the Board included: Peter Heintz, Karl W. Deutsch, Hans-Joachim Hoffmann-Nowotny, Bruno Fritsch, and Volker Bornschier. More detailed information on past research projects sponsored, the topics and recipients of the 2007–2018 WSF Awards, the WSF book series "World Society Studies," and the call for papers of the current WSF conferences (2022–2023) can be found on the Foundation's website at www.worldsociety.ch.

Preface

In April 2019, the Institute of Sociology of the University of Neuchâtel and the World Society Foundation (WSF) organized an international conference on “The Past, Present and Future of African-Asian Relations” within the framework of the WSF program for research papers on world society. The conference took place in Neuchâtel and was supported by the Swiss Society for African Studies, the Swiss Sociological Association, the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Swiss National Science Foundation, and the Carl Schlettwein Foundation. This volume contains a selection of thirteen contributions presented and discussed at the 2019 conference.¹

With this conference, the organizers encouraged researchers to investigate sociological theories and conceptual tools for the analysis of the relationships between Asia and Africa, welcomed analyses on the economic, political and social changes triggered by African-Asian relationships, both on the African continent but also in China and in other Asian countries, and the driving forces behind these developments, again on both continents. The conference and this volume, therefore, contribute to improving our knowledge on the past and current dynamics in the economic, social and political structure of world society.

The conference brought together more than fifty researchers and participants from all over the world to the shores of Lake Neuchâtel. About 30% of the participants came from Switzerland, 15% from other European countries, 25% from the United States and Canada, 20% from Asia and the Middle East, and 10% from Africa. A majority of the participants were doctoral students (30%) or postdoctoral and advanced researchers (40%). Regarding gender, female and male speakers and participants were quite equally represented (speakers: 47% females and 53% males; participants: 42% females and 58% males).

¹ More details on the 2019 conference, the World Society Foundation, and the WSF conference and research paper sponsoring program are available on the WSF website at <http://www.worldsociety.ch>.

The conference included five keynote lectures, 28 workshop presentations, and a concluding panel discussion. The summaries of all presentations can be found on the website of the World Society Foundation (at <https://www.worldsociety.ch/doku.php?id=conferences:2019:abstracts>). In addition, most speakers agreed to share their powerpoint presentations (available at the WSF website). The five keynote speakers included Ching Kwan Lee (University of California at Los Angeles) with a lecture on “The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor and Foreign Investment in Africa,” Philippe Beaujard (Institut des mondes africains IMAF, Paris) with a lecture on “Exchanges Between East Africa and Asia Between the 1st and the 15th Century,” Andreas Fuchs (Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg and Kiel Institute for the World Economy) with a lecture on “China’s Development Aid to Africa and its Consequences,” Christopher Alden (London School of Economics and Political Sciences) with a lecture on “China and Africa: A World After its Own Image?” and Scarlett Cornelissen (University of Stellenbosch, South Africa) with a lecture on “Industrial Entanglements and their Political Outflows in the Japan-South Africa Relationship in the Mid-Twentieth Century.”

Many people have contributed to the realization of this volume and of the 2019 conference. First and foremost, the World Society Foundation and the editors would like to thank the authors for their stimulating contributions and their patience during the reviewing and copyediting process. A big thank-you is due to the staff and the students at the University of Neuchâtel and to our colleagues of the organizing conference committee, notably to Andrei Sofronie, Christelle Chittani, Marilyn Grell-Brisk, Daniel Künzler, and Sabrina Tabares. We should also like to thank Joël Roth for the cover image and the conference poster. Finally, we are very grateful to the Swiss Society for African Studies, the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Swiss Sociological Association, the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Carl Schlettwein Stiftung, and the Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines at the University of Neuchâtel for providing generous financial support for the organization of the 2019 conference and the publication of this volume.

Neuchâtel and Zurich, January 2021

Christian Suter, President of the World Society Foundation Zurich and

Director of the Institute of Sociology, University of Neuchâtel

Patrick Ziltener, Associated Professor of Sociology, University of Zurich

Mafan: Community Formation and Dynamics of Nigerian-Chinese Interracial Interaction in Guangzhou City

Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo

The notion of *mafán* or troublemakers is one of the main organising frames with which the identification of Nigerians subsists in Guangzhou, China. This chapter situates this identification in the processes of the constitution of Nigerian community and highlights how interracial interactions of Nigerians with Chinese people have been shaped by three key issues: transformations linked to the socio-historical phases of migrant community formation; episodic civil disobedience and public disturbances that the host society considers threatening of social order, and African image remaking struggles informed by the problem of criminality and subsequent attempt at evolving dissociative boundary that thrives on intra-group Othering of Nigerians by other Africans in the city. The chapter advances our understanding of the universe of rarely discussed historical, social and political circumstances surrounding African presence in Chinese cities.

Introduction

How have the socio-historical processes linked to the congregation of Africans shaped the dynamics of Afro-Chinese interactions in China? Focusing on the notion of *mafán*¹ or troublemakers as one of the organising frame with which the identification of an African community subsists in Guangzhou city, I argue that contemporary Afro-Chinese interactions cannot be understood without considering how African communities are constituted in Chinese cities. Specifically, I argue that interracial interactions of Africans with Chinese people in Guangzhou have been shaped by three key issues: transformations linked to the socio-historical phases of migrant community formation; episodic civil disobedience and public disturbances that the host society considers threatening of social order, and African image remaking struggles informed by the problem of criminality and subsequent attempt at evolving dissociative boundary that thrives on intra-group Othering.

1 Simply means “trouble” in Chinese.

The increased visibility of African bodies in China, especially in the city of Guangzhou, has made “Africans in China” an attractive topic of interest. Several studies exist on the broader economic and legal manifestations and implications. Some provided in-depth explorations of African trading activities and networks (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007; Cisse, 2015; Lyons, Brown, and Li, 2012; Marfaing, 2019; Marfaing and Thiel, 2015; Yang and Altman, 2011) and experiences of documentation issues, profiling and navigational tactics of African traders at China ports of entry (Bodomo, 2015; Haugen, 2019; Lan, 2016a, 2017a; Mathews, Lin, and Yang, 2014). Besides, focus on the cultural consequences of African presence is growing, owing to the spread of Afro-Chinese intercultural relationships through diverse and intersecting forces of mixed-marriages (Joseph, Yun, and Teya, 2017; Lan, 2015; Zhou, 2017), people-to-people encounters and dynamics (Zhou et al., 2016). Moreover, more recent studies delved into the racialised construction of Africans and how institutional practices of the Chinese state presently condition their targeting and policing, illegalization and discrimination (Haugen, 2019; Huang, 2019). While these studies explain important and current Afro-Chinese interactional moments, practices and relationships in China, they are unable to account for how migrant community formation processes have historically shaped these conditions.

This study, therefore, documents and analyses the social and historical trajectories of formation of the Nigerian community and the emergence of *mafan* as an identificatory category within which interracial interactions between Nigerians and Chinese people became defined in the broader African community in Guangzhou, China. Adopting the notion of *mafan*, a term that Nigerians frequently encounter in their interaction with Chinese institutions and peoples, I also explain how the socio-historical context and dynamics of civil disobedience and intra-African struggle to represent itself and remake its image as a model migrant community contribute to the identification of Nigerians as troublemakers.

In exploring *mafan* in the context of the interaction between Nigerians and Chinese in Guangzhou, I conceive the term as an “identification” category in the sense of Brubaker and Cooper (2000). Conceptualising *mafan* as an identification takes cognizance of who is doing the identifying without presupposing that an internal sameness, distinctiveness or bounded groupness would result from the process of identifying. Following Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 14), I further stress its situational and contextual character and seek to understand how it emerged and has crystallized under specific historical and socio-political circumstances.

The study relies on ethnographic and interview data collected in Guangzhou city in 2017 from Nigerian migrants and Chinese people. After this introduction, I discuss the context of the presence of Africans in China, with a specific focus on their population and profile, experiences and challenges in Guangzhou. Next, I describe the methodology in detail and then follow up with the presentation of the

findings where I trace the evolution of the Nigerian community over two migration waves. Here, I describe the process of community formation and analyze the critical transformations that inform the identification of Nigerians as troublemakers. The last section concludes the chapter.

This contribution sheds light on how Nigerians became *mafan* in China, a group that is not only heavily policed but Othered by intra-African dynamics of relations. It also advances the literature on the African presence in China beyond the dominant discussions of African trading, race, and illegality. Moreover, it responds to the scholarly invitation, which calls to interrogate the processes that are critical for making sense of the contemporary formation of Africa’s new diasporas in East Asia.

Africans in China

One protracted issue in the field of “Africans in China” studies is the lack of consensus on the population of Africans in major Chinese cities. The unavailability of accurate official statistics in cities like Guangzhou where many Africans visit and reside has permitted conjectures and speculations with figures running between 20,000 (Castillo, 2014; Haugen, 2019) to over 100,000 (Bodomo and Ma, 2012; Wang, 2015). In the absence of both credible data source on inflows and mechanism for determining the size of undocumented Africans, it may take time to resolve the issue of how many Africans are in China. Nevertheless, scholarly views converge on the position that Africans are key participants in China’s 21st century migration reality, especially in big trading cities (Bodomo, 2010; Pieke, 2011). In Guangzhou especially, three main groups are noticeable: those who attempt to live in Guangzhou; those who recurrently visit the city; and those who pass through it—the majority (Castillo, 2015). Also, African migration to China is a male endeavor, dominated by young and middle-aged men from Nigeria (Bodomo and Pajancic, 2015; Liang, 2014).

With a growing presence, however, Africans have become targets of legal reforms and are more susceptible to increased policing and surveillance, even though they were initially considered a positive force for local economic growth (Haugen, 2019; Huang, 2019; Lan, 2015). Most of them have problems renewing their visas and usually end up overstaying as a result (Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle, 2014; Haugen, 2012, 2015; Lan, 2017a; Liang, 2014). The reason for this, observes Liang (2014, 1), is that “the influx and settling of large numbers of African immigrants in Guangzhou have caused problems of illegal residence, illegal immigration, and illegal employment (also known as “the three illegals”).” The “triple illegal” or “the three illegal” or *san fei* immigration regime in China is a fallout of nation-state’s continued and cumulative responses to the presence of foreigners (Haugen, 2015). As a result, many Africans experience social and structural discriminations, racism, and stereotypes. Africans experience institutional discrimination and negative perceptions in China, from the port of entry up to where they work and live.

To be precise, Bodomo (2015), in studying the interaction and discriminatory encounters of regular African visitors to China, reports that African travellers reported cases of tension, conflicts and unpleasant experiences. Likewise, Bodomo and Ma (2010) find that law enforcement officers single out Africans for routine visa checks. Whereas billboard notices advise all foreigners to carry a passport, Africans experience overwhelming stoppages, interrogation and harassment, both publicly in the streets and during private moments in the restaurants (Bodomo and Ma, 2010). Some scholars allude to the problem of increased raids targeted at Africans by “foreigner police” (Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle, 2014), with public security practices contributing to their deepening construction as *san fei* (Huang, 2019). Within places of residence, raids over visa are also frequent in African dominated neighborhoods (Haugen, 2019; Zhou et al., 2016).

At the local level, negative perceptions and attitudes drive social discrimination against Africans. Chinese people are finding it challenging to accept African migrants even though they acknowledge their presence (Le Bail, 2009). Everyday Chinese people maintain ambivalent attitudes towards their African visitors even in cities where a lot of economic interactions and space sharing occur between them (Adams, 2015; Zhou et al., 2016). As shown in Zhou et al. (2016), Chinese people hold negative stereotypes towards Africans regarding physical attractiveness, personality traits, and abilities. Also, 56% of surveyed Chinese people view Africans as violent, and nearly three-quarters believe that black people had unpleasant body odour.

Furthermore, some studies highlight the challenges of racism experienced by Africans in China. Zhang (2008), for instance, mentions that Chinese people direct psychosocial xenophobia against Africans. African teachers working in rural China complain about latent racism (Pelican and Tatab, 2009). In a critical comparative exploration of campus racism and contemporary internet racism against Africans, Cheng (2011) also discovers that Chinese freely deploy extreme racist constructions and comments towards black people. As shown in the following quotes, the constructions range from fear to utter disgust about African presence:

“It is a racial invasion!”; “Public safety is gone!”; “Are they becoming the 57th ethnic group?” (officially the government identifies 56 ethnic groups in China); “China is not a camp for refugees; our resources are already scant”; “Not obeying law and order is their nature, not to mention their body odour!”; “Go home you African dogs! You are here only to share our businesses and our women!” (Cheng, 2011, 567)

Hence, in the view of everyday Chinese, a black person remains a racialised ‘Other.’ Africans are disparaged using labels such as *hēi guī* (black devils) and *aizibing* (AIDS) while *feizhou* (evil continent) is used to describe the African continent (Sautman, 1994). Besides, the media projects racism and constructions that demean Africans (Cheng, 2011; Hood, 2011; Le Bail, 2009). Le Bail (2009) argues that the Chinese

media has not helped in improving the relationship between the local population and African migrants. Moreover, conflict potentialities are present in Guangzhou due to adverse media reporting about Africans regarding differences in lifestyle, public health hazards and threats, and social problems (Zhou et al., 2016).

Thus, African migration to China is real and complicated. As shown in the preceding paragraphs, extant studies reveal the complications in African settlement in Chinese cities, from their living conditions, trading activities in different Chinese spaces to encounters with their host community. However, most of the previous studies did not reflect on how the processes and circumstances of community formation have shaped Afro-Chinese interaction. This study sheds light on the broader dynamics of interracial interaction by tracing the historical and social trajectories of Nigerian community formation in Guangzhou. Through the notion of *mafan*, I intend to show how Nigerians became an Othered migrant group in the city and the ways that this Othering is shaping visitor-host interactions.

Methodology

I adopted an ethnographic qualitative design and conducted fieldwork over two months in two separate visits to Guangzhou in 2017. Guangzhou is a megacity and a major port city in China's Guangdong province, located in the Southeast of the province and to the north of the Pearl River Delta, bordering the South China Sea and adjacent to Hong Kong and Macau (The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality, 2010). The concentration of Africans in the city informed the choice of this location.

Primarily, I conducted observations in various settings, mainly in Yuexiu and Baiyun districts of Guangzhou, where many Nigerians work. The in-depth, key informant and life history interviews, informal conversations and a mixture of participant and non-participant observations were applied to collect relevant data. In all, I interviewed a total of sixty-nine (69) participants: Nigerians (52) and Chinese (17). While Nigerian participants included short- and long-term residents, community leaders and a Nigerian embassy official, three groups of Chinese participants were involved—shop owners, property agents, and regular people. Two of the Chinese participants were married to Nigerian men at the time of data collection.

I conducted most of the interviews in English language and pidgin (localised English that is widely spoken by Nigerians). Two Chinese university students conducted interviews with Chinese participants. I reviewed the information as acquired to ensure that informational gaps were identified and promptly filled. However, it was difficult to interview people outside their work hours as many live outside the city and only come into Guangzhou for work. Also, because of time constraints and the problem of convenience, interviews with some Nigerian shop owners were done in the presence of others—customers or acquaintances. When I suspect that the presence of others affected a response, I did an informal follow-up discussion to

seek clarification when the participants were alone. Female participants, who are a hard to reach group, were connected through churches and interviewed after church services—either within the church space or at a nearby restaurant.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and processed alongside the field notes for qualitative analysis. I processed transcripts using NVivo 11, after which I conducted thematic, content and narrative analyses. In doing thematic analysis, I conducted axial coding whereby new codes were created from the main variables in the research questions. Content analysis was carried out to explore sub-themes and unanticipated issues in the coded segments of the transcripts. Narrative analysis was done on in-depth interviews and life histories to develop a coherent narrative of the processes that inform the construction of Nigerians as *mafan* in Guangzhou city. Data presentation was done using summaries and direct quotations. All the names in the section that follows are pseudonyms.

Mafan in Nigerian Community

In 2017 when I visited Guangzhou, a lot of Nigerian migrants complained that the Chinese authorities have stepped up raids in a bid to drastically reduce their population in the city. Although this intensified policing affects members of other African communities, many Nigerians believe that the host society targets them for expulsion given their reputation as *mafan*.

In many markets where Africans interact with Chinese people, one of the first Chinese words that a newcomer would likely pick up is *mafan*. It is common to hear “you *mafan*!” from a Chinese shop owner who has spent the last few minutes haggling with an African over a product. Africans too can deploy the same vocabulary to suggest that the Chinese seller is not considerate with pricing. In this sort of interaction, *mafan* is an innocent enough word which is meant to keep business negotiation going.

However, for Nigerian migrants, *mafan* is a characterization that transcends business interaction. The word has a deeper meaning, with significant consequences for their social experience in the city. As an example, a Chinese shop owner believes that Nigerians “have moods, and [are] quite stubborn” (SO4/male/27) while Chinese housing agents perceive Nigerians as synonymous with trouble, in that “they don’t quite get along well with their neighbors. Sometimes, they are just hard to understand” (HA5/male/35). In a more elaborate conversation, another housing agent says that when Nigerians rent an apartment and enter into an agreement:

They come to me to complain, saying the electric fee is too expensive, one month later. I helped them to check and found that they didn’t turn off the air-conditioner, keeping it on without being at home. But, they wouldn’t listen to me and continued to complain... When they don’t pay the fee on time, and I tell them to leave, they will be rude to me. (HA4/female/35)

In social settings where cross-cultural understanding is limited between migrants and their host, troubling circumstances are not unexpected. Unfortunately, interactions that Chinese people consider troubling have increasingly defined Nigerians as a group, with *mafan* constituting a shorthand for characterising them.

More importantly, many of my Nigerian interlocutors in the streets of Guangzhou think that the *mafan* characterization is more than the label imposed on them by Chinese people. They are of the view that, indeed, *mafan* routinely shapes the processes of social inclusion in the city. While interfacing with the institutions of the host society, in particular, the *mafan* label is used as a basis for dismissing Nigerians seeking one form of assistance or another, such that:

[When] you are forced to tender document, they will be saying Nigeria *mafan*, Nigeria *mafan*. There is nothing that you want to do, it is always a problem, it gets to a stage that when you want to do registration, they say that they are no longer doing registration for Nigerians and that Nigerians should go back. (Adeoye/male/54)

Another Nigerian who has approached a Chinese police department for a housing registration also says that being perceived as *mafan* affected him:

Assuming I am not a Nigerian, they will not take up to five minutes. I was there from morning till 3 o’clock. I was almost bursting into tears before they tried to help me. ... But the first thing they said was Nigeria *mafan*, *mafan*; that Nigerians give them problems. [Also] the landlords usually say that if Nigerians rent an apartment, they don’t pay much. ... They think that we are bad people. (Salami/male/28)

Despite assuming an existential condition, it is nonetheless apparent that Nigerians did not wish to be labelled as troublemakers. As such, many of them have become accustomed to being selective of their interactions with Chinese people. They are deliberate in avoiding troubles, irrespective of whether social relations with the host community suffer. To reduce the possibility of being engaged as *mafan*, a lot of Nigerians limit interaction with Chinese to business affairs.

The point to stress, therefore, is that today, Nigerian-Chinese social relation (or lack of it) subsists within a strategically self-imposed interactional barrier. Staying out of trouble is indicative of the adaptive practice that Nigerians employ to adjust to their othering in Guangzhou city.

But what factors explain the identification of Nigerians as *mafan*, perceived and even treated differently from other Africans in Guangzhou? In the next section, I locate the answer in the historical and social circumstances of Nigerian community formation since the early 1990s and the transformations that occurred as a result of the influx of young Nigerian men who arrived in Guangzhou during the first half of the first decade of 2000s. Critical to this explanation are specific historical moments

and interactional dynamics, which make the flows of Nigerians into China a problematic affair for the host society.

Evolution of the Nigerian Community in Guangzhou

Although the Nigerian community in Guangzhou has been in the making since the early 1990s, many Nigerians interviewed only began to feel the presence of a vibrant community from 2006 upward. Based on the information from long-term residents, past and current community leaders and other informed participants, two major waves of arrival of Nigerians are significant: the early and later waves of arrival. The early wave started in the early 1990s up to 2005, consisting of trickles and a slow congregation of predominantly Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria. Many of these early arrivals came to China from other Asian countries, settled in other Chinese cities and later moved into Guangzhou from there. The later migration wave, which began in 2006, features the influx of young Nigerians who migrated to China directly from Nigeria. This later wave, in particular, introduced social problems which strained the relationship of Nigerians with the host society.

The entrepreneurial drives of the first comers in the 1990s influenced the formation of the Nigerian community in the early period. As with other accounts on the presence of Africans in Guangzhou (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007), changes in the economic circumstances of Asia around the late 1980s triggered the movement of Nigerians into mainland China. In the 1980s and 1990s, Nigerians moved to South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Japan in search of work and for business. As a Commonwealth territory, Hong Kong served as a transit space for most flights from Nigeria to Asia. Hong Kong was also visa-free to Nigerians at the time and an important centre of commerce and trade that attracted business people and fortune-seekers. Igbo businessmen from popular markets in Southeast Nigeria were a dominant group in Nigeria-Hong Kong trade, although Hausa traders were involved as well.

However, as the economy of Asia began to decline, the role of Hong Kong also changed in the social and economic affairs of Nigerians travelling to East Asia. For those visiting Hong Kong for business, the cost went up, and business was becoming unprofitable. Also, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and other nearby Asian countries were deporting Nigerians as a result of the economic downturn. Many of these deportees ended up in Hong Kong. Rather than return home, these deportees took advantage of their status as Commonwealth citizens to stay back in Hong Kong in the hope of finding work. Unfortunately, many were unable to secure work, “doing nothing, virtually doing nothing” (Baron/male/50). Their condition remained mostly unchanged for most of the mid-1990s when mainland China emerged as a viable economic space.

One of the earliest stories recorded of Nigerian presence in Guangzhou was a man named Smith who arrived in 1990 to teach English. The accounts of partici-

pants who had lived in the city for more than two decades corroborates the story of Smith as the first person from Nigeria to settle in Guangzhou.² Mr Smith was well-known at the time as he later married a Chinese and learned to speak Chinese. The second person, called Eugene Madu, came in 1992 to set up a business consultancy service.

However, it was the discovery of motorcycle business after the arrival of one IK Okani in 1995 that made a significant impact on the eventual influx of Nigerians into Guangzhou. According to one account, Mr Okani went to Hong Kong after a factory accident in South Korea where he had worked up to 1994. Mr Okani was forced to move on because he was unable to find another work. Without money to start a business in Hong Kong, he decided to cross over to mainland China, Guangzhou in particular. Upon arriving in the city, the massive presence and use of motorcycles in the streets attracted Okani. Given his experience in the motorcycle parts business, his first decision was to locate the motorcycle plant and explore the possibility of procuring second-hand motorcycles. This interest led him to a large motorcycle impounding site in Sanyuanli area.

Given the enormity of the motorcycles at the site and Okani's limited financial capability, he invited Smith and Eugene to partner with him. Having managed to reach an agreement with the responsible local authority, these partners connected merchants in Nnewi, a famous commercial centre in Southeast Nigeria where motorcycle sales was a big business at the time. The arrangement was to load “turn by turn; this person will load today; another person will load tomorrow” (Baron/male/50).

As work started with the loading of containers, these partners began to face some problems with their Chinese workers. The challenge was that they lacked the skills to fill up shipping containers: they were loading up 60 motorcycles in containers that can take up almost 200 if dismantled. With the permission of the local management, they decided to replace the Chinese workers. However, where will replacement workers be found?

At the same time that Okani and others were setting up the motorcycle business in Guangzhou, the number of Nigerian deportees in Hong Kong was growing. Many of those who managed to cross to mainland China stopped in Shenzhen, an industrial city just two hours away from Hong Kong and three hours to Guangzhou. Okani and his partners took steps to tap into the labor of unemployed Nigerians in Shenzhen by spreading the news of job availability in Guangzhou, and the young men responded. While the wage was little, about RMB50, it attracted many more Nigerians, including those floating in Hong Kong. The motorcycle business sustained many Nigerians in Guangzhou from 1997 to 2000. The area around the mo-

2 Chima/male/48; Akingbola/male/50.

torcycle loading site in Sanyuanli will later be dubbed *Igbo Ezue*, which means the “Igbo have gathered” (Baron/male/50).

Apart from trade in second-hand motorcycles, textile and freight businesses also shifted gradually to Guangzhou. The shift was made possible because of the availability of textile compressing machine and the founding of two major freight companies, one owned solely by a Nigerian while a Nigerian-Chinese partnership led to the formation of the second company. The availability of compressing machine in mainland China enabled small Nigerian businessmen to make purchases using a “groupage system”³ which was hitherto only available to them in Hong Kong. The establishment of the shipping companies, especially, made it easier to transport goods to Nigeria.

So, with transformations in previous migration destinations in Asia, migrants’ impoverishment, entrepreneurship and business collaborations among Nigerians, and between Nigerians and Chinese people, Guangzhou was feeling the presence of Nigerians. As connoted by the *Igbo Ezue* construct, Nigerians from Southeast Nigeria were gathering, and their presence was becoming evident in the communities they have taken residence. It is worth noting that during this early phase of inflow, many accounts⁴ holds that it was relatively easy to extend visas and prolong one’s stay in Guangzhou.

Building Community Structure and the Crisis of Later Arrivals

By the year 2000, some early arrivals mobilised to establish a structured Nigerian community association, also known as the Nigerian Union,⁵ to manage the influx of Nigerians. The old-timers believe that a vibrant and functional community association might help to solve emerging social problems, including visa overstays and arrests. In collaboration with the Nigerian embassy in Beijing, one Basil Ukaere was nominated to lead the Nigerian community. Mr Ukaere ran the community for four years and handed over to an interim community executive. Another election in 2006 produced Mr Okechukwu Uche as community head. According to informants’ accounts, the Uche regime was smooth for the most part, up to the point that his relationship with the authority of the host community became sour.

3 The system whereby textile dealers from Nigeria buy in bits, after which a number of them assemble their merchandise in a warehouse and then ship to Nigeria.

4 Interviews with Mr Emma Ojukwu, Ademola Olagunju, Mr Basil Ukaere and Mr Elochukwu, Guangzhou, 2017.

5 This name is generic as the actual name of the organization has changed more than once. Before the Nigerian Union was set up, Nigerians have established state, local government and village level associations.

There are conflicting accounts of what transpired. One account holds that Mr Uche challenged the host community over what he believed was exploitative immigration policy. As the population of Nigerians swelled, more and more people were overstaying their visas. When arrested and imprisoned, the majority of overstayers rely on community assistance to fund their deportation, and many often languish in Chinese prisons when community effort was not enough to raise needed funds. Mr Uche was said to have protested against the mandatory imprisonment and compulsory payment of RMB5,000 fine for overstaying. As one community head explains:

Okey [Okechukwu]...said no, that they should scrap the fine entirely and leave the ticket so that the community can assist those in the prison rally round and help to buy a ticket; [that] this fine is too much; it is bearing much on us, on the people. (Baron/male/50)

Baron speculates that since the community was forthcoming with the deportation money, the Chinese authorities could not forgo such a revenue. “They did not know how to lose that money,” he says (Baron/male/50). Rather, more and more people were being rounded up, jailed and made to pay overstay fees. Mr Uche’s position against the host community was radical, at least when compared with the strategy of Mr Ukaere who said he negotiated with the police on a case by case basis—instead of calling for a major change to the Chinese immigration rules.

Another version of the story states that Mr Uche was operating an illegal church. However, as one informant interprets the situation, there was a conspiracy that made Mr Uche a target. Mr Uche, he explains, was set up by people who “reported” him to the authorities: “they said he is a pastor, he is running a church...and the reporting was done by Nigerians as an allegation to set him up” (Emeka/male/45).

Irrespective of the version one believes, the outcome was the same for Mr Uche: he was arrested, imprisoned for a few months and then deported to Nigeria. Alternatively, as put by an informant “they used an upper hand on him to tell him you are only a community leader, but we are the people, we are the police” (Baron/male/50). At that time, Uche’s family was in China, and he had valid papers.⁶

Following Mr Uche’s ouster, there was a lull in community activities. By 2007, Nigerian embassy officials who revisited Guangzhou from Beijing conveyed another meeting. This meeting was the first to be attended by the man who would usher in the reformation phase of the Nigerian community, Mr Emmanuel Ositadome Ojukwu—or Emma Ojukwu for short. There, they nominated Mr Ojukwu as an interim community head, a position he held for three years until the election of 2010. Mr Emma-led interim cabinet needed to confront a rising population of Nigerians,

6 An account has it that in the past, Mr Uche overstayed his visa but only managed to regulate it after residing illegally in China for some years.

and the range of social problem baggage that accompanied the arrival of predominantly young men. As one community leader describes the situation, the later arrivals were audacious:

[In] 2005/06...people were dealing on...drugs and...forming cultist groups. They formed Aye; they formed Bagga and [cult groups with] so many names. ...Each of the cultist groups brought criminals from Nigeria to strengthen their groups and secure drugs business. They fund the transportation of [member] to come to China and join them. (Mr Ojukwu/male/45)

During this period, “people’s f**k ups” were “treated” in public restaurants with a machete (Okocha/male/37), and restaurant owners were forced to pay “protection fees” using open threats. Also, drug traffickers were being gutted to retrieve swallowed drugs, and deep freezers were converted into storages for human carcasses.⁷ Similarly, phones and money were being “obtained” in the open streets, while imported Nigerian cultists groups fight for supremacy on a foreign soil (Anichebe/male/38). Those involved in drugs and cultic activities were said to have transformed Guangyuan Xi Lu into a terror zone where daylight robbery and macheting became part of the everyday experience of Nigerians and the host community.

Consequently, Nigerians and the Nigerian passport were taking a hit from the host community. In order to make it difficult for Nigerians to stay in Guangzhou, the authorities made it tougher to extend visas on the Nigerian passport and conducted regular crackdowns on areas with a high presence of Nigerians.

Some Responses to the Crisis of Late Arrivals

Efforts to mend the relationship between the Nigerian community and their Chinese host took the shape of reforms which were instituted and steered by community leaders. Apart from seeking and obtaining the support of the local authorities and the government of Nigeria through the Nigerian embassy in Beijing, they reorganised the Nigerian Union and negotiated the expansion of access of Nigerians to market spaces as a way to enable them to set up businesses regardless of their visa status. Community leaders packaged access to business spaces as a mechanism to promote productive activities and reduce criminality among Nigerians in the city.

Also, by 2014, the dream to extend official Nigerian consular service with a physical presence in the city was achieved. Furthermore, to cut down on the population of Nigerian overstayers and the financial burdens of overstay, the community heads collaborated with the Nigerian consulate to negotiate an “amnesty” agreement with the host community. Typically, those arrested and facing deportation

⁷ Interview with Mr Ojukwu, Guangzhou, 2017.

because of immigration offences spend between a month and three months—some spend a year or more—in Chinese jails. While incarcerated, they are expected to pay RMB10,000 fines for overstay, and then raise money to procure return tickets, without which they will remain in prison. The amnesty mechanism was used to secure a reduced or no prison sentence—depending on the case—and made it possible for those willing to return voluntarily to do so by paying reduced overstay fees.⁸

By far the most critical project pursued during the reformation phase was the formation of a vigilante group known as “the Peacekeepers.” The primary task of the group was to deal with the criminality problem. With drugs and robbery becoming emblematic of Nigerians’ presence in the city, the community leadership recruited volunteers who tracked and seized culprits, some of whom were handed over to the police. It was a significant community clean-up performed on Nigerians by Nigerians outside the Nigerian borders.

Despite the improvements and stability that occurred during the later phase of arrival, the Nigerian community would fall under a strain that challenged its internal resilience, survival and capability to manage its members. By 2014 especially, the euphoria of the past achievement was waning. Many community members were looking forward to another transition through an election, which never held—and remained so after the researcher exited the field.

The Nigerian community, which one prominent community member tagged as being “...in turbulence right now” (Glover/male/34), was mainly characterised by political and constitutional stalemates, social-relations crack, internal disaffections, and community-wide apathy. The community structure descended into an arena of politicking where personal interests ruled and migrants formed alliances along ethnic lines.

Public Disturbance, Intra-African Dynamics and *Mafan* Identification

As the Nigeria community was experiencing internal problems, the construction of Nigerians as a *mafan* population—distinct from other African communities—was gaining ground. Primarily, the host community and other Africans were associating Nigerians with public disturbance. Central to this “public disturbance” discourse are the public protests and matters of criminality that challenged the orderliness of Guangzhou.

The first incident happened in July of 2009. Following the death of a Nigerian who jumped through the window as he made to escape visa check, Africans staged a protest with many Nigerians participating (Branigan, 2009). Almost three years later, in 2012, there was another protest. This time, a Nigerian man died while in

⁸ The amount mentioned varied, between RMB3,000 to RMB5,000.

police custody. A predominantly Nigerian crowd surrounded a major police station in the city to demand justice against police brutality. Through these unprecedented events, Nigerians openly questioned the power and legitimacy of the host community to deploy violence and cause deaths in the name of immigration control. The incidents established the prominence of Nigerians as a migrant population while, at the same time, bringing their presence to public awareness but in a manner that projected them as peculiar troublemakers.

Interestingly, the capacity of Nigerian migrants to challenge China's pristine orderliness did not end with the protests. In 2013, a high-profile drug-related raid in the famous Lihua Hotel in Yuexiu district (also called Dragon Hotel in the community) led to the arrest of 168 suspects, the majority being from Nigeria (Global Times, 2013). One participant describes the Dragon Hotel as space over which criminally-minded Nigerians exercise considerable dominion until the raid (Adeoye/male/54). Although the police arrested other nationalities in the raid, including other Africans and Chinese people, Nigerians grabbed the headlines. This drug-raid in particular and other criminalities quickly brought Nigerians to the centre stage and amplified their *mafan* status. Reflecting on the audaciousness of Nigerians, a Nigerian with over ten years of continuous presence in China expresses a shock, that:

Only [a] Nigerian that you hear will kill someone by pushing a lady from upstairs, throwing her through the window—a skyscraper. Only Nigerians have come to this country and demonstrated against the Chinese government in China. ... The Chinese will never do that; they [Nigerians] blocked a road. It is only a Nigerian that came here and formed a drugs cartel; they took over the whole hotel and formed mafias. (Muritala/male/54)

While the protest and drug burst did not easily constitute similar actions, in both content and orientation, they led to a similar outcome in that they jointly upheld the perception of Nigerians migrants as *mafan*. For instance, the Chinese media quickly learned to make a distinction among African groups in the city, thus unmasking and making Nigerians more visible. Unlike the 2009 protest, when the media used the word Africans, the local Chinese media specifically mentioned Nigerians when they reported on the protest of 2012. This naming is a significant shift because, in the past, issues involving black people were reported as involving Africans rather than mentioning specific nationalities (Pang and Yuan, 2013).

More critical, however, is that other Africans who felt that the activities of Nigerians were tainting their identity began to align with an African identity that excludes Nigerian migrants. Other Africans blamed Nigerians for spoiling the reputation of all Africans because of their involvement in drugs business and public protest (Lan, 2016b). One Ugandan told a researcher that he stopped associating with Nigerians because of how they shout, drink and fight and the same Ugandan said that Chinese people withdrew from him following the protest of 2009 because they

assumed he was a Nigerian (Lan, 2017b, 135). In short, other Africans did not wish to be identified as or get mixed up, with Nigerians (see Pang and Yuan, 2013).

Back in the Present: Nigerian's *Mafan* Identification

In describing what it meant for them to live in Guangzhou as Nigerians in 2017, many participants insist that Nigerians were treated differently because of their country of origin and past actions. With statements such as “Nigeria's name is always bad” (Favour/male/35) and “Nigeria has been cast” (Salami/male/28), participants affirm that an entrenched nationality-based blemish exists which impact on the lives of Nigerians in China. As Nonso surmises:

They [i.e. Chinese] don't use eyes to see us; they do not like us. Once you are not from Uganda, Tanzania...they do not pity us. Once you are a Nigerian, they will put eyes on you; they will focus on you. (Nonso/male/33)

In the build-up to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2017, the police stepped up the eviction of foreigners, mostly black Africans, in places like Xiaobei. Before their eventual forceful eviction from the rented apartments, three Nigerian participants have lived in Xiaobei for over a year, working and attending school in the city. At different times, while on their way home from work, the police conducted random checks on them by collecting urine samples. They said that the police wants to know if they had traces of drugs in their urines.⁹ When the police visited Isiche (male/33) in the apartment he shared with a Senegalese; he says that “as they entered my house, I brought out my passport. They said this one is NG, as in, one of the police guys said 'this one is NG,' which is Nigeria.” Isiche complained about how he was treated differently during arrest and at the police station, as compared to his Senegalese roommate who had harbored someone “illegally” in the apartment. While having similar legal standing, only him “the Nigerian” was eventually evicted from the apartment. One community leader insists that in the city today, Nigerians are demonised because of the crimes committed by a few, and the host state uses this to justify the unfair treatment of Nigerians (Baron/male/ 50).

While the image of Nigeria has not always been bad; today, “they look at Nigerian like you are nobody!” (Akingbola/male/50). Some participants frequently fingered those they called “bad eggs” as the source of the community-wide stigma that Nigerians experience, with claims that even as many Nigerians have established profitable businesses in the city, paid taxes and maintained clean records, the authorities still perceives everyone as the same. Thus, in Guangzhou today, the vast

⁹ Isiche/male/33; Moses/male/26.

majority of Nigerians believe that “there was something about Nigeria/Nigerian identity” that is stigmatising and damaging to individual and community wellbeing.

Conclusion

Based on the central question raised in this chapter, which is to understand how the processes linked to Africans congregation shapes Afro-Chinese interactions in China, we observe that how the Nigerian community evolved provides insights into the dynamics of their interactions with Chinese people. We also see that as a distinct group of Africans in Guangzhou, Nigerians struggle with being perceived as troublemakers. Despite over two decades of presence and intense interactions between the visitors and the host community, *mafan* continues to animate a perceptual undercurrent that projects Nigerians as criminals; to be suspected, feared and managed.

In the fashion that Brubaker and Cooper (2000) articulate, *mafan* is a categorical model of identification that emanates from the process of categorising by others. We see how the historical and social circumstances specific to the visiting and host communities permit the construction of *mafan* along nationality lines. This label is further entrenched in a processual manner through the everyday constructions that the host society and non-Nigerian African migrants deploy in Guangzhou city. Besides, the dissociative dispositions of non-Nigerian Africans are remarkably evocative of Andreas Wimmer's (2009) boundary-making thesis. Wimmer argues that in a bid to cross into “the mainstream,” groups struggle over the boundaries of acceptance and rejection. When certain categorising identification becomes stigmatised, they struggle to renegotiate their membership, including through distancing. With *mafan* burden, other Africans are remaking the boundaries of “African” in a way that excludes Nigerians. Such re-categorising act demonstrates the utility of shifting away from the assumption of homogeneity and towards a more nuanced understanding of experiences of Africans in China.

Future studies can identify how other African communities are constituted. This endeavor is particularly useful for understanding the universe of rarely discussed historical, social and political circumstances surrounding African presence in Chinese cities. With possible future flows of Africans, such understanding will, in specific and comparative senses, advance the discursive space of Afro-Asian encounters, as well as the literature on contemporary diasporization of Africans in the Asia region.

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