

Guangzhou's African Migrants: Implications for China's Social Stability and China-Africa Relations

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Abstract

Until recently migration was treated like a footnote in the Africa-China discourse. Previously researchers and the media had focused attention on the “cost-benefit analysis” of China’s economic penetration of the continent. However, since 2008 when over a hundred African migrants blocked a major street in Guangzhou protesting the death of a Nigerian in an immigration raid, researchers and the media have been falling over themselves to unpack the phenomenon of migrant exchange in the relationship. There are now about one million Chinese migrants in Africa as against about two hundred and fifty thousand African migrants in China. Migration is a two-edged sword. On the credit side, migration can be a bridge between peoples as well as a major contributor to economic development. On the debit side, it can be a source of dispute between peoples and a threat to the hosts’ social stability. This paper discusses the implications of Guangzhou’s African migrants for China’s social stability and China’s relationship with Africa.

Keywords: *African migrants, Africa-China relationship, Chinese migrants, Guangzhou, social stability*

1. Introduction

Migration has become one of the recurrent themes in the Africa-China discourse. Until recently, the discourse focused on the pros and cons of the continent's economic relationship with the Chinese. The relationship remained the only "item on the agenda" until a decade ago. On 16 July 2008 over a hundred of African migrants, majority of them Nigerian, blocked the Guangyuanxi Street (廣園西路) in Guangzhou 廣州 protesting the death of a Nigerian due to injuries sustained while fleeing an immigration raid. The protest drew China's attention to "the presence of a large community of Africans in Guangzhou" (Bodomo, 2010: 696). More importantly, it drew the world's attention to one of the concomitant realities of the relationship, i.e. migration. A similar protest occurred in 2012.

The scantiness of the literature on African migrants in China and Chinese migrants in Africa prior to the protest reinforces the assertion that migration was a footnote in the discourse. Before the protest, the literature could only boast works like Li Anshan's *Social history of Chinese Overseas in Africa: selected documents, 1800-2005* (2006, in Chinese) and *A history of Overseas Chinese in Africa to 1911* (2012) as well as Bertoncello and Bredeloup's (2007) "The emergence of new African 'trading posts' in Hong Kong and Guangzhou". In contrast, the literature now teems with reams of academic publications and media reports. Among the works that have been done on Chinese migrants in Africa since the protest are: *The dragon's gift* (Brautigam, 2009), "Chinese migrants in Africa as new agents of development: An analytical framework" (Mohan and Tan-Mullins, 2009), "Are the Chinese in Africa more innovative than the Africans? Comparing Chinese and Nigerian entrepreneurial migrants' cultures of innovation" (Kohnert, 2010), "Living in between: The Chinese in South Africa"

(Park, 2012) and “South-South migration and Sino-African small traders: A comparative study of Chinese in Senegal and Africans in China” (Cissé, 2013). Similarly, some of the works that have been done on African migrants in China are: “The African enclave of Guangzhou: A case study of Xiaobeilu” (Li, Xue, Lyons and Brown, 2008), “In the dragon’s den: African traders in Guangzhou 2005-2008” (Lyons, Brown and Li, 2009), “The African presence in contemporary China” (Bodomo, 2009), “Foreign migrations to China’s city markets: The case of African merchants” (Le Bail, 2009), “The African trading community in Guangzhou: An emerging bridge for Africa-China relations” (Bodomo, 2010), “From Guangzhou to Yiwu: Emerging facets of the African diaspora in China” (Bodomo and Ma, 2010), *Africans in China: A sociocultural study and its implications on Africa-China relations* (Bodomo, 2012), “African trading posts in Guangzhou: Emergent or recurrent commercial form” (Bredeloup, 2012), “African traders in Guangzhou: Routes, reasons, profits, dreams” (Yang, 2012), “‘Agents of translation’: West African entrepreneurs in China as vectors of social change” (Marfang and Thiel, 2014), “Africans in China: The experiences from education and training” (Bodomo, 2014), “The African traveller and the Chinese customs official: Ethnic minority profiling at border check points in Hong Kong and China” (Bodomo, 2015), “Africans in Guangzhou” (Mathews, 2015), “The social construction of Guangzhou as a translocal trading place” (Giles, 2015), “African traders in Yiwu: Their trade networks and their role in the distribution of ‘Made in China’ products in Africa” (Cissé, 2015), “A ‘Wild West’ of trade? African women and men and the gendering of globalization from below in Guangzhou” (Huynh, 2015) and “African diaspora in China: Reality, research and reflection” (Li, 2015). The migrant exchange is being monitored and analysed by research fora such as the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network (CA/AC).

Migration creates diasporas (Collier, 2013: 40). For example, the trans-Atlantic slave trade created the nucleus of the huge black diaspora in the Americas. Similarly, the voluntary migration of the Chinese during the Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties created the huge Chinese diaspora (*huaqiao* 華僑) in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. By the instrumentality of inter-racial marriage, it can also create mixed-race populations such as the emergent African Chinese ethnic group in Guangzhou. As a double-edged sword, it can foster or strain relations between origin and host places. In addition, it can impinge upon the hosts' social stability.

This paper discusses the implications of Guangzhou's African migrants for China's social stability and China's relationship with Africa. The objective is to problematize migration in Africa-China relationship.

2. African Migration to China

African migration to China has its origins in Mao Zedong 毛澤東's Cold War diplomacy. The first wave of the migration began with the offer, in 1956, of four scholarships to Egyptians to study in China following the establishment of diplomatic ties between their country and China. Scholarship has been a major instrument of Chinese diplomacy in Africa ever since then. The plan to use scholarships to create the first generation of pro-Chinese Africans was constrained largely by the country's own economic conditions. There is no evidence that any of those Africans who benefitted from the scholarship diplomacy stayed behind after their studies. After all, the country's economy was such as would not have encouraged any thoughts of long-term residency. However, nowadays many African students stay behind to reconfigure themselves into economic migrants. Students have played very

important roles in fostering Africa-China relations. They have not only helped in forming the nucleus of African trader population in the country (Le Bail, 2009: 9), but also have, through proficiency in Mandarin, improved communication between their continent and China at both official and non-official levels.

Until recently, African migration has focused on North America and Western Europe (Wang, 2013: 2). The Cold War, skill-targeted immigration policies as well as colonial ties determined the focus. The focus began to diversify after the end of the Cold War so that Asia has emerged as another major destination. China is a major destination for African migration to Asia. Its African migrant population, the largest in Asia (Atanasov, 2015), has been described by Bodomo and Ma (2010: 283) as “Africa’s newest diaspora”. The population is comprised of students, traders and English-language tutors (Politzer, 2008). Traders, the majority of whom reside in Guangzhou, Yiwu 義烏 and Shanghai 上海, constitute the majority of the population (Bodomo, 2009: 4; Bodomo, 2010: 699; Bertonecelo and Bredeloup, 2007: 95). Those students who stayed behind after their studies formed the nucleus of the trader population (Bodomo, 2009: 5; Bork-Huffer and Yuan-Ihle, 2014: 581; Le Bail, 2009: 9). Most of the migrants come from West Africa and the Maghreb (Davies, 2009: 3) and are found in Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai and Beijing 北京.

3. A Glance at Guangzhou’s African Migrants

Guangzhou is not only the best-known Chinese, if not Asian, city in Africa, it is also “the city where the presence of Africans [in Asia] has been most thoroughly studied” (Marfaing and Thiel, 2014: 7). Its African migrants play a very important role in the export end of China’s trade relationship with Africa. The literature on its African migration, which

has grown exponentially during the last decade, is a mosaic of epistemological perspectives, drawing from disciplines such as international relations, sociology, linguistics, economics and gender studies. The migrants are a focus of media attention too. The city is attractive for African migrants because of its generally warm weather, commercial ambience and social networks which can aid adaptation. The migrants, whose number has eluded approximation, have established “enclaves” along colonial language and religious lines. For example, most English-speaking and Christian migrants transact their businesses in the San Yuan Li 三元里 district, while most French-speaking and Muslim migrants transact theirs in the Xiaobei 小北 and Yuexiu 越秀 districts (Lan, 2016: 5).

The presence of a large African migrant population in Guangzhou is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it can help to further China’s relationship with Africa. On the other hand, it can have grave implications not only for China’s social stability but also for China’s relationship with Africa. The implications are the thesis of this paper.

4. Deviancy and Agitation for Social Inclusion

Marriage into the host community is a strategy for dealing with the challenge of migrant adaptation. Male migrants use the strategy more than female migrants do. The strategy is in wide use by African migrants in Guangzhou.

African-Chinese marriage, whose stock has been on the rise since the 2008 street protest (interview, 2016), is one of the factors that are gradually changing Guangzhou’s ethno-cultural landscape. Typically, an African-Chinese marriage involves a reasonably educated African and a barely educated Han 漢 Chinese from a poor, rural family, who had worked as a *fuwuyuan* 服務員 (shop attendant or waitress) or a rich

unmarried woman derisively called *shengnü* 剩女 (“marriage leftovers”, “glut mistress”). Marriage between the migrants and ethnic minorities or young, reasonably educated Hans is rare because the ethnic minorities, especially the Uighurs, tend towards endogamy, while young, reasonably educated Hans would not want to “marry down”.

African-Chinese marriage is generally a marriage of convenience. Mostly a migrant will want to use it to negotiate immigration obstacles, while the spouse will want to use it to move up the economic ladder (Marsh, 2014), circumvent the country’s one-child policy or bail out of the stigma of late marriage. Intermarriage does not win a permanent residency, let alone Chinese citizenship; and some women would instigate the deportation of their spouses so they could appropriate their family business.

African Chinese, whose number is estimated at two hundred¹ (CCTV America, 2015), bear African names such as Chioma and Nnenna. Their birthright (Chinese) citizenship makes them eligible for state-subsidized education, healthcare, transport, etc. Only few of them can speak African tongues. They face an uncertain future in the country. Deportation, death, desertion, divorce or voluntary return to Africa usually results in many of them being raised as “technical orphans” by single mothers. In the event of deportation or voluntary return, most wives would be most reluctant to join their husbands in Africa. “Technical widows” – those who have lost their spouses due to any of the aforementioned eventualities, excepting death – who find it difficult to support their children might abandon or traffic them (interview, 2011). Those Chinese who regard spousal loss as a visitation for marrying a “*hei gui*” (黑鬼, “black devil”) would be so reluctant to help any intermarried relative raise her “technical orphans”. A migrant father can lose the chance of re-union with his children if their separation occurred when the children were still too young to know who he was (interview,

2015).

The inability of most single mothers to give their children the good preparation they will need to be able to compete in a country where they are most likely to be treated as an ethnic minority can predispose the children to delinquency and social maladjustment. Most “technical widows” remain in the city, leaving the children in the care of their grandparents in the rural area. They remain in the city in order to earn the money they can remit to the grandparents for the children’s upkeep. Single parenting has grave implications for children’s psychological development. According to Ablow (2012), children from single-parent homes may face not only poverty but also a higher rate of depression and behavioral disturbances.

African Chinese’s exposure to racism is already an issue in China’s ethnicity discourse, as evidenced by the incident involving Lou Jing 婁婧, a TV show star who was raised by a single mother that had been deserted by her black American spouse even before Jing’s birth in 1989. Lou became “a national sensation” following her participation in a Chinese reality television show called “Go! Oriental Angel” (《加油! 东方天使》). As an CNN report commented, it was not necessarily her talent, but her skin colour that propelled her into the limelight.² African Chinese already encounter racial discrimination at school and on the streets (interview, July 2016); and racial discrimination can easily suck its victims into a life of crime.

Agitation by African Chinese for social inclusion in the future is already receiving attention from researchers. For example, Bodomo (2010: 694) posited that “in 100 years’ time an African-Chinese Minority Ethnic Group could be demanding self-identity and full citizenship rights in the heart of Guangzhou and other major cities.” This timeframe, however, is too generous and elastic. A more realistic timeframe would be the next twenty years by which time most of the children would have

attained adulthood and acquired the wherewithal with which they can force attention to any demand for social inclusion.

Agitation by Guangzhou's African Chinese for social inclusion can have two implications for China's social stability. Firstly, it can aggravate the tension that already exists between the Hans and ethnic minorities and create tension between African Chinese and the other ethnicities as well. Minorities might want to make common cause with African Chinese against the Hans – an alliance that can escalate ethnic tension in Xinjiang and Tibet Autonomous Regions. In addition, African Chinese can receive external support from Africans and African Americans against the other ethnicities. If externalized, the agitation can easily degenerate into a protracted rebellion. Secondly, it can redound to political activism on the Mainland and anti-Chinese sentiment in Hong Kong. Political activism has been gaining momentum since the Tiananmen Square (天安門廣場) protests.

5. Xenophobia

Xenophobia is a concomitant of migration. Hosts exhibit territorial behavior, resenting all forms of competition with outsiders for jobs, social amenities, romance, socio-cultural and political space, etc. Such resentment is universal and often shades into xenophobia.

Xenophobic violence against African migrants in Guangzhou is undoubtedly loading. It is likely to be triggered by resentment against the migrants' encroachment on the hosts' romantic and commercial space. According to Marsh (2014), the Chinese generally resent African-Chinese marriage. Interestingly, romantic escapade caused the only openly expressed anti-African sentiment that has occurred in the country – the 1998-99 club brawl involving Chinese and African students at Nanking universities. The brawl nearly ruptured China's diplomatic

relationship with African countries such as Ghana.³

The other factor that could trigger xenophobic violence is the fierce struggle for the control of the commercial space. Until recently, the Chinese controlled the link between Chinese manufacturers and traders coming from Africa. In fact, African traders and African migrants nearly completely relied on local wholesalers to access manufacturers. However, the monopoly is being eroded by the involvement of certain migrants, especially members of migrant sales representatives' associations such as Association of Nigeria Registered Company Operators in China (ANRCOC), in that critical segment of the supply chain. According to IK, a leading member of ANRCOC (interview, December 2016), resentment exists but only subtly. Most Africans going to Guangzhou now rely on migrant intermediaries to buy from manufacturers. Most intermediaries use their Chinese spouses or girlfriends to link with manufacturers. Territorial behavior by resentful hosts can explode into xenophobic violence in the near future. Such violence can spread to other cities with sizable migrant populations such as Yiwu, Beijing and Shanghai.

6. Drug trafficking

Guangzhou's African migrant economy is three-quarters legitimate trade and one-quarter drug trafficking, Internet fraud and prostitution. Legal migrants dominate legitimate trade, illegal migrants the other three economic engagements. Chinese spouses and girlfriends are widely used to retail drugs and to handle Internet fraud receipts and remittances. West Africans dominate drug trafficking and Internet fraud, East Africans prostitution (interview, 2016).

The majority of African migrants involved in China's drug trade operate at the distribution end of the trade. Only a few migrants operate

at the smuggling end. Supply mostly comes from Guangdong's illicit drug factories, Hong Kong, neighbouring countries and South America. Supply from Africa is small and mostly consists of marijuana cultivated on the continent and re-exported imports from South America. Chinese spouses and girlfriends mostly handle distribution, which helps to cover tracks for the migrants. About ninety-five percent of African prison inmates engaged in drug trafficking. Guangzhou prisons have the largest number of inmates, which indicates that the majority of drug-dealing migrants reside in Guangzhou. Drug trafficking is one of the reasons for introducing tougher residency requirements for African migrants in the country.

China's tough attitude towards drug trafficking is a product of history. According to Zhang and Chin (2016: 2), "Illicit drug dealing and consumption are highly stigmatized in China because of its bitter history. All Chinese governments in the past 150 years [since the Opium War], irrespective of their political persuasions, have tried various harsh measures in curtailing drug use and trade, and the society at large holds drug addicts in disrepute and considers it a failure of the family." The Opium War, which led to the partial colonization of the country and the forcible opening up of Guangzhou, Ningbo 寧波, Xiamen 廈門, Fuzhou 福州 and Shanghai to foreign trade, is considered "the beginning not only of modern Chinese history but of national humiliation" (Schurmann and Schell, 1967: 131). It is among the factors that have shaped China's attitude towards foreigners.

African drug gangs operating in Guangzhou are among the drug gangs being targeted under China's massive crackdown on illegal drug trafficking. They operate in collusion with Chinese gangs. For example, the drug gang that was busted at Liuhua Hotel (流花賓館) in Yuexiu district in 2013 consisted of Africans and Chinese.⁴ Gang violence involving both the migrants and their Chinese partners already exists in

the city (interview, 2016). The gangs can jeopardise the municipal economy by scaring away international traders or by demanding protection money from residents. Struggle to control the trade can spawn brutalities like the ones Mexico is grappling with. It can also spawn gangsterism and street violence among non-drug dealers.

7. China-Africa Relationship

Migration has emerged in this age of globalization as one of the factors that define relations among nations. They can foster relationship between receiving and sending countries. For example, the U.S.'s centuries-old friendship with Britain is largely a result of migration. At the same time, they can be a source of misunderstanding between countries. For example, "An international conflict can arise when a government classifies individuals as refugees with a well-founded fear of persecution and has therefore implicitly accused their country of origin of engaging in persecution. In other words, the mere granting of asylum can create an antagonistic relationship." (Weiner, 1995: 137).

African migrants in Guangzhou can strain China's relationship with Africa if their home countries should think that they are victims of unfavourable immigration regulations. Unfavourable immigration regulations by China can influence African countries' attitude towards Chinese migrants. According to Marsh (2014), "African states – home to millions of Chinese, also often undocumented – are watching closely to see how their citizens are treated on mainland soil." African countries will condemn the involvement of their nationals in the drug trade. Still they will protest their detention or execution as well as China's refusal of their proposal for prisoner exchange agreement. Demands by citizens and organisations such as the United Nations that states protect nationals facing execution abroad can harden Africa's attitude towards Chinese

migrants.

African Chinese can become a formidable group in China in the next few decades. Their agitation for social inclusion can be easily transnationalized with support from Africans and the African diaspora in Europe and the Americas. African support can come from both the state and separatist movements such as the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB). Transnationalized agitation can exacerbate China's ethnic tension. It can also test its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

8. Conclusion and Suggestions

Africa and China are beginning to feel the full impact of migration, which had hitherto been treated like a footnote in their relationship's discourse. African migration is mostly self-sponsored. On the contrary, Chinese migration is mostly quasi-state-sponsored. Migration can enrich the relationship. At the same time, it can strain the relationship and, additionally, impinge upon the hosts' social stability. African migrants in Guangzhou are receiving a lot of the attention focused on the migrant exchange because of their adaptation challenges. Their recourse to intermarriage as an adaptation strategy and the engagement of a few migrants in drugs, Internet fraud and prostitution can impinge upon China's social stability and China's relationship with Africa.

Since migration has become a fact of their relationship, Africa and China should consider the following actions. Firstly, they should begin to treat migration as a policy matter at bilateral and multilateral levels of interaction. For example, the phenomenon should become an agenda item at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Secondly, they should begin to fund research on the phenomenon. The West, not Africa or China, have funded most of the research that has been done on

Africans in China and the Chinese in Africa. For example, the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network (CA/AC) is funded by the Henry Luce Foundation of America. Thirdly, Africa should adopt a set of “quality control” measures to ensure that only people with genuine aspirations are allowed to travel to China. Likewise, China should take steps to address complaints about migrant labour exportation to the continent. In addition, it should slacken its attitude towards African migrants, given the fact that African migrants are very important to its economic relationship with Africa. Its one-size-fits-all approaches to its African “migrant crisis” have made it difficult for it to adopt measures to aid the adaptation of migrants with genuine aspirations. More importantly, it should quickly come to terms with the fact that it is now both a leading migrant-giving and migrant-receiving country. By so doing it can better handle its African “migrant crisis” as well as prepare itself for the eventuality of agitation for social inclusion by its emerging African Chinese population.

Notes

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Policy Comments

