

ECONOMIC NOMADS IN GUANGZHOU, A CITY OF FLOWS

By Sam Piranty

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SAM PIRANTY is a producer and journalist working at the BBC. He has reported for outlets such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, Think Africa Press, *Le Monde* and others in print, radio and film. He holds a Master's degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and is currently working on a project called Borders and Checkpoints. In 2013 Sam travelled to Guangzhou thanks to a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant as part of a migration project looking at trading communities in China.



At about 5am every morning outside the Don Franc hotel in the Xiaobei Lu district of Guangzhou, I'm awoken by a cacophony of noise. The main culprits ruining my morning lie-in are some serious squabblers.

About 20 men from the north-western provinces of China, dressed in polo shirts and trousers, are furiously bartering over currency exchange rates as they transfer what looks like hundreds of thousands of dollars and yuan. Nearby sit about ten Uyghur men from Xinjiang,



Guangzhou night market.

with thick, twitching moustaches aggressively touting rides on the back of their three-wheeled motorbikes with makeshift umbrella roofs to keep off the rain. Next to them Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Moroccans and Lebanese argue and laugh over prices of kitchen doors, rubber ducks, clothes, hair extensions, toilet seats, football boots and mobile phone accessories with their Chinese counterparts. Stall holders sit drowning in various products, their heads the only body part visible above their sea of goods. Among the morning soundscape one also hears tales of Lagos, Luanda and Lesotho as traders from Cairo to Cape Town and Senegal to Somalia discuss their latest travel and business plans while the morning train chugs along the overhead tracks.

Everyone and everything is on the move, every day. Cash quickly changes hands, goods are hurried into clapped-out Nissan vans, and buyers jump into taxis while answering two mobile phone calls at once. It is true that there are many African traders in this part of the city, but to simply label this, as many commentators have done, 'Africa Town', 'Chocolate City' or 'Little Africa' is misleading. In fact, most people who live locally have never even heard those descriptions. This is a part of a city, orchestrated by flows of people and cash, that

is constantly moving and adapting. No label sticks. 'Chocolate City' does not exist.

Straight to Guangzhou

The history of the Xiaobei Lu area is fascinating. Recounting the tale told to him by a long-term Guangzhou resident, researcher Roberto Castillo suggests that only 30 years ago the area was farmland. "The first people to come were internal Chinese migrants from Hunan province," he says. "They developed the land and built some of the buildings and structures that are there today. Once the land had been developed, then came migrants from the Middle East."

Many of these migrants acted as middlemen, sourcing and distributing products for their African clients. However, from the mid-1990s, many of the African traders permanently residing in the city today decided to cut out the middlemen and head straight to Guangzhou themselves. "By around 2004," Castillo continues, "there were more and more Africans, and by 2006-2007 almost all the Arab traders had moved away."

The early period saw many African traders concentrated around the Xiaobei Lu and Sanyuanli areas. However, over time Castillo suggests that we could no longer talk about a concentration of African migrants in one or two places. "There are many Africans spread in many different places," he explains. "What was once a more stable, set community is now an archipelago, spread throughout north-western Guangzhou." The population is also a largely transient one, with many traders staying for a week or two before moving onto another destination. Knowing how many African migrants are currently in the city is a difficult to impossible task.

Home is moving

The hotel I'm staying in is famed for its African clientele which is the main reason why every so often immigration police, dressed in light blue and black uniforms, loiter

"WHAT KIND OF THINGS DO YOU TRADE?', I ASK DAVID. "EVERYTHING. SERIOUSLY, EVERYTHING," HE ANSWERS.

outside and in the markets asking every black man or woman for their passport. The hotel is used as much for sleeping as it is for storing goods. Beds get lost underneath colourful bags bursting at the seams with clothes, shoes and various kitchen appliances. Many have to squeeze through the door and clamber up the mountains of bags to fashion a place to sleep, three inches from the ceiling.

Coming back from breakfast, as I walk, shoes clicking down the hallway towards my room, a man pokes his head around his door: "This is why Africa is moving up and why you have an economic crash. White men always walk so slow", he shouts. David* is from Nairobi and has been in Guangzhou for three days. His room is already full to the brim with bags of mobile phone headsets. The reason he looked out of his room was because he thought I was the porter coming to collect his goods to take to the port. "I have spent about US\$20,000 here," says David. "Once I get everything shipped back home, I'll have doubled that. Africa has lots of phones. They all want to talk but are too lazy to hold them so they need headsets. I've got no time to waste though, I go to Vietnam next. It is cheaper there."

David is reiterating something I was to hear from dozens of others. China, and Guangzhou in particular, has always been known as the place to come and purchase cheap goods. However, with rising living costs and greater visa restrictions, many African traders are looking elsewhere to source their products. Vietnam, Thailand and Turkey were all consistently mentioned as more lucrative places to visit.

I arrange to have a drink with David later in one of the bars surrounding the hotel. David takes me down a



Guangzhou street trading.

crooked, winding alleyway and up a flight of stairs lit by a neon sign saying ‘African food. This Way’. As we enter the bar there is a tense atmosphere. Everyone is on edge. You could hear a pin drop if it were not for the rather scratchy sound of a Chinese football commentator coming through the speakers. There is no fight or argument. Chelsea are playing a friendly. We take a seat at the back of the room as we order a couple of beers.

“You know, I have watched Chelsea in eleven different countries,” says David. He is talking to me but with his eyes fixed on the six different screens all showing the same match. “I have watched them in India, China, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, Kenya, Tanzania, England, Scotland.” He pauses before whispering to me in a Scottish accent that England will never win the World Cup again. He seems upset when I agree. “And then also in Bangladesh and Uganda”.

David travels regularly between Africa and parts of Asia sourcing goods and shipping them back home. “What kind of things do you trade?”, I ask David. “Everything. Seriously, everything,” he answers. “If you wanted something, I could get it for you. I move wherever a product is cheapest. You have to be alert and ready to go at a moment’s notice, else, as a trader you will never make money.” We pause for a moment as Chelsea hit the crossbar and the whole bar hold their heads in their hands before David continues, “I have been travelling for almost thirty years. Flights are so cheap now. I don’t stop.”

David spends about six weeks a year in Kenya, his country of birth. I ask him where home is for him. “Ha. Home?”, he replies. “What is that? A house? Home is where you feel calm, home is where you feel settled, right? Well, for me, I spend most of my time in the air or on a boat. Home for me is on a flight from Beijing to Tokyo. Home for me is on a train from Beijing to Guangzhou. Can it be possible that home is moving? Well, whatever, home for me is moving.” Chelsea go on to win and with David in a good mood we move on to another watering hole.

Economic nomads

Later that evening I am introduced to a number of other traders all from East Africa who spend the majority of their time away from that part of the continent. All of them tell me about how they hop from one trade hub to the next within a network of Asian marketplaces sourcing goods and sending them to various African buyers. They are the modern-day economic nomads.

My conversations with them are frequently interrupted by phone calls or text messages from one of their many mobile phones. Each trader has at least three – one for each country they trade in or as one told me: “one for each girlfriend.” The text messages and phone calls are not only from girlfriends or business associates, however. Many are from members running text networks alerting those without visas to the location of the immigration police. I recall one afternoon in a market in Sanyuanli where I was distracted from buying a pair of shoes by an orchestra of text tones. Suddenly the market was empty and sure enough as I went outside to see where everyone had gone, dozens of immigration police were waiting, checking passports. In a place where for many African traders, especially Nigerians, visas are particularly difficult to extend, mobility is key.

On a number of occasions, I meet African traders with Chinese partners and children who have lived in Guangzhou for over a decade and are still on a tourist visa. Robert, a Nigerian who owns a luxury clothes shop, has lived in Guangzhou for almost 13 years. He lives with his Chinese wife and three children in a gated community in the city. Robert’s passport says he is a tourist but he argues that despite its business restrictions, it doesn’t bother him.

“You see, I have always been a tourist,” he says. “What does it matter what your passport says? Yes, it would be good for my business if I had a resident visa but China does not like foreigners. It does not like foreigners, but we know that. Therefore we should not complain when they don’t extend or give us good visas. You come to Guangzhou to do business. You go to Vietnam to do business. You don’t go to Guangzhou to come home.”

Getting used to us

One morning Robert takes me on a tour of the city in his old blue Mercedes. He takes great pride in letting me sit in the front seat which he has just upholstered himself. As we drive around the outskirts of the city, windows down,

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the amount of construction work is remarkable. Cranes, scaffolding and tower blocks dominate the skyline, growing by the minute. “They moved the farmers there you know,” he says. “Many of the farmers were given lots of money and moved into the edge of the city in those flats. I know this because one came into my shop to buy a suit. It was the first one he ever bought.”

Robert is referring to the rapid urbanisation development where rural land owners receive pay-offs to move into urban areas. “When the farmer came into my shop, he was a bit scared,” he recalls. “He told my wife he had never seen so many *hei guis* [which roughly translates as ‘black ghosts’ or ‘black devils’]. When he saw my children, he could not believe it. He asked my wife if they needed to go to hospital. We laughed a lot but you know many Chinese still think like this. Though in Guangzhou it has changed. Before they used to say we smelled when we got on a bus or laugh at us in the street all the time. Now it is less. I think the Chinese are getting used to us.”

We then take a tour of the centre of the city. Along the highways Robert points out various grey and rather dull offices and high-rise buildings which aren’t quite what they seem. “That one has five churches in it,” he reveals. “There are two Congolese churches and a few Portuguese churches, you know, for the Angolans.” Many African churches in Guangzhou are illegal under Chinese law and so have to conduct their services discreetly from old office blocks and halls.

We drive further and he points at a factory, now derelict and empty. “That was a place where they used to make fake drugs, illegal drugs to sell in Africa. Look at it now. Empty. Even the buildings here are tourists. One minute they are a church and when the police find out, they have to move. One minute it is a factory and now it has to move. The problem is China is too big. The police can’t see everything like people without visas and places without official homes. We Africans are too quick for them.”

The sense of impermanence and transiency runs throughout the African communities in Guangzhou. Some of this is self-made, and some is forced upon them by Chinese authorities and their visa restrictions.

Moving on

As the heavens open and the rain starts to pummel down on his precious Mercedes, Robert winks at me and presses the electric window switch. “Business in China can be

good you see. You have to put up with a lot but if you stay in tune with what people want, you can make a lot of money. Prices are becoming too high though, so soon we will move on again. I will take my family to another place. I am a tourist after all!” Robert laughs and lets me out at one of Guangzhou’s new spectacular metro stations. I disappear underground, down the escalator, next to a Ugandan. Despite the heavy presence of many Africans in parts of the city, out in suburbia all eyes are firmly on him.

Later that week I am taken out by David to a nightclub which according to him is known for its ‘African nights’. A few hours after we arrive, at around 4 am, we watch Lo-D, a Nigerian musician, as he raps on stage alongside a Cameroonian rapper from Moscow and a Ghanaian MC. After their performance I talk to the Cameroonian, M-One, about his lifestyle. With his name adorned on his cap, diamond-encrusted watch and flashy outfit, he is clearly doing well for himself.

“I work the circuit between Moscow, Beijing, Guangzhou and other places,” he says. “Europe won’t have me, well, not yet, but Asia and Russia love me.” He goes on to tell me about how he regularly tours all over the Asian continent and shows me pictures of his Russian supermodel wife. “You know in the UK you can be popular but only 50 million people will know you. Here, you can be popular and a billion people know you.” Mid-conversation we are interrupted by another musician, from Angola. “You know why he’s popular here? Because the younger Chinese, they like people from Africa. They know what Africa has done for China. It is the older ones who are racist but the older ones are not the guys who will buy the music.”

That morning, I stumble back to my hotel with David, slightly tipsy through the bustling crowds of taxi drivers, currency exchange men and African traders. I wake up at around 2 pm in the afternoon to find a note under my door from David. “Bangkok calls. Had to go. Going home for a few hours.”

There is a population of longer-term African residents living in Guangzhou, but the majority are just passing through. They slip beneath the radar of statisticians and economists and defy the easy categorisation journalists crave. With decreasing transport costs, their fluidity and transience offers a glimpse into the economic nomads of the future, where home is on the move.

*Names have been changed to protect interviewees’ identities.