

China Africa Diasporas Trip Report
August 20-21: The University of Hong Kong (Planning Meeting)
August 22-24: Guangzhou (Meeting and Fieldwork)
August 25-28: Yi Wu, Zhejiang Province (Fieldwork)

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(First draft September 9, 2010; revised May 19, 2011)

The Team

On 20 August 2010, a team of researchers from The University of Hong Kong and Yale University gathered in May Hall, HKU, to begin the first research mission of the China Africa Diasporas project. The two year project is jointly supported by funds from the Sun Hung Kai Properties Kwoks' Foundation Limited administered by the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale University, the Inter-Asia Initiative at Yale University, and the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong.

From Hong Kong University, participants included Professor Helen Siu, honorary director of the Hong Kong Institute and Professor of Anthropology at Yale; Dr. Jascha Yu and Ms. Emily Ip, Associate Directors of the Institute; Dr. Adams Bodomo, Associate Professor of Linguistics and head of the African Studies Program at HKU, Dr. Matthew Mosca, Post-doctoral Fellow, and Cao Nanlai, Research Assistant Professor at the HKIHSS. From Yale, Professor Roderick McIntosh, Assistant Professor Narges Erami, and Assistant Professor Mike McGovern of the Anthropology Department traveled to Hong Kong, and were joined by three Yale doctoral students; Yang Meijian, Susanna Fioratta, and Michael Degani. The team also included Yan Lijun, doctoral student at HKU, and Du Feng, doctoral student at Sun Yat-sen University. Project assistants were Tiffany Chen from Hopkins School and Francis Cheng from HKIHSS.

Research Training Mission

The group convened in order to explore the deepening and broadening links between China and the 54 countries of the African continent. These links have been extensively commented upon in the international press, particularly in regards to rapidly growing Chinese presence in African countries, with primary resource for infrastructure swaps. This reporting has often been somewhat superficial and even alarmist, and a smaller flow of articles about the rapidly growing African populations in Hong Kong and several southern Chinese cities have also struck an anxious tone. The researchers in the group sought to begin a process of delving beneath these surface impressions, hoping to combine the local knowledge and language skills of local researchers (whether in China or Africa) and the fresh perspective of scholars with longstanding familiarity with the mobile

populations across the continents. This first stage of the project focused on African populations in China, while subsequent ones will look at Chinese populations in West Africa. The research project is designed to be multi-sited and to cross linguistic, cultural and political lines. It relies on the experiences of senior scholars to build a global platform for a younger generation to bond intellectually and institutionally.

The Field Trip

The team spent two full days in Hong Kong, both exchanging ideas and perfecting research questions, and focusing on Chungking Mansions, the site of greatest activity by the African and South Asian trader communities in Hong Kong. Professor Gordon Matthews of Chinese University of Hong Kong spent an afternoon and evening with the team, first presenting his findings (which will soon be published as an ethnographic monograph entitled *The Ghetto at the Center of the World*), and then accompanying the team to the Chungking Mansions in order to speak with some of his African friends and acquaintances there. The Africa specialists were pleased to meet traders from Mali and Guinea, where Professors McIntosh, McGovern, and Susanna Fioratta have conducted long-term research, and they were able to ask focused questions about the traders' trajectories from West Africa to Hong Kong, their business practices, and the challenges and satisfactions they had experienced in Hong Kong. They were especially happy to talk with Monsieur Mamadi Sibi, the representative of the African community in Hong Kong and a 30-year resident of the city. Sibi is a Malian Soninke who has raised his children as fluent Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong. He was able to give a global view of the evolution of the African trader community in Hong Kong, and the ways in which it had changed demographically and in its practices over time.

The next day, the team had an engaging seminar with Dr. Bodomo, who gave a presentation that took African restaurants and foodways as a window on African communities' attempts to recreate a sense of home and of community in China, but also the unintended consequences including the intermixing of Chinese and African foods and the fact that the cooks in many African restaurants are now Chinese.



After this morning seminar, the team headed to the Kam Tin area in the New Territories. The team observed the used car “junk yards” along the Kam-Sheung Highway where African and South Asian traders buy used car parts for sale in their home countries. The team then went across the border to Guangdong by bus via the new Hong Kong-Shenzhen West Corridor. The team continued its trip along the Shenzhen-Guangzhou highway, observing a part of the Pearl River delta converted by foreign direct investment in recent decades into industrial parks producing a huge variety of commodities for world consumption. The highway was clogged by trucks and long-distance buses carrying migrant workers. Private cars were few by comparison until the team approached Guangzhou.

In Guangzhou, they stayed on the campus of Sun Yat-Sen University. Professor Li Zhigang of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning delivered a comprehensive presentation on the history and spatial development of the city of Guangzhou from the Tang Dynasty to the present. The team also met students from other departments and from the Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences (Dr. Chen Jie).

The team’s second stop was the Shishi Sacred Heart Cathedral, built by the French in the 1870s, and a center of the African Christian community, currently estimated to number between 30,000 and 70,000. The historic church offers English language Sunday service. Among the two thousand or so who filled the cathedral that Sunday, over 80% were African men. After the Catholic service, the crowd regrouped in an adjacent building for a charismatic Christian service that often lasts for hours. It was followed by a dinner and discussion with Mr. Atta, an African community leader from Ghana.



The following day, the team spent its time in the Deng Feng district, where many itinerant African and Uighur traders live. They visited the commodities market for electronics, cosmetics, wigs, clothing and accessories in the Tianxiu and Taoci Building of the Xiaobei District, where mostly Africans and some Arabs come to

buy from merchants who are Chinese, South Asian and African. After lunch, the team visited the Sanyuanli markets (Jinan Commercial City, the Tangqi Foreign Trade Clothing Mall). They watched how the low end goods, mainly shoes and clothing, were bought and sold, packaged and shipped. Some team members were able to locate itinerant traders from the part of West Africa where they do fieldwork, and made connections.



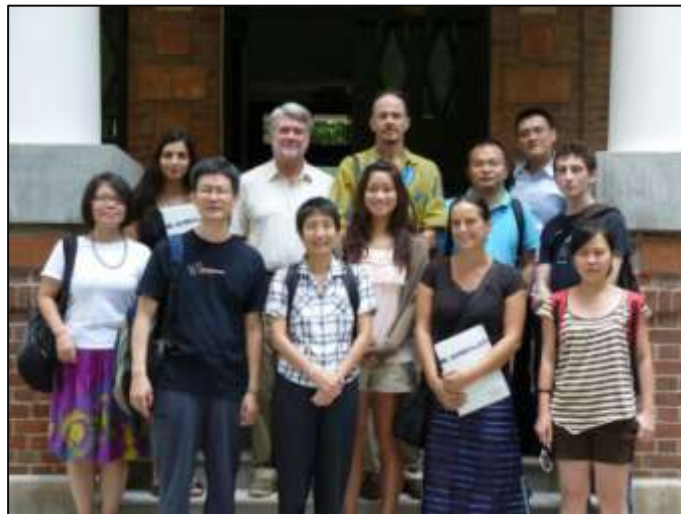
In the afternoon and evening, the team followed the path of African Muslims in the city, talking with the Imams of three of the city's four mosques (Islamic Sage Tomb, the Huaisheng Mosque, and the Xiao Dong Ying Mosque) to get a sense of the changing social profiles of the believers.

The next day, after a visit to the Guangzhou Museum to understand the historically significant maritime trade in the region, the team headed to Yiwu, Zhejiang Province. Yiwu, a former rural county, has established the world's largest small commodities market. It has become the new frontier of the commercial interface between China and the rest of the world. Although European and American buyers take up a large percentage of business, traders from the Middle East (and an increasing number of Africans) were everywhere visible. During this portion of the trip, the team took its lead from Professor Zhang Letian of Fudan University who accompanied us along with three of his students. This part of the trip was also facilitated by the Yiwu Foreign Affairs Office. The team visited the Yiwu commercial center, its new mosque (said to be the largest in eastern China), its new Buddhist temple, a number of Arab cafes and restaurants, and the Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College where we had a fruitful exchange with local teachers about the interaction of culture, policy and the development of the Yiwu

markets. During the three days in Yiwu, the Foreign Affairs Office kindly arranged for us to meet with managers of the market, trade and immigration officials, and a discussion session with Arab and African businessmen.

The team flew to Guangzhou from Yiwu in the morning of August 27, and returned to Hong Kong by the through train in the late afternoon.

A full program of the planning meeting and fieldtrip in Guangzhou and Yiwu is at [Annex](#).



Findings and Hypotheses

The evening before the team left Yiwu, members had a long meeting to summarize the experience of the trip, to select relevant themes for future consideration, and to plan the sharing of information and the logistics of a workshop in Africa next year. The team decided it would focus on three levels of the overall China-Africa phenomenon. First, they will look at the flow of people and goods. This 'biographical' approach, pioneered by Appadurai, Kopytoff et al. under the rubric of 'the social life of things,' seems particularly appropriate to this study of transnational petit bourgeois exchange. Secondly, the team will look closely at the institutional and administrative context in which these flows take place. Finally, as sociocultural anthropologists, most of the scholars involved in the project will tend to approach these meta-level issues via the bottom-up approach offered by ethnography. The researchers will be especially attentive to those areas of people's lives that might be characterized as 'total social facts,' or those practices, habits and often unconscious acts that crystallize a whole set of social, cultural, economic and political relations. These may include the realms of food and eating; gift-giving; sexuality; the techniques of the body, including hair care and other modes of self-fashioning; medicine; and religion.

The China research raised a number of issues for the members of the team, particularly those who work in Africa and had never visited East Asia before. One finding was that the three sites visited present views of three very different moments in the life cycle of foreign trading communities. The African trade community in Hong Kong appears to be on the wane. For many years, African traders have come to Hong Kong to get close to China, but now they have easy access to China, and those who remain in Hong Kong seem peripheral to the main thrust of political-economic developments in the region: -- scam artists, asylum seekers, sex workers, suitcase traders -- while the serious African business people have long since moved on to mainland China.

Meanwhile, the African population in Guangzhou seems to have reached maturity. There is a density, complexity and diversity within the African enclave that has prompted the development of national and even sub-national groups: Guineans, Malians, Nigerians, but also Igbo and other ethnic groups organized together. The density and spread of the African community has also engendered the kinds of discrimination that often develop when an ethno-racial stranger community develops to the point that it becomes visible (and thus threatening) to the host community. Difficulties in getting taxis to stop for them, feelings that they are targeted by the police, and alarmist reports about them in the local news all give the Guangzhou African community the classic structure of feeling of an immigrant community under siege.



Yiwu presents an altogether different image. There, growth has been so fast that the local population has actually become a minority, yet at the same time, an explosion of economic activity has meant that everyone is becoming richer at once. In addition, the Chinese state has been managing the development of Yiwu carefully, attempting to maintain the rights of both natives and strangers and taking such measures as building a large mosque that is said to be the biggest in all of eastern China. This activist stance contrasts with the laissez-faire attitude of Hong Kong and the mildly hostile attitude of both the Chinese population and the

officials in Guangzhou. This reminds us that the process of growth, diversification, and forging relations with the host community is not a linear one, but is in fact coloured by (often rapidly) changing attitudes and policies by the Chinese state. These changing attitudes raise a final question that may be important for the team's research as it moves forward: China is embracing its role as the future world hegemon. In this regard, Chinese economic, political, and even cultural 'outreach' to the rest of the world is logical. At the same time, many policies of the Chinese government appear to be at least implicitly oriented toward maintaining a cultural 'firewall' between foreign and Chinese cultures. In this regard, the experience of Africans in China is symptomatic of much larger orientations and dynamics. Yiwu itself could be interpreted as a place where China has engineered 'the world's biggest commodity market' according to a fantasy in which China can gain all the economic benefits of exchange with the rest of the world while minimizing the potential 'contamination' of cultural interchange and racial, cultural and other forms of miscegenation. The bigger question is, of course, what will China do if it evaluates the economic and cultural exchanges as being inseparable. Middle Eastern Muslims are clearly interacting with Hui and Uighur Chinese Muslims. Africans are marrying Chinese and having mixed-race children together. Although the policy of economic engagement and cultural containment seems to be so far holding up in most places most of the time, we may ask what will be the reactions by the Chinese state and the Chinese population if this 'two track' policy seems to be failing. This is all the more pertinent to the China-Africa diasporas project if it is Africans who are seen as breaking down these understood boundaries and introducing 'matter out of place' into the Chinese body politic.

These observations will be very relevant in view of China's increasingly aggressive expansion into the African continent for raw materials, land, market, infrastructural and political influence. Its agents have built economic domination but its enterprises and populations remain culturally, socially and institutionally insulated. Our group wishes to focus on the viability of this Chinese mode of engagement in the next stage of our research agenda.



The Way Forward

In the months after the trip, the team members have continued their exchanges with HKU and other colleagues in order to clarify several points. Originally, the team took the decision to make a visit to the West African country of Mali, where Professor McIntosh has worked for 35 years and also adjacent to Guinea where Professor McGovern and Susanna Fioratta conduct research. We have three primary aims: First, the team will seek out the communities that are sending African traders to Hong Kong and China in order to understand better how they organize their trade, the extension of credit and the social networks that help to support community members in times of sickness, imprisonment or even death abroad. Secondly, the team will engage with both official and private Chinese in Mali who will be working in areas ranging from large-scale development projects to individual entrepreneurial activities at the levels of restaurants and small-scale retail sales. Finally, the team will inquire amongst Malians about their perceptions of the Chinese presence in their country. We are keen to know how they see state-to-state relations between Mali (and by extension other African countries) and China over the years, as well as how they evaluate the quality to price relation of Chinese goods brought to Africa by African or Chinese traders, and finally how they see the entrepreneurial activities of Chinese business people. Between now and the trip to West Africa, the team plans to convene a meeting in Dubai, where many of the African traders either conduct operations parallel to their Chinese business or where they developed their international trade before coming to Hong Kong and China, and where Chinese business interests have also grown to important levels.

During September, 2010, the group set up a shared web site on the Yale v2 server. Members include Professors Siu, McIntosh, McGovern and Erami from Yale and Yale students Yuan Zhou, Julian Serrao, Susanna Fioratta, Adrienne Cohen and Michael Degani. The list has grown to include Jascha Yu, Emily Ip, Cao Nanlai, Yan Lijun, of The University of Hong Kong, and Yu Luo of Yale.

In April 2011, Mike Degani teamed up with Cao Nanlai (from HKIHSS) to attend a panel on Chinese “land grabbing” in Africa, at the American Ethnological Society Annual Meetings in San Juan. They came back with research materials, observations and contacts.

Since the write up of the report, political turmoil in certain parts of Africa and the Middle East raise concern for the trip to Mali and Dubai. At a meeting at Yale (May 2011) with McIntosh, McGovern, Siu and the two doctoral students Fioratta and Degani, the group has decided to hold another brainstorming meeting at Yale in October 2011, inviting a wider network of colleagues in the USA and Asia who have expressed interests in our research agenda. It will be followed by a two-day workshop with a core group and a site visit in Tanzania and the nearby Zanzibar. We continue to focus on the flow of people, commodities, institutions and cultural meanings linking China to Africa via an inter-Asian route. Zanzibar will be an ideal site for the historical linkages. In addition, Tanzania has a history of engagement with

socialist China for almost half a century, and has the diversity of Chinese enterprises the group wishes to explore. Michael Degani would be conducting year-long field research in Tanzania and would be able to help with local logistics.

China-Africa Diasporas
Program of Planning Meeting, August 20-28, 2010

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Event</u>
Aug 19 (Thu)		Arrival
Aug 20 (Fri)	9:30-12:30	Planning Meeting @ HKU
	12:45-14:00	Lunch
	15:00-16:30	Presentation: Gordon Mathews (Department of Anthropology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong)
	17:00-19:00	Site Visit-Chungking Mansions
	19:00-	dinner
Aug 21 (Sat)	9:45	Meet at RBC dining room
	10:00-11:30	Presentation: Adams B. Bodomo (African Studies Coordinator, HKU)
	12:00-12:45	Travel to Kam Tin
	13:00-14:00	Lunch
	14:00-15:00	Site Visit
	15:00-18:45	Hong Kong- Guangzhou
	19:00-	Dinner (Bandao JiuJia 半岛酒家)
Aug 22 (Sun)	9:40	Meet at Rong Guang Tang lobby (榮光堂)
	10:00-11:30	Presentation: Zhigang Li (Department of Urban and Regional Planning, SYSU)
	12:00-13:30	Lunch (Zijin Yuan 紫荆园, Sun Yat-sen University)
	15:00-17:30	Site Visit: Shishi Sacred Heart Cathedral (圣心大教堂, 一德路)
	18:00-	Dinner with African leaders (Dao Xiang JiuJia 稻香酒家)
Aug 23 (Mon)	9:00	Meet at Rong Guang Tang lobby (榮光堂)
	9:30-10:30	Dengfeng Village (登峰村)
	10:30-11:30	Xiaobei (天秀大厦, 陶瓷大厦)
	11:30-13:30	Lunch with African Merchant (Mr. Atta, Hongxing Haixian JiuJia 鸿星海鲜酒家)
	13:30-14:30	Sanyuanli Markets (三元里, 迦南商贸城, 唐旗外贸服装城)
	15:00-16:00	Islamic Sage Tomb (清真先贤古墓)*
	16:15-17:15	Huasheng Mosque (怀圣寺)*
	17:30-18:45	Dinner (Huimin Fandian 回民饭店)
	19:00-20:00	Xiao Dong Yin (小東營)*
Aug 24 (Tue)	8:45	Meet at Rong Guang Tang lobby (榮光堂)
	9:20-11:30	Guangzhou Museum (五层楼)
	12:00-	Lunch (土耳其餐厅)
	13:30	Leave for Guangzhou Baiyun Airport
	16:10-17:50	Guangzhou- Yiwu, Zhejiang (CZ3309)
	19:00-	Dinner
Aug 25 (Wed)	9:00-11:30	International Trade City (国际商贸城) and Imported Commodities Hall (进口商品馆)
	12:00-13:00	Lunch, hosted by Yiwu Municipal Foreign Affairs Office (义乌市外事与侨务办公室)
	14:00-15:00	Zhejiang China Commodities City Group Co., Ltd. (商城集团)
	15:30-17:00	Entry & Exit Administration Department (出入境管理局)
	21:00-22:30	Night Market
Aug 26 (Thu)	9:00-10:00	Yiwu Municipal Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation Bureau (外经贸局)

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Event</u>
		10:30-11:30 Meet with some African and Arabian merchants 12:00-13:00 Lunch 14:00-16:00 Meet at Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College (义乌工商学院国际贸易学院) and visit the campus
Aug 27 (Fri)	7:55-9:35	Yiwu-Guangzhou (CZ3796)
	12:12-14:07	Guangzhou-Hong Kong (T817)
Aug 28 (Sat)		Departure