



Africans in China: Guangdong and beyond

Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo

To cite this article: Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo (2019): Africans in China: Guangdong and beyond, *Asian Ethnicity*, DOI: [10.1080/14631369.2019.1627514](https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1627514)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1627514>



Published online: 05 Jun 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

BOOK REVIEW

Africans in China: Guangdong and beyond, edited by A. Bodomo, New York, Diaspora Africa Press, 2016, 166 pp., \$14 paperback, ISBN: 987 1 937306 40 3

The edited book by Adams Bodomo titled *Africans in China: Guangdong and Beyond* assembles key essays on the emerging African Diaspora communities in China. The articles in this volume capture a range of themes about the origins, presence, activities, relationships, and experiences of African – and ‘Africana’ – peoples in Chinese cities, from Guangzhou to Yiwu, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Macau. Inspired by the need to analyse the place of the African diaspora in contemporary China-Africa relations, and the broader historical context that shaped the interactions of Africans and Chinese, the six-chapter volume explored the complexity involved in studying Africans presence in China, both now and in the past. The chapters built upon a combination of data forms and empirically grounded case studies to demonstrate the viability of ‘Africans-in-China’ as a research field, capable of illuminating new global processes. As a departure from the negative coverage of Africans in Chinese society and the limited field-based scholarly analysis on the population, the editor introduced us to the vibrant and dynamic African community in China which began to congregate more rapidly since the 2000s. Bodomo informed us that many of these Africans are traders, but some are studying or working as teachers and expatriates.

Is the African presence in China old or new? This is a perennial question in the study of the Africa-China encounter. The question is even more critical now when the narrative of historical connection between a continent and a state has become central to foregrounding and justifying Afro-Sino relations. Li Anshan dealt with this question in the first chapter of the book, tracing it from a historical perspective and relying on archaeological, literary, archival and other scholarly sources, including sources unknown to non-Chinese researchers. Li confronted the tension in conflicting – and inchoate – accounts documenting the origins and roles of ‘blacks/Africans,’ or Kunlun/Kunlun nu (Kunlun slaves). He traced the origins of blacks/Africans to the Shang Dynasty (17th to 11th century BCE), a much earlier period than the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) which most Chinese historians hitherto agreed to be a reliable dating. The chapter underscored that while people of Negroid race in China originated from Africa via Arab merchants, their origins can be traced to Indochina too. The author was candid in observing that while they served the Chinese society as slaves, Africans also served in the military and functioned as nobles in Chinese royal courts. Though the contextualisation shows the ‘humane character’ of China’s enslavement of African peoples, as different from European enslavement, readers may wish to know if there is more to the significance of such a framing. On Chinese ethnocentrism towards Africans, Li said that ethnocentrism is a universal phenomenon. He insisted that Chinese people are not discriminatory about their ethnocentrism because they perceive all foreigners as beneath them – not only dark-skinned people. Therefore, ethnocentrism becomes a problem if it ‘changes to racism which is mobilized to justify the action of suppressing, economically exploiting, and politically dominating other human groups as modern colonialism did ...’ (p. 21). The audience will also find this claim controversial and struggle to make sense of it.

Li’s discussion overlaps with Carlton J. Adams’s interest in chapter four. However, Adams was more in the present than Li, and he had an interest in ‘Africana’ community, which is a much broader category. Adams collected data from traders, students, teachers, artists, entrepreneurs, and company executives in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Grounded within the structure-agency and psychoanalysis traditions, he identified that Africana peoples exercise agency by acquiring a legal

status and in-demand skills while also being 'curious, reflexive, and creative,' despite the constraints on their sense of community, spirituality and intimacy needs in the host society. Africana peoples in these Chinese cities reconcile with their reality by maintaining 'adaptive ambivalence.' That is, they identify with homeland's aesthetics and relationships despite the lack of opportunities for growth and material accumulation there; at the same time, Africana population value the opportunities and resources available in China even though they are disturbed by problems of unethical business conduct, work environment and discriminatory attitudes and racism. Adams' contribution is a portrait of the contradictions inherent in contemporary diasporisation of 'Africana' peoples in China today, even among well-qualified ones.

Meanwhile, significant discussions about Africans in China converge on the thinking that economic and trade-related engagements are paramount and dominant. Chapters two and three provide a refreshing insight into these critical themes with a focus on African trade networks in China. In chapter two, Daouda Cisse presented an empirically grounded discussion of trade networks of African traders Yiwu, China's biggest commodity market located in Zhejiang province. On their part, Laurence Marfaing and Alena Thiel, in chapter three, did not only look at this issue within Yiwu alone but incorporated Guangzhou and Hong Kong. In these chapters, the authors described the development of African migrant networks in China and identified the forms they take and how they function to promote business success. For example, Cisse notes that although kin, ethnic and religious ties were important, economic/business considerations and trust have become stronger factors informing business transactions in African transnational trade. He explained this change using the Senegalese-Nigerian business exchanges. More than this, Cisse showed that the knowledge of markets, factories and relationship with actors such as factory owners, logistic companies, customs and so on help to strengthen business networks and facilitate transnational exchange.

Marfaing and Thiel framed their multi-sited study within the network theory tradition, which sees the crucial role of multimodal links in business success and economic accumulation. At the core of their analysis are two constructs, 'networks of survival' and 'networks of accumulation,' both deriving from the 'weak ties' and 'strong ties' concepts in the network theory. Traders embedded in the latter networks have a better chance at economic accumulation than those belonging in the former, mainly due to better access to capital, training and skills. The positive side to this was that, in the authors' view, migrant traders could graduate from networks of survival into the network of accumulation as they succeed and become more knowledgeable about Chinese society.

Another critical theme in the book is the experience of African students in China's higher education sector. In the move towards increased internationalisation, universities all over Asia, including China and its autonomous regions have joined the West in attracting foreign students, a strategy that now involves African students. This issue was of concern to Chak-ping Gordon Tsui in the fifth chapter. Using data from 10 African students in Hong Kong University, his finding was emphatic on the fact that African students do not intend to stay in Hong Kong upon completion of their studies. This is an unusual situation one considers the trend in the West, where African students wish to stay back after schooling and where 'post-training mandatory return' is being used to enforce return. The fact that the students were willing to return speaks about how Africans perhaps construct (or misconstrue) Hong Kong unfavourably even though the autonomous region could easily absorb foreign talents. We expect that further empirical studies will be done in this area in the future, based on more robust data. For now, Tsui's chapter is relevant because for too long, the swelling population of African students in Chinese universities today is not getting deserved attention.

The final chapter – chapter six – contains crucial reflections on the challenges that anyone interested in understanding the African presence in China must contend. This chapter could

have fitted better as the first main chapter as it can set the tone for chapters to come. Nevertheless, the mere inclusion of empirical and methodological problems ultimately erased the possible downside of the decision to organise the book in the current format. In this chapter, Bodomo returned with Caroline Pajancic to address the population estimation and methodological issues in ‘Africans-in-China’ studies. They revisited the perennial definitional and conceptual problems of describing and delineating who is an African or ‘African diaspora.’¹ While Bodomo and Pajancic successfully laid out the issues, they presented no clear resolution, an attestation to the difficulty of the subject matter. Two main issues summarised this chapter: estimating the population of Africans in China despite data unavailability and a call for more diverse methodologies in the study of Africans in Chinese cities. In defence of the ‘guesstimation’ intimated in chapter one, which pegged African population in Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong and Macau at 100,000, 30,000, 3,000, 50,000, 20,000, and 10,000 respectively, Bodomo and Pajancic explained the logic and usefulness of population estimation in settings where statistics are unavailable or unreliable. Another critical submission of the authors was the call for more mixed-method research in a field that is dominated by qualitative and case study approaches.

The edited volume fills a significant gap on the bookshelf of researchers, students, and curriculum builders interested in a rapidly growing area of study. With closer contacts between people of African descent with the Chinese economy, peoples and society, scholars interested in contemporary African diaspora on a new geopolitical space, the volume offers an impressive collection of introductory themes and guide.

Note

1. Zeleza, “The Challenges of Studying the African Diaspora.”

Notes on contributor

Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo is at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He recently defended his doctoral research which examined the migration and settlement experiences of Nigerians in Guangzhou, China. He co-authored (with Femi O. Omololu) an article titled ‘Moving east: Explaining aspects of Nigerian trade to China’ which appeared in *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*.

Reference

Zeleza, P. T. “The Challenges of Studying the African Diaspora.” *African Sociological Review* 12, no. 2 (2008): 4–21.

Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo
Department of Sociology, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, Ibadan,
Nigeria

 oluwatoyinkudus@gmail.com  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3746-4963>

© 2019 Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1627514>

