

## CONTESTING GENDER SPACE: DEMASCULINIZATION OF GUANGZHOU'S AFRICAN TRADER POPULATION

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### ABSTRACT

*The African trader population in Guangzhou, the capital of China's Guangdong province, was, until recently, highly 'masculinized', for until a decade ago the vast majority of Africans going to that city on business were male. The predominance of male traders in that diasporic subgroup, however, is being eroded by the increasing number of African women, who are now going to that city on business. The women traders are leveraging the existence of an African diaspora in that city to carve out a niche for themselves in their continent's trade with China. As this research found out, they are going to China for different reasons. For example, there are those who are going there because they want "to support their families"; there are also those who are going there because "things are cheaper here [in Guangzhou]". During the fieldwork carried out between 2015 and 2016, twenty-five persons (fifteen females and ten males; fifteen from English-speaking countries and ten from French-speaking) were surveyed. Most of those who declined to be surveyed did so either because of reservations about the researcher's identity and purpose or because they did not understand English. Some of the data came from direct observation.*

**Keywords:** African trader population, Guangzhou, African women, African diaspora.



## INTRODUCTION

Guangzhou, the capital of China's Guangdong province, is "one of the biggest cities in China, attracting many businessmen [not only] from different parts of China" (Bodomo, 2010, 698) but also from the other parts of the world. It was among the first Chinese cities to establish contact with the West. Its centuries-long contact with the West was inaugurated during the so-called Voyages of Discovery; but it was not until after China's humiliating defeat in the first Opium War that it became a virtual colony of Britain. Under the 1842 Nanking Treaty China was forced to open it up alongside four other treaty ports, namely Ningbo (Ninpo), Xiamen (Amoy), Fuzhou (Fuchow) and Shanghai to trade with the West. The Opium Wars and their resultant "unequal treaties" were the most decisive efforts by Westerners to make China a full-fledged colonial possession. Frustrated by their failure to conquer and colonize China, they decided, instead, to make the country a virtual colony by forcing it to open itself up to their so-called free trade. America's Open Door policy, promulgated at the turn of the twentieth century, was one of the factors that unwittingly enabled China's escape from colonial dismemberment.

Guangzhou, which "has emerged as a center for immigration from sub-Saharan Africa" (Haugen, 2012, p. 65), is the place where Asia currently has its largest African migrant community (Bodomo, 2009, 5; Yun, 2020). According to Le Bail (2009, 19), the city [used to be] the first place of settlement for entrepreneurs from Africa. The core of its African diaspora was formed in the late nineties (Mathews and Yang, 2009, 103; Huang, 2018, iii) by those who came direct from Africa fleeing economic downturn or political instability in their countries, those who re-migrated from East Asia fleeing the recession that buffeted that region during the same period (Bodomo, 2009, 5) and those who crossed over from Hong Kong after its reversion in 1997. In 2001 China joined the World Trade Organisation. Its entry, which was one of the factors that induced African migration to the country (Bodomo, 2018, 65), contributed to the formation of the diaspora. Curiously enough, the number of Africans residing in that city, who Bodomo (2010) described as "a cultural bridge between African and Chinese societies" (p. 703), is not known (Li, Ma, and Xue, 2009, 709; Haugen, 2012, 69). According to Mathews (2017), the difficulty in estimating the number is because



official figures are secret or unknown and also because many foreign residents are undocumented. African diasporic populations have emerged in other port cities (Ziyu, Dong, & Zhan, 2015, 2). According to Li, Ma and Xue (2009), their emergence has rendered urban China “socially and spatially more heterogeneous and multicultural” (p. 703).

Most African residents in Guangzhou reside in the suburbs— Tianhe, Nanhai, Dongguan, Panyu, Haizhu, Huadu, Baiyun, etc.— from where they enter the city centre in the morning to do business. The suburbs are attractive because of affordable accommodation and reduced exposure to the law enforcement agencies. In the city centre, the residents carry out the bulk of their business in the Sanyuanli (especially on Guangyuanxilu) and Xiaobei districts. Most of those residing and/or doing business at Xiaobei (particularly at the Tianxiu Mansions) are Muslim and French-speaking. On the contrary, most of those who do business at Sanyuali are Christian and English-speaking. Owing to expired visas, most residents live precariously on the edge of society, perennially exposed to exploitation and/or arrest by the law enforcement agencies. Whatever their residency status, the migrants leverage their previous experience of business in their respective countries to practice what Mathews and Yang called “low-end globalization” which not only involves “small amounts of capital, and semi-legal or illegal transactions under the radar of the law” but also enables their continent and other developing regions to experience globalization (2012, p. 95).





African male traders in Guangzhou. <https://qz.com/africa/945800/documentary-guangzhou-dream-factory-shows-the-lives-and-aspirations-of-african-migrants-in-china/>

Largely due to the ethnic and religious baggage which members of the diaspora brought along with them when they left their respective African countries for China, African migrants have not been able to blend into a distinctive sub-cultural group *vis-a-vis* their Chinese hosts. Even among Nigerians, who constitute the largest national group in the city (see Bodomo, 2010, 699), there are very tenuous ties and sense of shared nationality between the Igbo who constitute one of the largest African ethnic groups in the city (see Haugen, 2012, 70) and their compatriots from the other ethnic groups. Those centrifugal tendencies among the national groups have militated against every effort to establish a Pan-African association in the city. These tendencies among the national groups are evident in the predomination of the ethnic and hometown associations (HTAs) over the national associations, such as the Nigerian Community and Ghanaian Community. (Igbo migrants derisively call



Africans from the French-speaking *NdiZabarama*, a term of indeterminate meaning).

The African community in Guangzhou first drew attention to its existence on 15 July 2009, when tens of Africans, most of them Nigerian, blocked some major streets in the city centre protesting the death of a Nigerian migrant in a police raid. According to Bodomo (2015), that protest was “one of the very first times, if not the first, that many people in China and worldwide came to the realisation that there now reside sizeable groups of Africans in Guangzhou and other cities in China such as Hong Kong, Macau, Yiwu, Shanghai and, of course, Beijing” (p. 79). Some of the protesters were traders from Africa who happened to be in the city on business when the protest broke out. Those traders joined in the protest out of sympathy and solidarity or because they saw it as an opportunity to protest their own exploitation by the law enforcement agencies. Undoubtedly, many of those who participated in the protest belonged to the second category of *sanfei*, since they were residing in the country illegally, without valid documents. *Sanfei* is a term for foreigners “who enter, stay, and work in China illegally” (Guangzhi, 2018, iii). A handful of Africans had died in police raid or custody prior to that death that sparked off the protest. As far as can be seen, the significance of that death was that it created the opportunity for the migrants, especially the undocumented ones, to make a common cause which they expected could force favourable changes in their host country’s attitude towards migrants. For example, the protesters might have hoped that the protest would be considered alarming and disruptive enough to induce the granting of amnesty to those who had overstayed their visas to regularise their stay. But they were very mistaken, for the authorities, rather than granting any amnesty or relaxing the regulations, intensified their crackdown not only in Guangzhou but also in other cities— Yiwu, Shanghai and Beijing, etc. There is yet no evidence that women participated



in the protest. After all, there were not many African women in Guangzhou at the time.

Hitherto, male traders predominated in the African trader population in Guangzhou. However, the gender mix of that population is being reconstituted by the increasing involvement of female traders in the importation of 'Made in China' goods into Africa. Huynh (2015, 3) was among the first to recognize this emergent phenomenon of feminine ubiquity in the population. Like their male counterparts, African women travelling to Guangzhou break their journey in Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Cairo, Dubai or Doha. However, despite their increasing number, female traders still constitute less than a third of Africans who travel to Guangzhou on business (fieldwork observation). To a great extent, their numerical increase is owing to the following two factors.

First is human trafficking. Starting in the middle of the twenty-first century, international criminal syndicates, *a la* the Atlantic slave trade, began to traffic women (including under-aged girls) from Africa to Europe and the Gulf States where they were used as drug mules, prostitutes or domestic servants. Thousands of such African victims of modern-day slavery have been trafficked ever since. (Males are trafficked too, but mostly for drugs). Interestingly, the trade had its unintended effect, which is that it has induced thousands of other women in different countries of the continent to plunge themselves into import trade. Rather than going to those two regions (Europe and the Gulf) for any of the above-mentioned purposes (prostitution or drug trafficking or employment as domestic servants), some women who had the means went there on business. This was how Dubai became popular with African women. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thousands of women travel to Guangzhou every day on business. In fact, some of the pioneer women traders had been trafficked themselves before they started business with the savings they made from working abroad.



The second factor was religious pilgrimage. Pilgrimage to the Middle East (Saudi Arabia or Israel) or Europe (Rome or Greece) afforded some women their initial experience in international trade. During pilgrimage, such opportunistic traders would buy assortments of jewelry, clothing and shoes which they sold on their return from pilgrimage.

It was the increasing visibility of African female traders in Guangzhou that motivated this research contribution. I recall seeing only a few African women in Guangzhou during my first visit to that city in 2008. In this contribution to the growing literature on Africa's multifarious relationship with China, feminization refers to the rapid increase in the number of African women who now go to China to import goods.



A group of African women traders in Dengfeng village, Guangzhou, in 2019. <https://globalsentinelng.com/2021/03/21/covid-19-drove-hundreds-of-africans-out-of-china-a-generation-of-mixed-race-children-is-their-legacy/>

### **Women in African trade**

Women have always engaged in trade in Africa. In fact, in those African societies where gender roles were hermetically structured



they dominated trade while men dominated farming. In such societies they may combine trade with helping their husbands in farm work (Robertson, 1984, 639). The extent of their participation in trade, however, varied from society to society. For example, in precolonial Yorubaland where they dominated long-distance trade “the most successful women traders rose to the prestigious chieftaincy title of *iyalode*, a position of great privilege and power” (Falola, n.d., n.p.). In the past, they engaged in local, short-distance trade in order to support their husbands who were regarded as the legitimate breadwinners and heads of households. Even if the woman earned more income than her husband, her family was still regarded as a one-earner household because of the husband’s acclaimed status as the head of the family. Among the Igbo of southern Nigeria, for example, trade was almost a female preserve so that those males who dared to dabble into that sector of the traditional economy were despised and considered as shiftless, loafing never-do-wells. In their society, men proved their manhood and virility by being successful farmers in the manner of Okonkwo in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The opposite obtained (and still obtains) in the northern part of the country where women were/are practically confined to their homes as a religious prescription.

In the past, long-distance trade in most parts of the continent was the preserve of the menfolk essentially because of the fear of waywardness and the risk of rape and physical attack for women.

In cases where women must engage in long-distance trade, they must be accompanied by their husbands or other male relations. Women who dared to travel alone risked accusation of waywardness. However, with modern transportation it has become both easier and safer for women to travel long distances alone (sometimes across national borders) without serious fear of exposure to the above-mentioned risks. Women contribute to Africa’s development “through their involvement in the production of tradable goods as cross-border traders and as managers and



owners of firms involved in trade” (Brenton and Gamberoni, n. d., p.1).

In most parts of Africa women started long-distance trade with the advent of colonial rule. Colonial rule created the urban centers to which the natives, mostly men, flocked in search of menial jobs. Many men who settled in the urban centers took their wives along with them; and with their meagre savings, some of them set their wives up in petty trade. The trade usually involved travelling to the rural areas where most of the food items sold in the urban centers were produced. During the pre-colonial period, only few female traders ventured beyond the colonial borders; for then, it was not safe for men to travel long distances, let alone women. Due to the immanent risks of kidnap (and its attendant enslavement), robbery, rape and murder, long-distance trade during the period was, consequently, a male preserve. Such trade, however, became fashionable with the advent of colonial rule.

Until recently, Africa’s international trade was highly masculinized, with men dominating import trade and women participating marginally in distributive trade, buying off from male importers with a view to retailing. That pattern of division of labour is changing with astounding rapidity with more and more women travelling to different parts of the world in order to import goods.

**Where do the women come from?**

Fifty percent of the women travelling from Africa to Guangzhou for business come from West Africa ( most of them come from Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Guinea and Mali; include Cameroon); twenty percent from East Africa (most of them come from Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia); ten percent from North Africa and five percent from southern Africa (fieldwork estimate, 2016). Long-distance trade among North Africans is still dominated by



men arguably because of the religious restrictions on women in that part of the continent. Most traders from the northern part of the country is still small for the same reason as for the small number from North Africa. Most Igbo traders are based in Aba, Onitsha and Enugu. Probably because it has been said that there is safety in numbers, most female traders travel in groups or accompany their husbands or other male relatives or male friends.

**Where do the women buy their goods?**

Unlike their male counterparts, female traders from Africa do most of their shopping at the malls (such as Canaan, Tian'an, Guangzhou Wangfujing, China Plaza, Friendship Store, Bole, Tangqi, Yingfu and Tianxiu) in the Baiyun, Tianhe, Yuexiu, Liwan and Dongshan districts. One of my informants revealed that most of the malls bustling with activity today were unoccupied until Africans (mostly those who had intermarried) moved into them to start business. Those shops are located in the same areas where most women lodge during their usually one-month stay in the city. For example, the Bole mall shares space with the Tong Tong Hotel. The women also buy from those who hawk tawdry goods (shoes, trinkets, articles of clothing, toys, etc.) on the streets, especially in the evening after the malls have closed. They buy assorted goods and spend the better part of their checkout days packing their goods. Since most flights to Africa depart the Baiyun

International Airport at night, they check out of their hotels between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. shopping at the malls is mostly by cash. They exchange their hard currencies (dollars, euros and pounds) for the Chinese yuan on the black market. (There are Africans among the underground money changers). Disagreement between African traders and money changers over shortage and counterfeit is commonplace. During shopping the women, unlike their male counterparts, like to go Dutch on portage and transportation.



### **Where do the women stay?**

The vast majority of the women stay in budget hotels around the malls, sharing rooms in order to curb costs. (It costs averagely \$100 per night to stay in those low-cost hotels). The hotels are popular with Africans essentially because of their location. They boast propinquity to the malls as well as the African restaurants that cater to the diaspora, such as Mama Celina African Restaurant, Iyke Delicious Food and Bar, Emma Food, African Pot Restaurant, Dimkpa African Food and Nganda Maboke African Foods. Secondly, their guests hardly need to take a taxi, since they can easily source most of their goods at the malls around the hotels. Thirdly, those staying at the more strategically located hotels, such as Tong Tong, Long An and Dongfrank, can easily hire Chinese porters to bring their goods downstairs for loading preparatory to their departure to the airport. The hotels, however, are not considered to be sufficiently safe; for example, it is not uncommon to hear about guests losing their money and valuables during their stay.

### **What do the women buy?**

African women going to Guangzhou mostly buy toys, children's/ladies' wear, cosmetics, perfumes and trinkets. Their goods which cannot be carried along as allowable luggage are freighted through logistics agents or co-passengers travelling light. Safety concerns, communication difficulties (particularly for those from non-English-speaking countries) and limited capital are the major reasons why female traders, unlike their male counterparts, hardly go to the cities (such as Dongguan, Xiamen and Shanghai) in search of better prices. *A la* shopping expedition, they can finish shopping in ten days. Only a fractional percentage of the women deal in male-dominated imports such as building materials and motor spare parts.



### **Why do the women travel to Guangzhou?**

There are six reasons why an increasing number of African women are travelling to Guangzhou on business. Firstly, with the rapid redefinition of gender roles, many economic activities are no longer the preserve of men. Hitherto, women in Africa mostly complemented their husbands' efforts to provide for the family. This prevailing role allocation is changing with rapidity with two-earner families becoming the norm. A half of the women surveyed said that they went to Guangzhou because they wanted "to support their families." Most of those who adduced this reason were from Nigeria. The second reason for going to Guangzhou is the profit motive. Most of those who adduced this reason were from east Africa. Some women said that they went there because "things are cheaper here." Guangzhou is popular with Africans largely because of its relatively cheap goods. Thirdly, there are those who go to that commercial city in order to bolster their experience in international trade. Some informants felt that their experience from doing business in Dubai was enough to support them to do business in China too. One such informant, Amaka (a 40-year-old Igbo woman from Abia State), said with a mixture of confidence and feministic self-praise, "If I can go to Dubai, why can't I go to China itself? After all, Dubai imports from China. Why not import from the source? What is the difference between travelling to Dubai and travelling to China?" Fourthly, there are those who want to "import the right things." Uju, who was based at Enugu city, used to buy from her suppliers at Onitsha. She, however, stopped going to Onitsha and decided go to China because those suppliers were not giving her what she was looking for. Her exact words: "Sometimes they will import things that have gone out of fashion. They do not know that the two or three months their cargoes spend in transit on the high seas can affect fashion appeal. Male importers are always out of touch with the trends in children's/ladies' wear." The fifth reason has to do with visa application. Visa overstay by Africans residing in China is becoming a negotiating-table issue in Africa-China relations.



Generally, the rate of visa overstay is higher among men than women. Men constitute over ninety per cent of Africans staying illegally without a residence permit in Guangzhou, a development that has predisposed Chinese embassies to visa restriction for male applicants. The sixth reason has to do with capital formation. Some women started off by going to Dubai either because they wanted to gain experience in import trade first before going to China or because they did not have enough capital to start importing from China immediately. According to an informant, in Dubai one could buy goods in “small, small quantities” and still make a profit. In contrast, importing from China hardly allows of “small, small” purchase if one can ever hope to make a profit. Her meaning was that doing business in China requires a huge capital, whereas with little capital one can easily do business in Dubai. Many women started going to China only after augmenting their capital with turnover or assistance (loans or donations) from friends or relations. Some changed coordinates after discovering that with a little top-up to their plane ticket to Dubai they could travel to China as well. After all, only 3, 626.68 miles separate China and Dubai.

#### **How do the male traders perceive the women traders?**

How did the male traders who were surveyed view their female competitors? They shared reservations about the deepening involvement of women in the importation of Chinese goods into Africa. Seventy percent of those with whom I had casual discussions about the phenomenon regarded female traders so negatively. In fact, one of the males (a permanent resident) called them “vulgar, irresponsible and inexperienced”. When pressed to elaborate, he retorted, “Use your initiative.” His virulent disapproval merely reflected the chauvinistic attitude towards female traders on the continent. It also affirmed the earlier finding by Haugen (2012) that men view trade in Guangzhou as too dangerous for women to get involved in.



For Okey (an Igbo trader), the emergence of female importers is one piece of sad news for male traders. Women are known to have a penchant to patronize their fellow women rather than males who they accuse of gouging as well as ignorance about trends in ladies and kiddies. Consequently, their gender-based discrimination is forcing an increasing number of male traders to discontinue business in ladies and kiddies and to focus on men's. Also, the majority of female importers do not sell wholesale, which may make it easier for them to outsell their male competitors.

There is also the allegation that some female traders engage in short-term, opportunistic prostitution during their usually one-month stay in China. A male informant maintained that some women exhaust their visa period of thirty days so they could augment their capital from prostitution: "The women can finish their shopping in days and return back to Africa, but they would delay their return to the last day of their one-month visa. They finish shopping in a couple of days. It should not take much imagination to guess what they do with the remaining days of their visas." He further asserted that the waywardness of such women who will turn their hotel accommodation into one-room brothel was one of reasons why hotels like Tong Tong Hotel have banned prostitution on their premises. (Most hotels now have inscriptions banning narcotics and prostitution on their premises). The visiting trader who corroborated his assertion amplified it thus:

*Many women go to Dubai because of peer pressure. Some women come to China because they want to have a sense of belonging. They want freedom from their husbands. They think they can outdo their husbands in international trade. Allowing women to engage in long-distance trade erodes a man's reputation. Some men allow their wives to engage in long-distance trade for peace's sake, because they want to prevent trouble in their families... I will lose*



*the respect of my friends here if I should allow my wife to come here without me. Have you not noticed how indecently those female traders who come from our place [Nigeria] dress while they're here? Other men pay their hotel accommodation and other expenses. They come here with, say \$4000, but will buy goods worth, say \$6000. Where did the extra \$2000 come from? Did it not come from sleeping around here? Any woman who comes here every three months is a suspect. You can see them at the Tong Tong Hotel area every evening loitering and pitching sex. No self-respecting man will allow his wife to stay away from her matrimonial home for more than two weeks. Any woman less than forty years old may be suspected of marital infidelity... My wife who is twenty-five years old now can only come here after attaining forty-five years of age. At that age, I may not care much what she does behind my back (interview, 11 December 2016).*

There was a story of a certain female trader who coyly offered sex to her male creditor; but, seeing through her subterfuge, the wary, discerning creditor declined the offer because he feared that accepting it could impede his effort to recover his money. Also, a Nigerian resident once complained bitterly that a lady abandoned him after arriving Guangzhou, though her husband had entreated him to take care of her during her stay in the city. The man was disgruntled because he had designs on the woman.

### **Conclusion**

Africa's import from China is no longer the preserve of men, for during the past decade there has been a sharp increase in the number of women from Africa who are going to China on business. The majority of the women go to Guangzhou, where Asia has its largest African community. The involvement of African



women in the importation of Chinese goods reflects the reconfiguration of the roles played by the genders in the economic organization of their society. Male importers are not the only ones affected by this emergent contestation of economic space by women. For example, while male importers are being forced to abandon children's/ladies' wear, male retailers of these goods are lowballing because of the female importers' tendency to engage in retailing rather than wholesaling. Although women are rapidly gaining a foothold in Africa's import from China, men are poised to dominate that area of their continent's economic relationship with China in the foreseeable future. The reason is because the male traders still command more capital and experience than their female competitors.



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