"THIS COUNTRY OF CHINA IS TOUGH": NIGERIAN IMMIGRANT MUSIC MAKING IN GUANGZHOU, CHINA

By

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Abstract: This article concerns Nigerian music making in Guangzhou, one of China's leading manufacturing and trading centres, and where the largest groups of Africans in China, more generally, are concentrated. Nigerians are the largest community of Africans in Guangzhou and, like other Africans traders, practice what has been referred to as "low-end globalisation" (Mathews and Yang 2012). Beyond entertainment, music making among Nigerians, and Africans in China more generally, has a significant role in not only maintaining a sense of belonging but also in communicating key social concerns, aspirations and sentiments that stem from the experience of living and working in Guangzhou. This article describes how these experiences unfold in specific songs composed by two Igbo Nigerian immigrants whose aspirations and efforts to live and work in the city resulted in different outcomes.[1]

Keywords: Nigeria, diaspora, Igbo, highlife music, sacred, immigrants, Guangzhou, China.

[1] This article is based on encounters and interviews with informants and musicians who no longer reside in Guangzhou and who I could not trace despite the best efforts. As such, it has not been possible to obtain their permission to quote from their songs or the interviews. To address ethical concerns the author takes responsibility for ensuring that this article is made available to the entire community of Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou once the hold on accessibility is withdrawn by the publisher.

Introduction

Since the 1990s China has experienced an unprecedented growth of imports and exports[2] and an attendant influx of foreign visitors and immigrants into its main trading cities, in particular, Guangzhou, the capital of the southern province of Guangdong.[3] Many of these immigrants are West Africans who have followed in the wake of intensified Africa-China relations and the wide-ranging economic activities that have resulted (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007, Bodomo 2012, Carling 2006, Haugen 2012). Nigerians are the largest community of Africans in Guangzhou and, like other African traders, practice what has been referred to as "low-end globalisation" (Mathews and Yang 2012). Living in a homogenous Chinese city, African immigrants have tended to be marginalised and many are illegal. The state considers most Africans as temporary since many have entered the country on short-term visas and are therefore not regarded as potential citizens. By extension they have not been considered as legitimate recipients of services provided by the state.[4] Nor have they been considered participants in the civic and public sphere of Guangzhou but rather as cultural, social and political outsiders. It is not surprising then that African immigrants have taken to creating their own organisations and forming networks of associations, largely based on perceived ethnic origins, which to some extent assist in meeting many of their social needs; equally, that Africans in Guangzhou produce and maintain various forms of music to meet both sacred and secular expressive needs.

My initial foray into the topic of African music making in China began as a contributor to the newly formed African Studies Programme at the University of Hong Kong where I developed associations with the few West African refugees who managed to make a living through music. Many of these refugees were Senegalese musicians who taught the *djembe* in schools and drum circles and performed for both expatriats and local Chinese. Major sporting occasions such as the Hong Kong Rugby Sevens or the Hong Kong Jockey Club's events also provided a source of income for these musicians. Other musicians recruited from West Africa were contracted to perform in the Makumba Africa Bar Lounge in Hong Kong's Lan Kwai Fong nightclub district and for well-paid corporate and private functions.

[2] A number of interrelated factors account for China's rapid economic development among which are its entry into the WTO in 2001; the global economic crisis of 2008; national developments (changes in immigration regulations, development strategies, major international events), resulting in a Chinese city with the largest concentration of African migrants (Li , Z., Ma , L. J. C. & Xue , D. 2013).

[3] Official statistics on the population of African immigrants in Guangzhou are not available. Estimates vary between 20,000 and 300,000 (Haugen 2011, Bodomo 2010 and 2012, Chiu, J. 2017).

[4] See for instance the problems that Africans have in accessing health care in Guangzhou (Li, Z., Ma , L. J. C. & Xue , D. 2013).

African musicians were not normally part of the substantial cohort of immigrant traders or asylum seekers whose activities and gatherings largely took place in Hong Kong's notorious Chungking Mansions, a shambly 17-storey building located in the tourist district of Tsim Sha Tsui that housed low-budget accommodation, shops, South Asian and African restaurants, and where English is the *lingua franca* (*ibid*.). For the African traders, Chungking Mansions often served as a gateway to mainland China (Bodomo 2012, Mathews and Yang 2012), in particular, Guangzhou, which is two hours away by train. Other signs of exposure to African culture in Hong Kong were in the programming of The Hong Kong Arts Festival, the region's largest international festival. Though inaugurated in 1973, the Festival only began including African musicians and singers in their programming in 2000, around the same time as the intensification of trade between Africa and China and the attendant influx of African refugees and asylum seekers. Beginning with performances by Les Tambours de Brazza from the Republic of the Conga, the scheduling of African artists in the Festival peaked in 2007 with multiple programmes consisting of Youssou N'dour and the Soweto Gospel Choir.[5] By 2017 Hong Kong's biennial World Cultures Festival featured "Vibrant Africa", a special platform for luminaries, such as, Angélique Kidjo, Youssou N'dour and Germaine Acogny.

Living and working in a city that hosted Africans seeking refugee status and commercial opportunities provided me with a particular perspective on the transnational movement of Africans and a comparative basis for investigating African musical activity in Guangzhou. While Hong Kong affords opportunities for Africans to earn a living by teaching and playing their music, Guangzhou presents particular challenges for the expression of African musical culture, in part because the living conditions for African immigrants and the cultural environment are markedly different. One key point of difference is that the distinctive nature of Hong Kong's colonial legacy opened up a space for the production and dissemination of music by immigrants, most notably Filipinos. In a study of the lives of Filipino musicians in Hong Kong, Watkins argued that "While colonialism may stand out as an experience of great magnitude in the modern era, and one that had inflicted great harm on indigenous sociocultural worlds … colonialism [in Hong Kong] provided a space for music, in which the mobility of neocolonial subjects across regions of the globe is enabled (2009: 73)." In Hong Kong, the concomitance of neocolonialism, globalisation and cosmopolitanism has given rise to the emergence of niche spaces for the performance and consumption of a variety of musical styles and subcultures. It has also made space for ambivalent and hybrid identities (*ibid*.,

[5] Other African programmes includes: Master Musicians of Jajouka 2002 (Morocco), Cesaria Evora 2003 (Cape Verde), Orchestra Baobab 2004 (Senegal), Salif Keita 2006 (Mali), Youssou N'Dour and the Super Étoile de Dakar Senegal 2007 (Senegal), the Soweto Gospel Choir 2007 (South Africa), and Fatoumata Diawara 2016 (Ivory Coast).

76). Indeed, Filipino musicians in Hong Kong have contributed not only to the performance and circulation of mainstream pop, but also genres such as jazz, salsa, r&b and metal.

Turning to Guangzhou, as well as entertainment for African immigrants, music making functions as a medium of communication in both sacred and secular contexts, conveying messages and shared sentiments to members of African communities while simultaneously shaping and maintaining the individual's identity and sense of belonging within particular groups. For many, particularly those who experience economic and social hardships in their efforts to work as traders, musical expression takes on added significance; it provides an avenue for pursuing "dreams and aspirations" independent of trading ambitions (Castillo 2014). As such, music making is an essential part of the individual's subjectivity as well as a means for encoding cultural preferences and values during times of stress when normal avenues for civic participation, criticism and agency are inaccessible.

This article is based on field trips to Guangzhou that took place in May and June of 2009; February 2010; July 2011, and November 2014. During these trips I spoke with African community leaders and traders in Guangzhou, African musicians, the Chinese wives of Africans, and spiritual leaders in African Churches. Data was obtained through participant observation and extended open-ended interviews. This article is also informed by various research projects that have centred upon Africans in Guangzhou and other key sites in China. The research projects on Africans in Guangzhou are methodologically diverse and include those related to migration and diasporic studies, urban studies, socio-cultural studies, social and cultural geography, linguistics, ethnography, and international relations (Adams 2015, Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007, Bodomo 2009a, Bodomo 2009b, 2012, Castillo 2014, Haugen 2012, 2013, Lan 2016, Li *et al.* 2013, Mathews *et al.* 2014, Mathews and Yang 2012, Zhou 2017).

Nigerians are the largest group of Africans in Guangzhou and are highly visible in key commercial sites in the city (Bodomo 2010, Mathews and Yang 2012). These factors had me pay particular attention to their musical activities during fieldwork, hence this article. I focus on the Nigerian Igbo singer-songwriters, Ikechukwu Onyema Otigba and Boniface Okeke who illustrate different responses as immigrants in Guangzhou. In addition, through the analysis of one particular song by Boniface I show that the songs of these Nigerian immigrants reveal in telling ways the alienation and frustration, hope and ambition that pervades individual and collective immigrant experiences in China. I begin by outlining the broad patterns of music making among Nigerians in Guangzhou in both secular and sacred contexts.

Secular music making

The Nigerians I spoke to about their private listening patterns said that they acquired recordings from the Guangzhou commercial buildings frequented by Africans. These recordings are mostly pirated CDs and DVDs of imports from West Africa. Traders of wigs, clothes and other goods in commercial buildings such as Wufu, Caanan, Tangqi sell CDs and DVDs. But the most common source of pirated recordings is the smaller, specialist vendors in those commercial buildings that only sell CDs and DVDs. Vendors of pirated recordings mostly obtain originals or copies from relatives or friends in urban centres in Nigeria. Once received the originals are copied in the stores, which are usually no more than tiny cubicles. Disc copiers are handy so that recordings can be copied on the spot for customers. In 2010, the best-selling Nigerian recording in the Guangzhou stores was a production by Timaya (Enetimi Alfred Odom), a Nigerian singer-songwriter who came from the same state as the then Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan. The recording, "Gift and Grace", was produced in 2008 but was still very popular among Nigerians in Guangzhou during my field work in 2014.[6] Timaya's music is a Nigerian variety of hip hop though some tracks are clearly influenced by Nigerian highlife, a genre I will discuss later. Vendors are not willing to reveal their sales figures, but one can observe during peak times on a regular trading day ten or more customers stopping by the stores to buy CDs or DVDs. As convenient as this arrangement might be for Nigerian immigrants, the sale of pirated copies of Nigerian music and film recordings has become a major problem and concern for Nigeria's creative industries. Nigerian migrants the world over can find the latest Nigerian music and films whether it be "in the streets of Kingston, Jamaica, [or] Guangzhou's 'Little Africa', but the major share of the profit goes to those who do not invest in these productions" (Ibukun 2012).

Few Nigerians I spoke to acquire their music through online digital music providers such as Spotify, iTunes or Spinlet, the latter of which makes large catalogues of Nigerian songs available to Web users in more than 80 countries around the world, including China.

The use of copied materials extends to the various nightclubs frequented by Africans in Guangzhou. These nightclubs are mostly found in the Yuexiu District, a thriving commercial area and the central location for living and trade among the African community in Guangzhou. Many high-rise apartment buildings are located in Yuexiu, particularly in Xiaobei and in the adjacent areas. The first major African trader to setup residence in one such building, the Tianxiu Mansion, moved to Guangzhou from Hong Kong in the early 1990s (Li *et al.* 2013). Before Africans began arriving in Guangzhou in large numbers, Xiaobei was largely occupied by Hui and Uyghur minorities from the western provinces of China. It has since became a

[6] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPCnsBczPLQ

significant residential and trading zone for Africans. Aside from the Tianxiu Building, many Africans can be found in the Xiushan, Taochi, and Guolong "mansions", the lower floors of which are occupied by shops and the upper floors by apartments (Li et al. 2013). "Little Africa", as it is known, is a place of residence, trade and recreation for the Africans of various nationalities in Guangzhou. While the close proximity of work, home and pleasure provides opportunities for networking and a sense of security it also has the effect of increasing the marginalisation of Africans in Guangzhou. Notably, the most renowned upmarket nightlife area in Guangzhou is the Zhujiang Party Pier, which is located further away to the south of Yuexiu on the other side of the Zhujiang River.

Aside from the nightclubs, there are very few public events in Guangzhou that provide opportunities for the open presentation of Nigerian music and dance, and African culture more generally. However, African community leaders regard public events that feature African performing arts as a potential for helping to overcome the negative views that many Chinese have of African migrants. This aspect of cultural expression stands in contrast to the various African restaurants that have established themselves in "Little Africa" and, according to Bodomo (2010), show signs of serving as a cultural bridge between Africans and Chinese. One of the obstacles to public expressions of African music making is that Guangzhou authorities prohibit Africans, in particular, from assembling in large numbers. This is one of the reasons African Christian leaders provide for the lack of opportunities for Africans to worship openly in publicly visible churches. Aside from the few state endorsed churches that many Africans attend, most African Christian churches in Guangzhou are out of sight, underground and officially illegal, yet, they provide the setting for a major part of Nigerian participation in collective musical expression.

Sacred music making

In Nigeria, religious messages displayed at the Pentecostal churches are highly public thus drawing attention to their presence in the community (Haugen 2013). However, China permits the operation of very few government-sanctioned churches. African worship is all but invisible. Haugen has observed that, "The large numbers of black people who can be seen entering nondescript hotels, restaurants, or office buildings on Sundays are the only indication that Pentecostal services are about to take place" (ibid., 86) as illustrated in the following excerpt from my field notes on July 18, 2010:

> *In the lead up to the service African worshipers began entering the high-rise apartment complex around 10:00 a.m. heading to the elevator and passing by the Chinese security guards, apparently without needing to identify themselves. They exit the elevator at the twenty-second floor and walk up to the fire escape several more floors to the rooftop and enter the chapel, which is a custom-built room. Most of the worshipers are regulars at the service, with some*

> *newcomers to attendance including a few young Chinese females. The chapel is a narrow rectangular room about 15 by 40 feet with no air-conditioning or open windows and the room is stifling. The heavy decoration belies the simple construction of the room. Large draped windows admit light that glows through the pinkish semi-transparent drapes. Heavy velvet, wine-red coloured pleated curtains hang behind the pulpit behind which are located the singers and musicians. Thick dark burgundy carpets help absorb the penetrating sound of the amplified music and speeches coming from large speakers suspended just above the entrance to the chapel at the opposite end of the room. The musicians play continuously behind the preacher, providing an integral backdrop to the sermon, which begins with Ecclesiastes Chapter 9, Verse 10: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither though goest." Gospel songs also incorporate such themes into the religious message. The sermon is interspersed with commentaries that relate to the difficulties faced by the African community in Guangzhou and an exhortation to maintain faith in God, who will bestow wealth upon his faithful followers. The sermon continues uninterrupted for 50 minutes or so, then singer/songwriter Chigozie Onwunta leads the band with one of his original gospel songs, "Jesus be Baba" (Jesus is Father)*.[7]

In the sermon, verbal expressions of connection with the power of God are embodied in music and physical movement. Such sermons are often recorded and recirculated in the homes of immigrants through the production of DVDs and CDs. On occasion, original gospel songs are recorded in studios and distributed on CDs, as exemplified by Chigozie Onwunta, an Igbo trader living in Guangzhou, whose gospel songs featured in the above-mentioned service. His songs have a characteristic upbeat, double-time feel and are eminently danceable. They feature electric guitar, bass and keyboards, saxophone, drum set, congas, talking drums, a common five-stroke bell-pattern, and a mixed vocal chorus. Similar combinations of instruments are among the innovative strategies found in much African Pentecostal musical practice in Nigeria and among immigrants in Guangzhou. While the instruments, rhythms, and lyrics exemplify the emergence of new practices created out of devotion to a Christian God, deep musical structures and performance approaches emanate from older traditional practices. Basic West African musical characteristics such as call and response, improvisation, short repetitive descending melodic phrases, and strong rhythmic ostinato foundations are common stylistic elements in both sacred and secular musics as seen in the case studies described later. The musical characteristics of Nigerian Gospel music vary widely, though in the Guangzhou services they commonly contained the upbeat qualities of highlife.

[7] Chigozie Onwunta's CD, *Jesus Be Baba*, is a typical example of the kind of music played at such services.

While music is a part of most African Protestant services, Pentecostal churches provide the most intense assertions of religiosity through music and movement, and are openly encouraged as outward expressions of religious feeling (Meyer 2008). For Pentecostal churches are regarded by worshippers as places in which the Holy Spirit is present and manifested directly through speaking in tongues or glossolalia, faith healing and through experience that is both sensory and spectacular (ibid.). Verbal interactions and antiphonal musical structures underscore the collective and emotionally communicative spirit that pervades the sermons. The lively music, liturgical messaging and overall atmosphere excite the individual members of the congregation and induce bodily responses as well as an apparent deep sense of affective gratification. Indeed, part of the allure of Pentecostalism for Nigerians seems to lie in what Meyer refers to as "sensational religiosity" (ibid.). This particular form of religiosity coupled with a liturgical messaging that addresses the concerns of Nigerians who seek prosperity in Guangzhou exemplifies what Meyer refers to as the "aesthetics of persuasion" that characterises Pentecostalism (Meyer 2010).

Persuasion in this context is aimed not only at spiritual salvation but also at material salvation.
Nigerian pastors in Guangzhou are adept at preaching messages of prosperity and promise the bestowment of great wealth upon the congregants, as Haugen illustrates in the following excerpt from her field diary:

> *Now the Lord gave me a covenant in this place. I keep on announcing it, and one day, the gospel will come to pass. Two hundred and fifty millionaires multi-millionaires! will emerge out of this Ministry and surprise this generation when it comes to doing the work of the Lord. [Congregants shout "Amen!"] Two hundred and fifty multimillionaires, and Father, I see fifty of them saying amen right now (Haugen 2013: 95).*[8]

It is often the case that the line between religious and secular musical styles are blurred in African church worship, a tendency that is also present in African American musical practice. However, in this context, the blurring of stylistic categories has attracted criticism among African and African American worshippers. Kalu notes that in many Pentecostal churches in Africa devotees struggle to draw a line between sacred Christian music and what is perceived as polluting secular music (Kalu 2008), though it is not clear to what extent Nigerians in Guangzhou draw such a distinction. As evident in my case studies, religious themes are also found in secular musical practices and productions, in particular, the highlife songs composed by a Nigerian trader in Guangzhou, Ikechukwu Onyema Otigba.

[8] Documented at The Tower in November 2009.

Igbo highlife: Guangzhou case studies

The musical genre of highlife originated in Ghana at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though the coining of the term did not occur until the 1920s when it became patronised by Christianised African elites (van der Geest and Asante-Darko 1982). This genre hybridises the musical characteristics of particular language groups from southern Ghana, in particular the Akan. The melodic and rhythmic features of traditional Ghanaian music combined with Euro-American instruments and musical structures, such as tonal harmony, jazz inflected brass and wind and rhythmically layered electric guitar parts created a new and vibrant genre of popular urban music. By the 1930s Ghanaian highlife had spread to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia and to Nigeria. More contemporary stylistic developments of Nigerian highlife include synthesisers and fusions with other global genres such as hip hop.

Igbo highlife of Nigeria is one of the sub-genres of Nigerian highlife. It emerged during the 1950s and combines highlife musical characteristics with traditional Igbo music and blends guitars and horns with Igbo lyrics and smatterings of Nigerian pidgin. Like Ghanaian highlife, it can be stylistically diverse, though it normally uses the traditional bell pattern as a rhythmic ostinato. I will now turn to a discussion of Ikechukwu Onyema Otigba and Boniface Okeke Oluaka Jehova, two Igbo traders and musicians whose music was created out of their experiences of living in Guangzhou.

Otigba's is one of the success stories of African migrants in Guangzhou. He has his own trading business and legitimate residency status, which occasionally enables him to perform his music in small, live venues such as restaurant openings without fear of arrest. He produced an album, entitled *Otigba in China: Ndidi Amaka* (Otigba 2010), which contains four tracks. The album was initially recorded in Guangzhou between 2009 and 2010. After first laying down the basic instrumental and vocal background tracks and lead vocals he overdubbed the horn sections and various percussion played by musicians in Nigeria. To some extent this procedure reflects the transnational nature of the music industry today in terms of production and distribution. The Internet and global communications facilitate the mixing of tracks recorded in different parts of the world. This has made it possible for someone like Otigba to produce an authentically Igbo highlife sound in China even when the resources for recording with Nigerian musicians are very limited.

The four tracks focus on praising successful Nigerians in China and the virtues of patience, humility and maintaining comportment. They also draw on Igbo proverbs and expressions. Clearly, the nature of the songs reflects Otigba's relatively positive situation in Guangzhou and his belief in the virtues of patience and faith in God. The following table summarises the contents of these four tracks:

Chukwu Bute Uzo ("When God takes the lead")	Otigba beseeches his fellow Nigerians to trust in God, and in their pursuits and rather than their strengths. One's strengths alone cannot provide protection life's insecurities. Otigba salutes the "achievers" based in Guangzhou.
Ndidi Amaka ("Patience is good")	Otigba extols the virtue of patience in pursuing one's goals.
Ka Anyi Si Kwadoo ("How prepared are you")	The song begins with a fable the moral of which is to be careful with one's choice of words and then goes on to sing the praises of Igbos in China.
Okwa Mbido ("It is the beginning")	This song is a compendium of Igbo proverbs that extol the virtues of patience, resilience, diplomacy, trust in God, the importance of wealth, destiny and community values rather than individualistic ones. It also sings the praises of the successful Igbos in China.

The recurring themes in Otigba's songs concern achievement, persistence in the face of adversity and delivery on the promise of prosperity by the divine. Though rendered in the secular highlife style they echo the prosperity-oriented messages given in Nigerian Pentecostal underground churches. Otigba, like other successful Nigerian traders in Guangzhou, is considered as evidence of the fulfillment of such divine promises. As indicated earlier, prosperity-oriented messages are given in both secular and sacred musical contexts. In the next case study, while Boniface exalts successful Nigerian immigrants his songs offer more pointed observations of the underside of life for unsuccessful immigrants and the ways they manage the difficulties of living in the city.

By the time I began conducting research in Guangzhou in 2009, Boniface had already returned to Nigeria. His recording, *Oluaka in China* (Oluaka c.2008), was given to me by the Nigerian community leader, Ojukwa Emma, who is something of a patron for aspiring Nigerian musicians in Guangzhou. Like Otigba, Boniface also went to China to seek his fortune but like many others with similar aspirations he was not altogether successful. Unlike Otigbo, Boniface, lacking fluency in Mandarin, or a Chinese wife, or reliable commercial connections within the Chinese community, was unable to accommodate the roles of both trader and aspiring singer/songwriter. But before returning to Nigeria, he undertook to leave a legacy of several songs he composed that tell of the experiences of many Africans, about the hard realities of life in Guangzhou, of the constant surveillance by local

police and strategies of evasion, of the difficulties of conducting business without proper residency status, of poverty and loneliness, of disappointment, and of love and courting Chinese women.

Boniface's recording was almost exclusively produced in Nigeria on one of his return visits before his departure from China. According to several Nigerians I spoke to in Guangzhou, his recording received attention in Nigeria through radio airplay. Indeed, many Nigerians who came to Guangzhou after Boniface's departure had heard his music in Nigeria. Apparently, Boniface's hard-edged depiction of the realities of life for Africans in China did not deter them from migrating.

Boniface's CD consists of three tracks: *Ife Na-Eme* or "Things that happen", *Chinko* or "China", and *Bigger Boyz*. The first two tracks recount Boniface's lived experiences in Guangzhou and the third, *Bigger Boyz*, applauds successful Igbos not only in China but also in Japan and Hong Kong. In this article I focus on one of the songs, *Ife Na-eme*, as it provides insights into the social and emotional lives of Nigerians in Guangzhou.

Boniface begins by establishing his experiential credibility through a first-hand account of his life in China. On the recording of *Ife Na-Eme*, he starts with an ironic laugh that underscores the cautionary tale to follow and the notion that "China is not all what it's made out to be" for the African immigrant. He exhorts his fellow Igbo Nigerians to listen closely and to take care, lest the unwary traveller loses everything. The first lines in the second verse specifically refer to Guangzhou and named locations where Nigerians gather and hang out, creating a kind of musical cartography of places of significance to them:

When you enter Guangzhou in China
There are many corners where things happen
When you go from Canal down to Sanyuan Li (三元里大道)[9]
How about Dragon, Meng Fu[10] and Wu Fu[11]
Yi Xing Building,[12] all these places
Then the Igbo people are complete.[13]

[9] The name of a main street in Guangzhou.

[10] Mengfu City Of Foreign Trade, No 52 Huayuan Road.

[11] Wufu Trade Building, No.332,Shicha Road, Baiyun District.

[12] Yixing Building, No.728 Dongfeng East Road, Yuexiu District, Guangzhou.

[13] I would like to acknowledge Uchenna Oyali for preparing the Igbo translation

Guangzhou has become the preferred location for hundreds of overseas-funded enterprises including those from Africa (Li et al. 2013). Various factors that make Guangzhou attractive to foreign traders include its proximity to both Hong Kong and Macao and its central location in the Pearl River Delta. One observer has reported that Guangzhou's trade with Africa increased from less than $500 million in 1996 to slightly more than $3 billion in 2008 (Li et al. 2013). Demographically speaking, Africans tend to be separated along ethnic lines in Guangzhou. Boniface singles out the Sanyuan Li District, where Christian Igbo predominate, while Muslim Africans and Middle Easterners tend to focus around the Yuexiu District (Haugen 2012: 5), particularly in the area around the Tianxiu Building. After naming the main trading locations and other sites of interest for Nigerians in Guangzhou, Boniface describes many of the places in that locale where Nigerians entertain themselves:

There is also an open field
Where we play music is at Unique
Where guys stay and get happy
Which is opposite Tiang.

Among the various clubs in and around the vicinity, aside from the Unique bar, there are the Kama Club[14], the Town Bar, the Duo Club[15], the Banker Club[16], and the M8 Club[17]. Nigerians do not own these clubs, nor are they exclusively for them. Rather, the clubs are for a mixed group of patrons that includes Chinese and an Arabic speaking clientele as well as Africans. The clubs often use an African DJ and sometimes employ an African singer who sings over a pre-recorded backing track. Any African band that is likely to form in Guangzhou would have difficulties maintaining a regular gig because of the close surveillance of the Guangzhou police. Fidelis, a Togolese singer/song writer I interviewed had produced a recording in Togo before arriving in Guangzhou. He had been singing since the age of five and was encouraged by his cousin to pursue music and to apply for a visa to work in China. His recording focuses on "making money and making love", as he put it. From his perspective dreams of love can only be fulfilled by securing a good and steady income. When he arrived in Guangzhou he had expectations of continuing to produce music while he earned his livelihood in a daytime job. Those expectations were not met and he ended up selling his

[14] 248号 Hengfu Road, 金怡楼, (Yuexiu,), Guangzhou.

[15] Duo Club Jianshe 6th Rd, Yuexiu, Guangzhou.

[16] B/F, 338 Huanshi Dong Lu, Yuexiu District.

[17] M8 Club, Huanshi East Rd, Yuexiu District.

passport to earn money. His situation was precarious and the option of singing and performing his way out of poverty could not be realized because of the surveillance in the nightclubs. A brief excerpt from my field diary provides a sense of the environment in these nightclubs and the necessary vigilance of the African patrons:

> *We arrived at the M8 club after midnight, which hosted a mixed crowd of Africans and Chinese mostly talking and drinking in separate groups. Video clips on large flat screens at the back of the stage accompanied the ear-splitting African-American hip-hop that came from large speakers set up around the dance floor and other parts of the club. Other video screens decked around the club broadcast football and other competitive sports.*
>
> *After about thirty minutes, Africans, mostly in small groups began to fill the empty spaces in the club and by 1:00 a.m. the club was crowded. The Nigerian DJ took over from the preprogrammed music and played African music ranging from Afro-Beat to locally produced hip-hop and some Latino-based hip-hop.*
>
> *At about 2:00 a.m. one of the club employees came rushing in through the front door anxiously waving his hands above his head and the music suddenly dropped in volume. Following him was a group of eight Chinese policemen, one wearing a red armband. Within moments of their entry the club quickly emptied. The Africans who remained looked on scornfully. They began demanding passports which Africans are required to carry at all times then moved about the room checking the documents provided. I rose from my table to go to the bathroom taking the long way around the now mostly empty club. It was as though the African patrons had vanished into thin air. The police remained for about 20 minutes but shortly after their departure the African patrons inexplicably returned. It did not take long for the entertainment, enjoyment and energy that had been building up before the police raid to return to the club* (Mora 2010).

I was told that such raids were not unusual and while several Africans were taken into custody on this particular occasion, usually those without the required documents managed to find ways to avoid being caught. But the constant fear of being caught is all the more present in the streets. In the next verse Boniface describes various ways of dealing with the Chinese police during the arbitrary immigration checks that are normally carried out in the streets of "Little Africa" and, importantly, the ways in which street-smart Nigerians evade them. An inability to effectively circumvent these immigration checks will inevitably lead to deportation:

When you walk on the road, [and] the country's python[18] gets you
He tells you "Old boy, where is your passport?"
After looking at him, you tell him "Timbuto"[19]
If he marks you strongly, you tell him "Tinshia"

You put hand in the pocket as if you want to take something out
Brother a race will take place
You gently escape
But if you are got then it will be in Naija
Then you will know that the country is tough
What you will be seeing is Murtala[20]
Look at Mohammed
You have arrived Naija
Then it is home.

Intercultural marriage and family-making are pervasive topics of African/Chinese relations in Guangzhou. Yet these families have to deal with restrictions under the "Exit and Entry Administration Law", and the *hukou* (household registration/ 户口) system. These restrictions and other bureaucratic procedures can result in second-class status for Chinese-African couples and their children (Zhou 2017: 7). Chinese wives are normally outsiders in Guangzhou (ibid.). Indeed, the wives of African traders I spoke to in the various trading houses were not Cantonese or from Guangzhou. Many of them came from distant provinces to escape rural poverty and seek better opportunities in Guangzhou. But they often found ethnic barriers to advancement or fewer opportunities than their Guangzhou counterparts. One non-Cantonese woman I had sustained contact with over a span of about three years worked for Chinese exporters whose clients were mostly Africans. She liked Africans and eventually married a Nigerian. Dorothy, whose real name is not disclosed to protect her privacy, talked much about herself and her family. She commented on how Chinese families, like African families, were close and economic successes as well as failures were usually shared among family members. Western families, she remarked, were not like that.

The common ground for partnerships between African men and Chinese women seems to hinge on economic status and the experience of migrancy, an observation

[18] "Python" is the Igbo slang for the police.
[19] The untranslated expressions in quotes are African modifications of Chinese words. "Timbuto" derives from "ting bu dong" (Mandarin) or in English, "I don't understand you."
[20] The Nigerian international airport in Lagos is called Murtala Mohammed Airport. Seeing "Murtala" and "Mohammed" written means one has landed in Nigeria, as a deportee. "Tianshia" in the next line of the song derives from "dengyixia", meaning, "hang on a second", which is commonly used by Guangzhou Igbo.

confirmed in one of my discussions with one of the Chinese assistants[21] to the Guangzhou Nigerian community leader. He contended that African men mostly marry Chinese women from other provinces who are usually non-Cantonese speakers and come to Guangzhou in the hope of improving their lives and helping their families. He claimed that African men do not often marry Chinese women for love, but for practical, social and economic reasons. Chinese wives help in business dealings with their language skills, their ability to negotiate prices and contracts, and in easing social relations between their African husbands and Chinese associates. Correspondingly, Chinese women married African men for the advantages that it brought them; often coming from rural areas in China it gave them access to the kind of commercial opportunities also sought by African migrants. The arrangement is mutually beneficial, symbiotic and reciprocal. But Chinese women, according to this informant, also found African men attractive and confident (Zhou 2017). However, in casual encounters Chinese women often found African men too assertive in their advances, as the following depiction in Boniface's lyrics in verse 4 reveals:

If you see a beautiful girl you say to her "Ni le yi"? ("You are willing?")
She responds "Ni za yi"
You tell her "Baby I love you"
Which means "Wo ai ni"[22]
You keep following her like flies following faeces
Oh, the journey of life
You teach me English
You teach me Chinese
My mother asked me to search for a white girl to marry
If she accepts what you say
You keep fondling her like a chick[23]
When she leaves your house
You tell her "Baby min tian, min tian, wo lai" (Tomorrow, tomorrow, I come)
Baby come again tomorrow"
She says to you "gan ma" (what for)
You tell her "aiya"[24]
If she attaches herself to your waist
You now go to Ada's[25] place.

[21] Hou, J. 9 July 2011. *Personal Communication*.

[22] Literally, "I love you."

[23] Meaning if the woman responds positively, then pamper her.

[24] A common Cantonese exclamation ("goodness" / "oh God").

[25] Ada is the Igbo expression for first daughter, or, sometimes, any woman, and is sometimes used as a first name. In this context, it may mean the name of a particular Ada who probably has a popular eatery where many people gather to relax, eat and drink (U. Oyali pers.comm. 2014).

The necessity to maintain alertness and a streetwise attitude can mean the difference between survival and deportation, or worse, imprisonment. In verse 6, Boniface reminds his fellow Nigerians of the necessity to "stay awake like a fish" and that many have become the victims of deportation because of their failure to observe a few simple rules of evasion. He describes the situation of capture, of jumping out of apartments, of being caught while hustling in the street. These are not depictions merely created for dramatic impact. Several incidents that have ended in deaths or serious injury have resulted from African migrants attempting to flee from the Chinese police[26]. An important rule to avoid attention and possible capture by the "python" (the police) is to maintain your cool when you see policemen and to walk away as though you have not seen them (Mathews *et al.* 2014). But if it is clear the police are looking for you then you have no option but to run fast. There is a commonly held belief among Africans in Guangzhou that they can outrun the Chinese police if it becomes necessary. Nigerians, in particular, Igbos, regard themselves as more street smart than most and refer to other Africans in China as "Zabarama" who seem to lack the kind of vigilance and strategy necessary to avoid capture. Tearing the "Aba" net like a professional runner is the only way to avoid capture:

Brother, do you know that what is being done is not easy
Many people from our country entered China
With no money, they sold their passports
Bought a laptop, bought a handset
Bought two pieces of suit, and sent [them] to Naija
The people in Naija sold the goods
And kept the money
And keep telling tales
If you see that guy
He walks like a cursed child
And keeps begging for money for food
If he gets some contacts
He joins in what is being done
But if the python gets him
He joins the group of those to be locked up
My brother, what is being done is not easy
This country of China is tough.

[26] See for instance: "Protest in China over Guangzhou death in custody." *BBC News.* 20 June 2012; "Africans Protest in Guangzhou." (Video). Toronto Star. 2009-07-30; "Africans protest in Guangzhou after passport checks." *China Daily. July 16, 2009.*

Compared to countries such as the United States, Australia or Japan, it is relatively easy to obtain a visa to China; but renewing a visa is another story (Mathews et al. 2014). This fact and the idea that opportunity awaits in China results in many Africans arriving in Guangzhou without adequate means to secure goods for export and reliable business partners who can handle the goods in Africa. Unfortunately, many end up selling their passports to buy goods to trade, while others deliver goods to family or friends who fail them. Boniface describes encountering such unfortunates, downcast and broken, in the streets of little Africa, and who resort to begging for money to feed themselves and to desperately forage for new opportunities to earn a living. As Chinko emphasises in the final refrain, "This country of China is tough."

Conclusion

The research presented reveals something about the persistence of West African, specifically Nigerian, musical practices and stylistic traits in Guangzhou. Though Africans have been coming to Guangzhou since at least the mid-1990s there has been little evidence of any form of intercultural, musical activity between Africans and Chinese. This feature of Nigerian music making in Guangzhou is indicative of how African immigrants are generally situated, in social and cultural terms. For the Nigerian and other African communities seem to be largely separate from the Chinese community which has prompted many researchers to characterise Guangzhou African communities as either an enclave (Li et al. 2013), as an outpost (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007), or as spatially trapped in a "second state of immobility" (Haugen 2012).

By September 2016 newspapers began reporting a significant drop in the number of African immigrants in Guangzhou (Liu 2017, Luedi 2018, Marsh 2016). Speculation on the decline includes the slowing Chinese economy, the so-called dollar drought in Africa, more stringent copyright protection for global brands as well as China's immigration policies and the prejudice Africans experience daily at the local level. Other observers argued that Africans are not leaving in large numbers but are regrouping elsewhere in China (Bodomo 2018). Whatever the reasons for the downturn in the visibility of African immigrants in Guangzhou, there appears to have been limited opportunity for the sharing of culture between Africans and Chinese, the kind of sharing that might have stimulated intercultural curiosity and experimentation.

Indeed, the living situation for Nigerians in Guangzhou, and Africans more generally, resonates with broader demographic patterns that have emerged in the wake of globalisation and the transnational movement of populations, specifically, the creation of enclaves and fortified spatial units such as gated communities. But

clearly more research needs to be done as the relationship develops between Africa and China, more generally, and between Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou, more specifically, to gauge whether the direction of those relationships moves more towards the intercultural.

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