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“Agents of Translation”: West African Entrepreneurs in China as Vectors of Social Change

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West African Entrepreneurs in China
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“Agents of Translation”: West African Entrepreneurs in China as Vectors of Social Change

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SPP 1448, Project “West African Traders as Translators Between Chinese and
African Urban Modernities”

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Introduction

China-Africa relations continue to attract substantial academic interest. In addition to the activities of large-scale state-directed enterprises, the social and economic conditions and practices of both Chinese actors in Africa and African actors in China have gained increasing prominence in recent years. Yet, these transnational businesspersons tend to be portrayed in a negative light, with the incompatibility between their business practices and their new environments being emphasized. The isolation, exclusion and, consequently, the limits of social and economic cooperation between the two groups are some of the major themes of the literature.¹ In contrast to this, our paper focuses less on the structural description of the encounter between Africans in China and their Chinese counterparts and more on the semantic dimension. Having already established that the Chinese in Africa impact on the local social order by force of their mere presence rather than any close interaction with the local population (Giese and Thiel 2012, Marfaing and Thiel 2013), we set out to describe how the growing number of African actors traveling to China potentially trigger shifts in attitude and practice upon and through their return by translating and incorporating their commercial and intellectual experiences in and with China into their life at home.

Our initial hypothesis² assumed transnational African traders regularly moving between West Africa and China to be the main actors of this translation, with longer-term African residents in China merely influencing their encounter.³ Our fieldwork in China, however, quickly showed us that the division between resident and traveling actors could not be upheld. Ghanaian and Senegalese agents residing in China maintain close relations to their home countries and regularly exchange ideas and goods with those at home. Furthermore, observing that their encounters with China are arguably much more intimate and intensive than those of their short-term visiting compatriots – not only allowing them deeper insights into the workings of the Chinese business environment and society, but ultimately also greater interpretative authority – we reconsidered these actors not as a mere structuring factor in the China experience of transnational traders but as key translators in their own right.

- 1 Studies on Africans in China generally focus on businesspeople living in Hong Kong (Mathews 2011; Mathews and Yang 2012) or working as intermediaries for African merchants regularly passing through the commodity hubs of mainland China (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2006; Li et al. 2007, 2012; Le Bail 2009; Osnos 2009; Haugen 2012). Generally, these studies concentrate on economic practices, in particular the negotiation of business deals (Haugen 2012; Le Bail 2009; Bodomo 2010; Bodomo and Ma 2010; Li et al. 2008; Osnos 2009; Mathews and Yang 2012). Many authors also describe the living conditions and social practices of Africans in Guangzhou, the Chinese city hosting the largest group of Africans (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2009; Li et al. 2008; Bodomo 2009, 2010; Le Bail 2009; Osnos 2009; Yang 2011; Müller 2011). The relatively few publications dealing with the city of Yiwu – the self-proclaimed “small commodities city” – concentrate on Muslim traders and the role of interpreters (Pliez, 2010; Bodomo and Ma 2010; Müller 2011). Furthermore, a number of authors deal with Africans’ particular difficulties in the Chinese cities – that is, racism (Bodomo 2010), legal status (Haugen 2012), or the incompatibility of African and Chinese business practices (Osnos 2009; Bodomo 2010; Bodomo and Ma 2010; Bredeloup 2007). Finally, the social and economic networks of these African entrepreneurs have not remained unnoticed (Li et al. 2008; Le Bail 2009; Xu 2009; Yang 2011; Mathews and Yang 2012; Haugen 2012). However, conclusions about the limits of economic and social cooperation across diverse African national identities are at best contradictory (Morais 2009; Bodomo 2010; Müller 2011; Haugen 2012).
- 2 DFG project within the SPP 1448, Giese & Marfaing: West African Traders as Translators Between Chinese and African Urban Modernities.
- 3 We owe this idea to the concept of “translation regimes” developed within the SPP 1448 project “Translations of the ‘Adaptation to Climate Change’ Paradigm in Eastern Africa”.

Thus, drawing on our first set of data from this project phase, our aim in this paper is to analyze which elements of their encounter with China our informants deem worthy of selection for later reintegration and adaptation into the context of their home societies.⁴ We apply the term "translations" to describe the "processes of transfer" at work in African individuals' encounters with Chinese everyday life – that means, all the "interconnected articulations, practices and positionings" developed to interpret, assimilate and integrate these Chinese experiences (Wolf 2008). The space in which African entrepreneurs operate is understood as a field of forces where only those properties are considered that are significant to the individuals concerned. The latter permanently apply strategies of adjustment, confronting the new with their own conformity. Bourdieu (1979) describes this as the struggle for distinction (i.e., the dynamics of transculturation), whereby an actor monopolizes all forms of capital (social, cultural, and economic) to become an agent of translation. This allows the agent to adapt new experiences to his or her social, economic and cultural context and to communicate these experiences and have them bear fruit, always maintaining the power this capacity procures. Like a decomposition or deconstruction of the elements of the translation process, the stages in this process are the core focus in our case study of African entrepreneurs in China, whose capacities to adapt their experiences to the context of their home societies we perceive as the trigger of dynamic socioeconomic change back home.

In the following sections, we will present our methods, describe the corpus of our interviews, and introduce our field sites. We will then describe the characteristics of our group of informants in terms of both their business activities and their social organization in China. This is, on the one hand, to deconstruct the false notion of a homogenous group⁵ of Africans in China and, on the other hand, to illustrate the factors that shape our informants' options for economic and social activities and therefore their experiences with Chinese people or things. Finally, we will present our analysis of selected objects of translation defined by our informants as worthy of incorporation into everyday African life. We end by presenting our initial conclusions on the relevance of these translation potentials more generally. As one of our Senegalese informants put it (interview LM n° 19 on 19.6.2013 in Yiwu), the encounter between Africa and Europe is so old and the impact on African social life so deeply engrained in everyday life that the encounter between Chinese and Africans presents a new opportunity to understand mutual contributions and discoveries between two cultures and the transition and adaptations of ideas between them.

Methods, Interviews and Field Sites

Methods

Conducting fieldwork with African communities in China comes with a number of particularities. African communities, especially in Guangzhou, are concentrated in distinct areas. The number of studies carried out on these areas has seen the field extensively researched over the

4 We thus concentrate, at the current stage, on the potential of predominantly Ghanaian and Senegalese agents as translators of their experience with China, leaving the analysis of the process of incorporation of the selected translation objects into the transnational agent-traders' home societies for a later research trip in January 2014.

5 Some studies already highlight the fact that Africans in China are a heterogeneous group (cf. Bredeloup 2012). However, the vast majority of publications uncritically adopt the homogenizing label of "Africans in China."

years and the subjects in it become quite sensitive. Many potential informants are therefore taken aback by the ongoing academic interest. Another problem arises from the ambiguous legal status of many African residents in China and the added exposure when talking to other non-African foreigners. These issues have so far been addressed with two distinct methodological approaches. The few publications that reveal their samples and methods seem to rely on "hanging out" (e.g. Müller 2011) with African informants in informal ways and settings. This technique is not only used for the above-mentioned ethical reasons, but also because the contacts made on the street level did not open doors to larger networks of informants. We chose an alternative approach: following up the contacts of our informants from Ghana and Senegal, on the one hand, and approaching representatives of the national African communities in China itself, on the other. This strategy allowed us to move from node to node upon recommendation and eventually to negotiate access to the higher echelons of the Ghanaian and Senegalese business networks. Furthermore, this "snowballing" technique not only helped us to get more comprehensive insights into individual enterprises by following up on the employees, partners, colleagues and acquaintances of each informant, but also revealed additional information about the composition of, relations of power within, seniority of and solidarity of the nationality-based African communities in China. Furthermore, this mode of following network connections led us smoothly from Yiwu to Guangzhou and eventually to Hong Kong as most informants' businesses operated branches in more than one location.⁶ Our informants willingly introduced us to the above-mentioned parts of their networks. Without exception, however, they remained extremely protective of their African clients (both short-visit buyers and especially large-scale investors coming to procure Chinese machinery or production materials), which made it rather difficult to identify this group of informants for our particular country case studies.⁷ Surprisingly, our method of recruiting informants could not correct the overall lack of perspectives of African women in the literature (Diederich 2010), despite us both being female researchers. However, our contribution addresses the hitherto linguistic (and sociocultural) scholarly bias on this subject towards anglophone Africans in China at the expense of their francophone counterparts.

Interviews

Besides those African traders who come to China more or less regularly to purchase stock for their shops and warehouses, there are a number of Africans who reside in China. These businesspeople work either independently or in family networks, or they engage in business

6 Equally, we have collected the contact details of partners and branches in West Africa, which will allow us to see what actually becomes of the potential to reorder African business relations based on experiences and exposures in China. Existing studies frequently claim a multisited approach to the transnational actors and practices at hand. However, we are not aware of any study that has followed particular mobile actors or goods on their journeys between the two continents. Although we intend to complete our observations by revisiting our informants or their contacts and partners in Ghana and Senegal during their return from the Chinese New Year celebrations in China, at this stage of our research we can only present our findings from China.

7 Although we identified the prominent points of encounters for both Ghanaians and Senegalese traders (especially in restaurants and preferentially frequented hotels), these encounters do not provide the main part of our interviews (neither numerically nor qualitatively) as these actors are constantly pressed for time and the opportunities to build trustful relationships were extremely limited.

endeavors alongside their studies or (teaching) jobs. Our body of interviews is thus composed of the following categories of informants:

	Full Forwarding Agents	Associates and Apprentices	Coaxers ⁸ and Service Providers	Clients
Senegalese	5/7/0	4/9/0	0/3/0	3/0/0
Ghanaian	1/10/2	2/1/0	1/1/2	4/2/0
Other	1/1/3	4/0/0	1/1/1	7/0/0
Total = 76	30	20	10	16

Table 1: Interviews by Categories of Informants in Yiwu, Guangzhou and Hong Kong

Some of our informants fall through the grid of these categories, while others may be classed in several columns at the same time. In the case of students, we decided to treat their residence status (many agents enroll in educational institutions merely to secure a student visa) as irrelevant, concentrating instead on their business activities and relationships with the full forwarding agents training or affiliating them. This table should thus be read as a snapshot of our informants' activities at the time of the interviews rather than fixed categories of actors and activities.

In terms of age, our informants were spread relatively evenly between those aged 20–30 and those aged 30–40. This distribution is proportional to our informants' influence and financial means. Employees and apprentices are usually under 30 years old and we met only a few associated agents over 35. Actors in this age group are more often full forwarding agents who offer the complete range of services described in the subsequent sections. This division shows that the agents' profession normally necessitates the long-term accumulation of experience in addition to social and financial capital. A wide range of educational backgrounds can be found in our samples, with many genuine students deciding to stay in China after the completion of their studies. Our samples also reveal a variety of professionals trained in entirely different, mainly technical *métiers* (e. g., architectural technicians, building contractors, mechanical engineers, agronomists, etc.) and only a handful of original traders.

Equally, social and geographic origins are very diverse. Senegalese and Ghanaians in China originate from all major ethnic groups in their countries. Yet, a difference emerged between our Senegalese and Ghanaian informants due to different historical trajectories of business relations in the two countries. The Senegalese businesspeople in China come from urban settings but consider themselves predominantly *Dakarois* (i. e., residents of the capital Dakar) given that their businesses have been developed in the capital. Nevertheless, the locations of their reinvestment – either upon their return or in the form of constant oscillation between their investment sites – in industrial or artisanal production generally remain in their native hometowns, as well as in the countryside. Only the investment in trade remains practically confined to the

8 Coaxer comes from "to coax." These mainly Senegalese intermediaries use the French term *coxeurs* to talk about their activities. We fuse the categories of coaxer and service providers together in the same column because this kind of African agent often switches between the activities depending on the opportunities at a given moment.

big cities. Our Ghanaian informants tended to come from poorer backgrounds. One informant explained this phenomenon, saying "If your father is rich, he will not even allow you to go to China; he will send you to Europe" (interview AT n° 15 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Ghanaian importers of Chinese commodities come from all regions of the country, including surprisingly small or remote cities like Elmina or Bolgatanga. This suggests that the big Accra- or Kumasi-based wholesalers' role as distributors of Chinese commodities to the hinterlands is becoming increasingly obsolete. Ghanaian residents in China also regularly own private shops in Ghana and leave them to be looked after by a family member. These investments usually take place in the family's hometown. As for Senegal, investment in production is generally located in rural areas.

Field Sites

With regard to our expectations, our field sites (Yiwu, Guangzhou and Hong Kong) turned out completely different in terms of economic relevance, official regulation, history and, thus, the business opportunities they offer to foreign entrepreneurs.

Yiwu, the youngest sourcing destination for our African informants, is a city of 2 million inhabitants in China's Zhejiang province. In the early 1980s this province was targeted by the Chinese government to establish the local production of light commodities,⁹ which saw Yiwu launch the "developing the city through commerce" campaign. In 1982 Yiwu's municipal government set up the Chouchengzhen Small Commodity Market (Liu Liqin 2007: 2). Then, in 1995 the Yiwu Small Commodity Exhibition began (Luo Xiaojun 2005: 65). By 2002 five generations of markets had been built in Yiwu, the newest addition to the earlier generations being the Yiwu International Commercial Market.¹⁰ Featuring a central logistical complex, Yiwu is directly linked to the port of Ningbo, which became the world's third biggest port for light industry and consumer goods following its merger with the port of Zhoushan in 2006.

Africans were encouraged to open shops at the Yiwu International Commercial Market following the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 – a decision made by Chinese politicians in order to demonstrate that Sino-African trade was not a one-way street. Mediated by the embassies of all major African countries, these shops display art and other produce (e.g., shea butter) from their respective home countries. The Ghanaian shop is owned by a wealthy diaspora member from Canada, though it is managed on a daily basis by a Ghanaian agent residing in Yiwu. The Senegalese shop forms part of the extended business network of a large-scale businessman. In general, one might say that these African shops are at best a side business for their owners (interview AT n° 3 on 12.6.2013 in Guangzhou). However, the interest to promote knowledge

9 At that time (i.e., the beginning of the Chinese reform period), Zhejiang already had a history of light industry production in collective enterprises (not large state enterprises). Because of this advantage, Chinese planners further stimulated this so-called Zhejiang model: labour intensive production of light industry goods for daily usage, so-called small commodities. This was primarily targeted at the domestic market and only later developed into export production.

10 With the latest opening of the new megamall supplementing the city's older market complexes, a retail area of 7,000m² spanning five pavilions over four storeys has been added to the city's commercial terrain, where each section specializes in a particular product. In the mall's tens of thousands of shops, producers display samples of their product range to the 170,000 visitors, among them 2,000 foreign visitors, every day.

about Africa and therefore deconstruct Chinese-held prejudices justifies the effort in the eyes of these entrepreneurs (interview LM n° 2 du 12.6.2013 in Yiwu).

The African population in Yiwu is small. In contrast to Guangzhou (illustrated below), there is no real African quarter or tight-knit community. Africans have settled all across Yiwu, though larger numbers can be found in the modern buildings close to the trade center and in the vicinity of the Muslim quarter of Meidah¹¹ – it was Meidah's consolidated Arab presence (Bertoncello, Bredeloup and Pliez 2009: 106; Le Bail 2009: 9; Pliez 2010: 133; 137; Dittgen 2010) that to some extent facilitated the first African traders' inclusion in the city. Unlike Guangzhou and Hong Kong, however, Yiwu has no expatriate organizations. In fact, some of the half-dozen or so Ghanaian agents in Yiwu did not know of each other despite their long-term presence in the city.

Nonetheless, both francophone and anglophone African agents in Yiwu participate in a common business association, meeting more or less regularly to protect their interests in the market. "Nous développons des stratégies pour rester concurrentiels devant la concurrence des Chinois sur notre terrain; nous sommes dans le même camp et essayons d'être du même côté" (interview LM n° 14 on 16. and 17. 6.2013 in Yiwu). One of the meetings of African agents in June 2013 was attended by 26 associates. Since a good number of our informants later stated that they had not been invited and others merely lacked the time to attend, we estimate that the number of African agents in Yiwu is at least twice as high. It may be due to their small number and the local authorities' openness to foreigners (Bodomo and Ma 2010) that Africans in Yiwu achieve "d'être interconnectées avec le Gouvernement chinois" (interview LM n° 17 on 18.6.2013 in Yiwu), thus making it easier to live and invest in China. City bureaucracies actively facilitate the establishment of foreign businesses in the interest of economic development and social well-being. The economic importance to the city of foreigners of all nationalities moderates the behavior of the police and other officials. "Yiwu vit des étrangers; sans eux la ville meurt et son industrie avec, alors avec les étrangers ici c'est plutôt tranquille" (interview LM n° 11 on 15.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Guangzhou is a modern city of 12 million inhabitants and has been open to foreign business for centuries. The Canton Fair, for instance, has been attracting foreign entrepreneurs since 1957. The traders in our sample, especially those from Senegal, started to frequent the exhibition around the late 1970s. Guangzhou is also the city where the presence of Africans has been most thoroughly studied. Bodomo (2010b) states that very few Africans resided in Guangzhou at the end of 2010, though many more Africans had traveled to the city as entrepreneurs. In a context where official numbers are unavailable, the estimates of the number of Africans living in Guangzhou vary greatly. Some sources indicate that African residents accounted for 1,000 of the 15,000 foreign residents in Guangzhou in 2007 (Bertoncello, Bredeloup, Pliez 2009; Le Bail 2009). Another study estimated that there were 20,000 documented African migrants alone (Haugen 2012). Meanwhile, media sources quote numbers as high as 100,000 African residents (Spiegel 2010, Zeit 2011). Initially, African migrants consisted mainly of Nigerians and Malians, though Ghanaians and Senegalese quickly followed suit (Martinez 2008, Le Bail 2009, Bodomo 2010).

Previous studies describe African communities in Guangzhou as being tacitly separated into the francophone quarter Xiaobei and the anglophone quarter Sanyuanli. Among the many busi-

11 Meidah, or economic district n° 3 (Bertoncello, Bredeloup and Pliez 2009), is named after the first Arab restaurant in the area (Gaborit 2007).

nesses aimed at domestic consumption, these areas host many African, Arab and Chinese trade businesses that are frequented by transnational traders who wish to make both business and private purchases. Showrooms take up the majority of the businesses' premises. The business owners naturally prefer to sell their stock in bulk – which is either stored in nearby warehouses or, and more commonly, produced and delivered before a client returns home – though they will also sell individual items to those looking for made-in-China gifts that “are known in Africa” (interview AT n° 11 on 23.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Shops, malls, restaurants and hotels that cater to Africans are concentrated in these quarters; agents' offices can also be found, though in areas less associated with the African presence.¹²

The influx of African nationals into Guangzhou peaked around 2007/08. Since then, our informants claim, living conditions and visa regulations have become more restrictive.¹³ At the same time, commercial competition with Chinese agents continues to grow steadily. Finally, the world economic crisis has exacerbated the ever increasing difficulty for African entrepreneurs doing business in China. For instance, agents who only a few years back filled several containers a month today only practice grouping, whereby they ship a client's goods in a container shared with several other exporters. As one Ghanaian agent explained, “the big traders have moved on to other places like Vietnam, Brazil or Turkey. But the Chinese bubble cannot burst. The market is so important. Nowadays, there are so many smaller traders” (interview AT n° 20 on 28.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Hong Kong is the oldest among the Chinese sourcing destinations for our informants, having replaced earlier locations like Dubai or Bangkok in the 1990s (Darkwah 2007, Lavergne 2002). Still, this former British colony provided us with the smallest corpus of interviews as many entrepreneurs have since left for more lucrative locations.¹⁴ For the Ghanaian sample, the city's comparative advantage vis-à-vis mainland China has dwindled since the introduction of visas. As one trader pointed out, his business went from consisting of 99 percent wholesale to 99 percent retail to those Africans still residing in Hong Kong (interview AT n° 31 on 13.7.2013 in Hong Kong). Only one full shipping agent could still be recruited for our interviews, though he specialized in the export of slightly used cars and kitchen appliances rather than the big volumes of consumer items that previously fueled Africa's Hong Kong trade.

With the decline of trade, the relevance of Hong Kong for African traders also waned. “Hong Kong ne produit rien! Hong Kong était la fenêtre de la Chine; maintenant que la Chine est ouverte elle n'a plus besoin de fenêtre” (interview LM n° 19 on 19.6.2013 in Yiwu). Another remarked that “les gens de Hong Kong étaient les plus honnêtes; leur essentielle erreur a été d'avoir montré le chemin de la Chine aux Africains. [...] à Hong Kong il n'y a plus que la finance: nous y avons tous nos comptes off-shore mais on n'y fait plus de business. Les bureaux de Hong Kong sont venus en Chine et ils essayent de récupérer leurs clients” (interview LM

12 In Xiaobei, traders from central Africa, mainly Christian Francophones, are located in the old center of Xiaobei around the Dongfeng building, while the West African Muslims can be found on the other side of the quarter, in the relatively new Tianxiu and Guolong buildings. The Yidong Building, hosting the offices of West African agent-traders, represents the exception of this spatial division. Guanyuan West Street is the Sanyuanli counterpart of the Xiaobei central axis, with the Kanaan Building and other malls. Generally less modern than Xiaobei in its architecture, the area otherwise provides the same infrastructural benefits such as public transport connections, hotels and restaurants, and most importantly, a major retail area.

13 While the legal regulations for residence permits have changed very little during recent years, our informants have experienced a withering of bureaucrats' goodwill.

14 Therefore, while the interviews conducted in Hong Kong itself may be anecdotal, our informants in Yiwu and Guangzhou added to our understanding given their previous experiences in Hong Kong.

n° 14 on 16. and 17.6.2013 in Yiwu). Consequently, agents have since left Hong Kong for more profitable locations such as Yiwu and Guangzhou (Le Bail [2009] counted about only 10 African agencies remaining in Hong Kong), only keeping their business addresses in Hong Kong to process financial transactions or receive the occasional African visitor who needs a visa for a neighboring Asian country. The goods traded in the famous Chungking Mansions – in particular mobile phones and African semiprecious stones (Mathews 2011, Mathews and Yang 2012) – are handled as excess luggage on commercial passenger flights and therefore do not necessitate a shipping agent's services.

Yet, the African community in Hong Kong remains quite strong. "300 seulement sont inscrits à l'association mais on peut compter 1.000 africains en tout, et seulement une centaine de francophones dont une trentaine originaires du Sahel [musulmans]. Les trois-quart sont bloqués et ne sont pas autorisés à travailler. En Chine au moins, on peut faire coxeur pour gagner sa vie. A Hong Kong pour pouvoir rester, il n'y a que le mariage avec une ressortissante ou la formation de langue [...]. Tous ces Africains ne peuvent pas être formés, ils cherchent la chance, mais beaucoup ne peuvent repartir" (interview LM n° 42 on 13.7.2013 in Hong Kong). Our Ghanaian informants readily admitted that the majority of their 150–200 estimated compatriots in Hong Kong (interview AT n° 32 on 16.7.2013 in Hong Kong) had secured residence and work permits by marrying a Hong Konger (interview AT n° 31 on 13.7.2013 in Hong Kong). Of those who have married, many continue to operate their trade businesses; others have ventured into salaried employment, especially in construction and professional occupations like law, engineering and science (interview AT n° 30 on 16.7.2013 in Hong Kong).

From our informants' perspectives, each of the three locations has its advantages. Supporters of Hong Kong stress the liberal atmosphere: "Here, we have human rights, we can speak freely" (interview AT n° 29 on 14.7.2013 in Hong Kong). Or in the words of another informant: "You will never be a part of them [Hong Kong society], but at least we don't have to be afraid" (interview AT n° 30 on 16.7.2013 in Hong Kong).

Across the Chinese border, advantages are usually defined in entrepreneurial terms. Many pointed out that the bigger the business the more likely an entrepreneur will be to source in Yiwu rather than in Guangzhou (interviews AT n° 5 on 13. and 16.6.2013 in Yiwu, interviews LM n° 17 on 18.6.2013 and n° 6 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu). Our agent informants stress that African visitors in Yiwu are more likely to make larger investments and are better informed and connected. This explains why they generally send more full containers in contrast to Guangzhou, where grouped containers are said to dominate (interviews AT n° 5 on 13. and 16.6.2013 in Yiwu, interview LM n° 4 on 13. and 17.6.2013 in Yiwu). "A Guangzhou pour le business c'est trop petit: petites quantité et chinoiseries; Yiwu n'est pas loin de Shanghai et autour de Yiwu il y a beaucoup de production. C'est même un pôle plus intéressant que Shanghai" (interview LM n° 6 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu). And while Guangzhou offered more opportunities in the eyes of this informant, "la vie y est nettement plus chère et le marché est plus fermé. Il faut savoir où trouver les choses, ce sont d'ailleurs les secrets des traders [...]. Le marché de Yiwu est nettement plus ouvert" (interview LM n° 14 on 16. and 17. 6.2013 in Yiwu). The organization of the Yiwu malls according to product types in particular makes it possible to navigate the extensive market structure without a guide. In addition, according to our informants, certain types of product (e.g., hardware items) were cheaper than elsewhere in China (interviews LM n° 4 and n° 6 on 14.6.2013 in Yiwu). Yiwu is also considered safer than Guangzhou, where robbery and cheating are perceived to be omnipresent in both everyday and business life.

However, the traders and factory representatives in Yiwu source about 40 percent of their goods throughout the whole of China, and their offers thus hardly differ from those in Guang-

zhou. Ultimately, the difference between Yiwu and Guangzhou may simply come down to personal preference. One informant justified his choice quite subjectively: "Yiwu [...] c'est un terrain commercial, pas politique, Beijing est trop politique et Guangzhou, 'c'est déjà sale', les Africains ont déjà imprégné une marque négative" (interview LM n° 13 on 16.6.2013 in Yiwu). In general terms, however, Guangzhou is said to be more interesting for African traders who lack experience in China. The national and religious communities in Guangzhou are well established and relatively easy to locate for new arrivals. In contrast to Yiwu, the different nationalities also blend less, thus allowing for a more intensive communal life. "A Guangzhou il y a plus d'ambiance qu'à Yiwu; entre Africains on ne s'y fréquentent pas; même pas forcement entre Sénégalais, on n'a pas le temps" (interview LM n° 33 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Doubtlessly, for those Africans trying to establish themselves in China, Guangzhou is also easier to access in the sense that one can start hustling for clients in the streets, which is more difficult in Yiwu due to the closed structure of the market and the consolidated position of full agents.¹⁵

Africans in China: A Heterogeneous Group

Just like Chinese in Africa, Africans in China engage in extremely diverse activities and enjoy varied statuses within their communities and Chinese society at large. However, they are portrayed as a homogenous group in the academic literature due to the recurrent use of labels such as "migration," "trading posts" (*comptoirs*) and "economic enclaves."

Many studies talk about "African migrants" in China, but we avoid this categorization since our informants not only travel on business visas but also follow their own often elaborate investment decisions. During our fieldwork in Ghana and Senegal in 2011 and 2012, many youths saw China as a migratory alternative to Europe – an idea that has also been confirmed by other authors (Cissé 2013). Our investigations in China have shown, however, that the idea of China as a new "El Dorado" and migratory alternative to the West has been, at best, partially realized. Those of our Ghanaian and Senegalese informants who initially intended to migrate to China did so in the absence of viable alternatives or with the expectation of moving on to more desirable destinations in the region – especially Japan, Hong Kong or South Korea (interviews AT n° 17 on 25.6.2013, n° 19 on 27.6.013 in Guangzhou and n° 27 on 11.7.2013 in Hong Kong). After arriving in China, however, they quickly realized that the conditions there did not enable these plans. Most importantly, those with tourist or short-term business visas (other limits apply to investor, student and working visas) were previously only allowed to stay in China up to three months and now (as of July 2013) only one month at a time, thus rendering many actors' everyday lives semi-legal and precarious. Africans "trying their luck" in China thus quickly realize that apart from trade, economic options are limited. "La Chine ne peut être une destination migratoire, tu ne peux faire que du trading ce que tu fais comme migrant, les Chinois le font" (interview LM n° 25 on 24.6.2013 in Guangzhou). In the words of a Senegalese coxer, "il n'y a pas de travail pour nous [les Africains]. Dans les usines ici, ce que tu sais faire, les

15 Although there is an unknown number of young Chinese offering interpretation, guide and business introduction services in all the hotels frequented by foreign entrepreneurs, there seems to be no market for Africans trying to do the same.

Chinois le font mieux que toi. [En tant qu'étranger] tu ne peux travailler qu'avec des étrangers et là il faut avoir fait des études" (interview LM n° 30 on 26.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Even if salaried employment were an option, Chinese wages are perceived to be insufficient to achieve the essential migratory objective of supporting the family back home. "Même le travail qu'un Africain pourrait faire ici il ne l'accepterait pas: le salaire tourne autour de 500RMB¹⁶ [à peu près 65 USD]" (interviews LM n° 21 on 21.6.2013, n° 29 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Much like the network of trading posts set up to disseminate European goods into the African hinterlands during colonial times, African businesses in China are usually concentrated in one business area and operate as branches of parent companies (either in the home country or a previous investment location like Dubai). However, Africans in China rather collect Chinese products for export instead of disseminating goods and do so without appropriating the hinterlands.¹⁷ Finally, we find the concept of enclaves equally unsuitable for describing the activities of African businesspeople in China for the same reasons that we denounce the enclave approach to interpret the Chinese presence in Dakar and Accra (Marfaing and Thiel 2011).

In the following section, we introduce our informants' realms of social and economic activities, their relationships with each other, and the implicit dynamics of seniority and influence that structure these activities within the communities. We proceed as follows: First, in order to identify the areas in which our informants are exposed to things Chinese, we present the activities that make up the forwarding business of Ghanaians and Senegalese in China. Second, in order to explain the paths of dissemination that these imaginaries and experiences of China take before their translation into the home societies, we introduce the social dynamics of the business – starting from the bottom up and emphasizing the communal relationships at every stage.

Economic Activities

To varying degrees and capacities, African entrepreneurs residing in China use their knowledge of Chinese commodities, locations and bureaucracy to cater to their (predominantly compatriot) trader clients' needs during their sourcing trips in China. Among many other tasks, this takes the forms of providing guidance, advice and solutions to administrative hurdles and processing the goods for export.

Sourcing

The main role of these agents, regardless of their legal form, is to serve as a link between Chinese producers (i. e., either producers' representatives or other traders or agents acting as intermediaries) and African traders sourcing for their trade and production businesses. In addi-

16 In fact, the monthly minimum wage in China is set at 1,600RMB (about 200 EUR), increasing at a rate of 17 percent since 2012. While this amount admittedly surpasses the wages in our African country cases, it is not sufficient to support life in China and send remittances.

17 If at all, the only historical structure worthy of comparison is the caravan trade, in the sense that African offices in China represent localities of sociability for transnational Africans traders. But even this comparison is limited as traders rarely sleep or eat in these offices, merely killing time while waiting for the delivery of goods for export.

tion to identifying suitable suppliers, agents translate in business deals and negotiate prices. They also provide market research on China and other Asian countries. Agents usually possess up-to-date knowledge about prices in various production locations around the world as well as a refined sense for product trends.

Agents' most time-consuming task is accompanying clients to markets. In general, agents only provide these services to their most important clients and delegate less important customers to associates or even capable employees. How a client was acquired also determines who will cater to his or her needs. Sometimes, associates and (to a lesser extent) employees have their own clients, whom were recruited in Africa or in markets in China. Such clients are usually those first-time visitors with little experience and few contacts, but know that they will run into a guide who will be ready to help. Agents also procure goods on their clients' behalf – for example, to stock up on selected goods in between their clients' sourcing trips. Such goods are shipped at low cost in other clients' containers, space permitting. This service is exclusively provided to long-term, high-volume clients and at times goes unremunerated.

The Internet is a crucial tool in agents' work given that it is instrumental in searching for suppliers in the Chinese market. Sometimes, African businesspeople hire agents to conduct research on a particular commodity – for example, to verify a production site's capacities and professional standards, including whether the company and its factory actually exist. An agent usually takes full charge of such important tasks and rarely delegates them to his or her employees.

Warehousing

Besides procurement, agents also engage in warehousing. Before being loaded into containers, a client's goods will be delivered and stored in warehouses, where the clients (and sometimes the agents) carry out tight quality control. One agent claimed to "open every single box" because one "can never trust" the Chinese (interview AT n°9 on 16.6.2013 in Yiwu). In other cases, agents temporarily stock small amounts of goods in their offices. In fact, upon entering any of the modern offices in the skyscrapers of Guangzhou, it is common to see large bags of textiles or artificial hair destined for the African market. Further into these offices, which typically welcome their visitors with shelves displaying the range of products sold in Africa by the agent, there are more piles of clients' goods stacked up against the wall and office furniture. Such quantities of goods will normally be exported on commercial passenger flights as excess luggage. Also, these goods stored in offices are usually bought directly from Chinese shops as readily available goods and thus do not have to be delivered to the warehouse first.

Some African entrepreneurs in our sample have been coming to Guangzhou since 1994. For almost a decade they were not permitted to rent warehouses.¹⁸ Goods had to be stocked in premises sublet from a Chinese agent. Some informants quickly realized that their own customers' goods predominantly filled the warehouse spaces they shared with Chinese agents. They thus sought to negotiate better deals, like getting the warehouse space free of charge in exchange for

18 Only since 2002, with the partial liberalization of commercial regulations following China's WTO accession, have Africans been able to control the entire chain of activities (from purchasing to stocking to processing for shipment) either as shipping agents or direct representatives of the big shipping lines (interview LM n°36 on 2.7.2013 in Guangzhou).

booking all containers through the Chinese landlord. This led to the current cooperations and interactions (interview AT n° 23 on 30.6.2013 and n° 20 on 28.6.2013 in Guangzhou). However, following changes in regulations, African agents are now able to rent their own warehouses.

Shipping

Only very few African agents possess their own shipping line connections and quotas. Thus after gathering and checking the various goods a client wishes to export, the vast majority of African agents contact a Chinese shipping agent to order a container, process the export documentation and dispatch the goods to Africa. The shipping of goods is the only instance in which most independent forwarding agents require the services of a Chinese intermediary.

Chinese factories usually agree to deliver up to twice as many goods as paid for if the agent guarantees to finance the unpaid portion of the goods. The agent only releases the bill of lading once the full sum has been received and thus technically remains in possession of the client's goods, for example, in the ports of Dakar or Tema. However, African agents have become wary of this practice and face a dilemma: either they risk losing clients to their Chinese competition by refusing to guarantee financing, or they face the threat of being financially liable for loans that their clients are unable to pay. One agent in Guangzhou explained that he was having to deal with 160,000USD in open claims from an absconding customer – a sum that would threaten the future of even the more established agents in China. Another agent feared the spiritual consequences of misunderstandings arising from such quarrels and was convinced that the death of a colleague had been caused by related spiritual attacks (interview AT n° 23 on 30.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Expenses and Revenues

In terms of monthly expenses, forwarding agents calculated that they spend about 8,000RMB (1,315USD) on office rent in Guangzhou's Xiaobei area – this can be even more in the city's upmarket areas. A container hauler costs another 1,500RMB (247USD); the laborers filling the containers, 600RMB (100USD) (interview LM n° 23 on 22.6.2013 in Guangzhou, interview AT n° 15 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou). In addition, agents also have to pay the office staff that provide services to their less important clients. All agents in our sample have developed a preference over the years for Chinese employees despite having the right to bring one employee from their home country. Although Chinese employees are more likely to eventually start their own businesses by taking "their" clients with them, they are considered to be more loyal and efficient during the course of employment (interview AT n° 14 on 21.6.2013 and n° 15 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

With regard to revenue, agents generally pocket 2–10 percent of the value of the exported goods. The final percentage depends on the actual volume of the order. For example, one agent charged 5 percent for 10,000USD worth of goods as opposed to 2 percent for 200,000USD worth. Agents also adapt their fees to the commission received from the factories. Agents suspect that their clients often have no idea about such arrangements. "You have to listen to your conscience," one agent said, "our clients still need to be able to make a profit when they go home, otherwise they will not come back" (interview AT n° 16 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou). The practice of charging percentages seems to be more common among Senegalese agents than

among Ghanaians, especially in Yiwu. There, our Ghanaian informants claim to possess no such bargaining power over their clients. Generally less organized than their francophone counterparts, it seems they cannot enforce price agreements either.

The largest share of the revenue, under normal circumstances, derives from "selling" the container, which is usually passed on for a profit of 300 USD from the Chinese shipping agent. The calculation of the revenues is different when the goods are shipped in grouped containers, and each client is charged per cubic meter. For grouped shipments, African traders sometimes take it upon themselves to go to China and to organize the ordering and shipping of Chinese goods. Generally, however, clients group ship because they do not have the necessary capital to fill a container. In this instance, agents group the commodities according to type, weight and, of course, destination. While this service has been offered in Guangzhou ever since African traders began going there, group shipping to Africa is a more recent development in Yiwu – although it has been a common practice among Chinese exporters there for many years.

Agents also rent out private accommodation at a rate of around 10 USD per night. Although this rate may not be decisively cheaper than the budget hotels in the African quarters of Yiwu and Guangzhou, such accommodation offers clients kitchen facilities and a "home away from home"; it is thus considered preferential treatment by the agent.

Generally, agents also send containers of goods for sale back to their home country or, in other cases, to selected destinations along the Gulf of Guinea (interview AT n° 13 on 17.6.2013 in Yiwu, interview LM n° 14 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Our Senegalese informants often target all West African francophone countries, including Senegal, and the Senegalese migratory destinations in Europe and North America. By and large, our informants claim that they would invest much more in this part of their business if it were not for the unreliability of their partners in Africa. Due to their presence being required in China, they choose to delay investment plans back home until they return.¹⁹

Services

Besides those involved in activities directly linked to exporting commodities, there is another category of African entrepreneur in China that survives by providing everyday services and amenities to African transnational entrepreneurs. These service providers usually offer more than one service, such as catering, accommodation, laundry and/or hairdressing. These activities are generally informal, with two exceptions: formally registered restaurants and the provision of paid accommodation in private residences (although the latter is illegal without a license, it is tolerated provided guests register at the local police station). "On ne m'a jamais interdit de faire ce que je fais [...] pas autorisé non plus; je ne connais pas les droits" (interview LM n° 34 on 1.7.2013 in Guangzhou). These activities usually take place in private apartments that are transformed into restaurants or hotels and visited by patrons who wish to enjoy the company of their compatriots while in China more than they do a meal or bed.

Such services are mainly provided by women and youths "trying their luck" in China. While the majority of women in our sample arrived in China as students, some also came to join a family member. One Ghanaian woman started as a forwarding agent alongside her studies. She

19 We will follow up on this aspect of China-Africa business as a potential route of translations during our fieldwork in Ghana and Senegal in January / February 2014.

later decided to move from her exporting activities into retail and then eventually opened an informal restaurant. Another student from Senegal opened a shop in Xiaobei, targeting African customers. As a student, however, she did not possess the necessary permit; after a few months – and repeated visits by the Chinese authorities – she decided to close the shop and continue as an associated agent. Another Senegalese woman followed a family member to run a private restaurant / hostel and later diversified into forwarding in order to regain economic autonomy.

Social and Professional Differentiations

Past studies tend to categorize African economic actors in China by the type of business in which they engage.²⁰ During the comparative analysis of our Chinese field data, we quickly realized that the emic significations of social positioning, especially within the national communities, and legal status in the Chinese administrative apparatus is just as important as the structural determinants of our informants' businesses. In the following, we present the succession of business stages that many of our informants – with a number of notable exceptions – commonly pass through during their career in China and what this usually entails for both their social and legal status.

Coaxers

Many of our informants arrived in China with virtually no contacts. These "adventurers" often travel to China with misconceptions about the country's living conditions and business environment – something the secretary of the Ghanaian community, Appiah Kubi (2011), warns about in his self-published autobiographical guidebook, *The Passion to Go Abroad*. At some point, many of these typically young men find themselves stranded in a legal and economic dead end. With no option but to offer their services as guides, they linger in the lounges of hotels popular among their compatriots and in the areas known for trade with Africans (e. g., Xiaobei or Sanyuanli in Guangzhou). These independent guides also use their connections back home to recruit clients. Often in cooperation with a travel or clearing agent, they receive newcomers in the Chinese market in an attempt to build their client base.

On average, independent guides are paid about 300RMB per day. Without their own warehouses or contacts to the shipping lines, these coaxers either limit their services to the guiding of clients in the markets and, if possible, the provision of translation services. At some point, they build relationships with more established agents in order to make use of the agents' infrastructures with regard to warehousing and loading goods for export. As they usually only attract small-scale traders – whose goods end up in grouped containers – they often need to cooperate with other agents in order to make grouped shipments viable.

20 Cf. Cissé (2013) distinguishes between "trade agents," (a category under which he assimilates our groups of coaxers, associates, employees, and apprentices), "entrepreneurs," and "temporarily traveling traders." Cissé does not consider "service providers." Cf. also Matthews and Yang (2012) who differentiate between "traders" and "consultants."

Many coaxers depend on study visas to remain in China legally. While some are genuinely pursuing a degree at a Chinese institution, a large number have simply enrolled in a Chinese language school to secure their immigration documents. The remaining coaxers normally only have temporary business visas, which expire after one month. In order to renew their visas, they have to leave China; typically they do this in Macao due to its visa-free status and proximity to the city of Guangzhou. Agents who are more established though not yet formalized make use of visa agents who file their clients' visa applications in provinces far away from Guangzhou where there are fewer foreign residents and "back doors" are more easily accessible. According to one of our informants, a six-month visa from a visa agent costs 20,000 RMB (about 2,500 USD), excluding travel and accommodation costs at the place of application (interview AT n° 16 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Such a sum is only explicable by the absence of legal means by which clients can acquire their documents. Coaxers possessing less capital have shorter term visas arranged through an agent at the cost of 2,000 RMB (about 250 USD) (interview LM n° 35 on 1.7.2013 in Guangzhou). None of these solutions, however, permit the visa holder to work.

Despite these difficulties, the community associations today no longer support newcomers' presence in China beyond the dissemination of knowledge about legal regulations and procedures. Carefully managing their reputation with Chinese authorities and future clients, the organized communities prefer to use association members' monthly fees to send a "stranded" compatriot home, paying for the airfare and the penalty for overstaying his or her visa. Similarly, religious associations like the *dahiras* limit their support of newcomers. "Il y a l'entraide et on ne laisse pas tomber quelqu'un dans la facilité: tu es là pour travailler. [...] ils peuvent dormir au *dahira* 6 ou 10 mois maximum, la nourriture parfois, mais ils se débrouillent, dans ce pays ce n'est pas évident, il n'y a que le business et il n'y a pas de boulot pour les étrangers; si tu ne connais personne il n'y a pas non plus de boulot dans le business" (interview LM n° 24 on 23.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Nonetheless, solidarity goes a long way in the business strategies of successful agents. In fact, many of these agents were former adventurers that were lucky enough to arrive in China at a high point of China-Africa trade after the turn of the century. During this period, these newcomers were trained by experienced entrepreneurs who taught them the rules of the freight forwarding business and in return reduced the agents' workload

Associates and Apprentices

Some studies (Müller 2011, Bredeloup 2012) claim that agents help newcomers to gain an economic and social foothold in China. Established agents in fact frame their strategy to train newcomers in the lucrative business of freight forwarding in terms of solidarity. As one Senegalese agent put it, "j'emploie deux Sénégalais fixes plus des plus jeunes comme ça. Je le fais par solidarité, moi aussi m'a appris; mais la chance dure six mois" (interview LM n° 21 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou). In other cases, supporting a newcomer in difficulty is seen as a way to train a suitable assistant or even successor. These relationships take very different forms depending mainly on the newcomer's social capital. Notably, in our Senegalese sample, these relationships are often mediated by kinship or other social networks. Established agents often bring over young family members to China to receive training in the enterprise as well as attend language or business courses in Chinese educational institutions. These family members are then expected to take over a local branch of the business once a partner leaves the company to

either return back home or diversify elsewhere.²¹ Given that these relationships concern above all Malian and Senegalese nationals in our sample, we conclude that integrating young relatives into the business in China is more common within the francophone African milieu.

The apprenticeships or similar training relationships in our Ghanaian sample either came about through chance encounters or the mediation of assistance within the Ghanaian community. Only in one case did a successful Ghanaian agent in China bring a younger family member to China to learn the business and eventually become a reliable manager for the Ghana branch of the enterprise. Since trainees usually dissociate themselves from the business, taking with them "their" clients, the relationship is usually only temporary. In one instance, a newcomer decided to take his clients with him because he never received the 500 USD a month he was initially promised by his patron (interviews AT n° 15 on 22.6.2013 in Guangzhou), which furthermore discredits agents' claims of solidarity and support associated with this practice.

Apart from apprentices and employees, some external intermediaries work with an agent in addition to serving their own client base. As independent entrepreneurs, they are not employees. In contrast to coaxers, who depend on an agent for the provision of services, these associates are called to receive clients in a main agent's office. After guiding the clients through the market and negotiating business deals, they make use of the agent's infrastructure and contacts, thus adding to the full utilization of the capacities. In Yiwu in particular, one can also find associated suboffices that may also fall into the category of independent offices but were largely born out of a Guangzhou agent's interest to expand and diversify into the other major sourcing destinations in China (interviews AT n° 4 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu and n° 13 on 17.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Full Agents

Full agents are autonomous entrepreneurs, not only in the sense that they do not depend on others for the allocation of clients, but also in that they provide all export-related services "in house." Among those full agents who have become independent, some have registered their businesses with the Chinese authorities and others operate from "private offices" located in their homes. Whether registered or unregistered, their business activities remain largely similar and only differ in terms of long-term business perspectives and portfolios of services depending on their legal status. These larger-scale forwarding businesses operate on permits obtained through individual registration or branch office regulations. With at least 100,000–500,000 RMB (16,500–83,000 USD), depending on the region, one can find a wholly foreign-owned enterprise.²² One major advantage of registering one's company in China is the issue of annual resi-

21 We were told of many cases in which West African agents in China invested in a range of activities besides forwarding. Often, these businesses are multilocal, integrating several members of the family network in the home country in the locations of the business's stages of expansion in the subregion and in Asia. These networks include translocal investment structures in production, both in China (constructions materials, textiles, sewing machines, among others) and in West Africa (cosmetics, purified water, vehicles, among others), sometimes adding to their investments in agriculture (cassava, groundnuts, cashew, tropical wood, among others). Doubtlessly, these last examples concern only a few informants. Nonetheless, even in our informants' less diversified commercial endeavors, the business structures contrast with those commonly found in these entrepreneurs home societies. For the Senegalese cases, all partners are considered in the distribution of the profits, while in Senegal businesses are often managed by the head of the family, who generously distributes profits but often in the form of grants rather than business participation.

22 http://www.pathtochina.com/reg_wfoe2.htm

dence permits by the authorities. From the perspective of our informants, the Chinese authorities' acknowledgement of their contributions in terms of taxes and employment creation adds to their subjective sense of security that they will also be granted the necessary immigration documentation in the future.

In view of the minimum investment required to register a Chinese company, many agents chose to set up a letterbox company in Hong Kong and merely operate a representative office in China. Others run branches of businesses registered in Africa and thus only need to provide a bank account in their home country and the contact details of the "mother company" (interview AT n° 23 on 30.6.2013 in Guangzhou). These representative offices²³ are in principle only allowed to provide services such as the arrangement of travel and business needs for their clients. One informant confided that they regularly have to hide their transaction receipts (anonymous interview). As with the regular controls against counterfeit products, however, this is not considered an actual problem, as the malls' and office buildings' managers usually warn their tenants of upcoming raids (interview AT n° 15 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou). These registered businesses are otherwise very careful to comply with all necessary regulations, especially taxation. It is not so much the fear of losing the business permit that drives their compliance, but the anxiety of not receiving a renewed annual visa – though in reality both documents are bundled and depend upon each other (interview AT n° 15 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Irrespective of these legal differentiations, independent agents enjoy a particular social status within the nationality-based associations. In the Ghanaian community, the core group of agents observably maintains an exclusivity vis-à-vis other community members in the same business. Claiming to possess particular "influence" rather than monetary wealth, the dozen or so members of this group proudly claim to possess the right contacts with the Chinese administration, as well as exclusive knowledge of Chinese business locations and a strong voice in the community. In fact, having only a roughly similar arrival date in China, these agents are at different career stages (some have even been trained by or have received other forms of assistance from their colleagues) and collaborate to their mutual benefit by sharing key business information with each other.

African-Chinese Joint Ventures

The smallest and doubtlessly most successful group of our informants diversified from the forwarding business and into African-Chinese joint ventures. Such enterprises generally see both parties together raise the necessary capital and the Chinese party procure production sites (land can only be leased, buildings can be bought), factory workers and machinery – though the Ghanaian case described below diverges from this norm. In an equity joint venture, the profits are distributed in the same proportion as the invested capital, while in a cooperative joint venture the profits are distributed according to the agreement reached between the two parties.²⁴

One Ghanaian informant entered into a five-year joint venture with a Chinese partner and controls 30 percent of the business, paying the rent and electricity for their five factories' as well as the salaries of several hundred employees. The Chinese partner, in turn, is responsible for the

23 http://www.pathtochina.com/reg_ro.htm

24 http://www.pathtochina.com/reg_jv.htm

provision and maintenance of the factories' machinery. However, according to the Ghanaian partner, if the subsequent contract does not provide him with a 49 percent share, he will not continue with the joint venture but rather concentrate on his investment plans back home (interview AT n° 17 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Another Ghanaian investor does not control his own production facilities but engages in a Chinese-Ghanaian joint venture with a broad investment portfolio. With their core activity in the textile trade, this informant claims to own 49 percent "only on paper, in reality it is 50/50" (interview AT n° 15 on 23.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Together with his partner, he also runs a forwarding office and is currently looking into several investment opportunities in Ghana, including the construction of a hotel. This joint venture arose out of the informal partnership between a Ghanaian trade agent and his Chinese shipping agent. Realizing that the shipping business was very seasonal, the two decided to open a number of shops in Guangzhou's African quarters, from which they pursued further expansion.

Asked about the nature of his joint venture with a Chinese partner, a Senegalese responded, "appelez le comme vous voulez, j'ai la majorité des parts, je produis, je paye mes 250 ouvriers et je vends" (interview LM n° 19 on 19.6.2013 in Yiwu). These relationships seem to stem from the difficulty of establishing reliable business relationships. "Je suis en joint venture avec des Chinois pour produire des baignoires, mais avec de vraies usines; avec les sous traitants on ne peut pas travailler" (interview LM n° 36 on 2.7.2013 in Guangzhou).

Forming a joint venture with a Chinese partner comes with a number of advantages, especially in the informal spheres of doing business. The aforementioned Ghanaian textile trader points out how the Chinese partner signs all deals in order to discourage suppliers from cheating them. The partner's tacit knowledge of Chinese bureaucracy is equally acknowledged as a major asset. "It is not advisable to have a Ghanaian partner, you have to have a local partner. The factories are more truthful to my partner. And locals know their way in the system. She signs all the contracts with the Chinese companies; for me it would be difficult to succeed in conflicts. Even if I lose my residence title, I will trust her to continue in our joint interest. But the Ghanaians, you cannot trust in that way. Without trust you can never gain. But Ghanaians would rather take the money from the business than building it" (interview AT n° 15 on 22.6.2013 in Guangzhou). As a Ghanaian, however, he claims to be more aware of their clients' needs and expectations.

Production in Africa

The objective for the majority of our informants is to transfer the business model to Africa. On the one hand, there are those who plan to make the move with Chinese partners (who will act as instructors) and Chinese machinery which is deemed more suitable for African needs and conditions than the sophisticated and expensive machinery originating from Europe. "If a European machine costs 100,000 USD, I can buy five Chinese. Even if one breaks down, I still have four more running" (interview AT n° 17 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou). On the other hand, others stress the desire to become completely independent of China. "Tomorrow, if I invest in Ghana it will be simple. You should not need Chinese products, and you should not need their spare parts for your machines" (interview AT n° 16 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Translation Potentials: African Perceptions of China

Based on their experiences with China, our informants claim to have gained valuable insights into Chinese society and more specifically Chinese business culture. They are most likely to carry these understandings back to Ghana and Senegal, translating and adapting the ideas to fit those contexts. "How they do their business we can learn from them" (interview AT n° 16 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou). "Je suis la traductrice des marchandises chinoises" (interview LM n° 31 27. and 28.6.2013 in Guangzhou). If the practice of translation is understood as a process of disassociating a signification from its original context and reintegrating it into a new one (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996, de Tarde 2003), it represents a means to alter the tastes and lifestyles (i. e., the habitus) of individuals (Bourdieu 1979). At this moment, we are looking at the practices of selection and dissociation, leaving the paths these translation potentials take on their way to Africa and their reintegration for our later fieldwork. However, we were able to observe the first forums for dissemination of ideas and practices during our field trip in China.

The private offices of forwarding agents are frequently turned into public spaces, serving as meeting places between clients, associates and functionaries of the nation-based communities. In this semiprivate setting, agents advise their clients on best practices in the Chinese business environment, train newcomers and exchange gossip and anecdotes with their colleagues and business partners. African traders also simply observe the work rhythm, relations between employees and superiors, and relations between agents and other office visitors. On the level of the communities, institutionalized advice on China is created and then disseminated to new arrivals. In the case of the Ghanaian community, this is also done via radio, conventions during their annual trips to Ghana, and a specialized section on the GhanaWeb Internet portal.²⁵ Plans to disseminate information even include the filming of the sequel to the Ghanaian community secretary's guidebook. The following sets of ideas circulate in these spaces:

Professionalism

In general, both agents and African traders dealing with Chinese producers have a fundamental appreciation for Chinese professionalism. Agents associate professionalism with having the right permits and licenses in place, as well as modern office spaces and the latest communication technology. "To me, without a trading license, you are not a company. You are doing services yet you don't have the document" (interview AT n° 20 on 28.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Professionalism is further seen to include punctuality and a focus on one's work during working hours. "Dans mon entreprise je transmettrai le sens du travail que j'ai appris en Chine; les Sénégalais aussi sont capables d'apprendre à travailler: le boulot c'est le boulot, après et avant tu fais ce que tu veux working time is working time!" (interview LM n° 23 on 22.6.2013 in Guangzhou). On the issue of work ethics, one highly skilled informant from our Hong Kong sample stated that "knowing where we come from we are behind. [...] Our resources are depleting, we have to become competitive now. We are very relaxed. Our work attitude is

25 <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/diaspora/diaspora.news.php?country=CN>

not good; we have to be at work on time. We need better supervision. Even of the cleaner in the street. Here, there is always somebody to check whether you really did the job" (interview n° 30 on 16.7.2013 in Hong Kong). This is in line with literally all of our informants' perceptions of Chinese determination and discipline. One informant commented that "the Chinese really work; they don't play with their job" (interview AT n° 23 on 22.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Another claimed that "the Chinese do everything to get that extra Yuan" (interview AT n° 26 on 4.7.2013 in Guangzhou). African entrepreneurs have also recognized that the Chinese make a bigger contribution to the everyday work of their business. "Le Chinois croit en ce qu'il fait, il y met le cœur [...] personne n'est épargné: tout le monde travaille" (interview LM n° 12 on 15.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Professionalism further relates to the practicalities of the business. Agents regularly advise customers to avoid keeping large sums of money on them and to opt for safer payment methods. "I tell my customers that it is risky to keep their money on them, whilst they can also put it in the bank" (interview AT n° 5 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu). Another agent added, "you have to send your customers to the Bank of China [to exchange currency]. There is so much fake money. [...] I had one client and she had so much money the bank could not change it all, so she stored it in my account and was very impressed when I just used my pass to pay at the shops" (interview AT n° 4 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Such realizations have seen concrete changes in conduct. One informant claimed that "nowadays [his clients] stay in the shops during lunch and use a rice cooker, so that they save money and don't miss their customers when they are away" (interview AT n° 16 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou). In addition, agents point out that China gives its clients ideas on how to treat customers. "Small scale traders and business people learn from China, for example, how they arrange their shops, how to render services. Now they receive a client with water and food, they know how to display the goods" (interview AT n° 22 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou). "Je sais maintenant comment on fait du commerce, comment on accueille le client [...] mais j'ai aussi appris qu'il n'y a pas de petites sommes; qu'il vaut mieux vendre vite et moins gagner que d'attendre pour avoir plus et ne rien vendre (interview LM n° 33 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Entrepreneurship

Ghanaian and Senegalese entrepreneurs in China get new ideas for their businesses regarding the importance of preparation and information, on the one hand, and innovation and risk-taking, on the other. Emphasizing the need to take risks, one businesswoman claimed that although she had "learned everything from [her] husband," she had "surpassed him because [she was] courageous." She said that "sometimes the investment does not work, [...] but when it works the profit is big" (interview AT n° 9 on 16.6.2013 in Yiwu). In the words of a Guangzhou-based agent, "you have to let some moneys go for the sake of future opportunities" (interview AT n° 22 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou). However, having understood the relevance of innovation to business success, many of our agent informants admitted to being rather disappointed in their compatriots. "My people should learn to study the market before they come instead of just following others" (interview AT n° 3 on 12.6.2013 in Yiwu). Another even said, "My clients are visionless. They ask us agents what they should buy. You have to have a target instead of following others. One of my clients goes to the shops to ask what other Ghanaians are buying there and then she asks for their invoices and buys the same. I now refuse to work with her" (interview AT n° 5 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Then there is the issue of business partnerships and the spreading of risk. "The Chinese believe in group work and partnership. They can establish a company with little money because many people bring their funds together. All are adding a part of the product. We would be more productive if we believed each other and made more partnerships. In China they can produce with little, we can also do that" (interview AT n° 22 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou). One Senegalese said, "Ici on combine mécanique et modernité. J'ai compris que ce n'est pas si difficile de produire; je ne dirai plus c'est pas possible, mais je trouverai une solution" (interview LM n° 33 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou). A big Ghanaian producer explained that "production in China is less risky than in Africa. You just buy the parts and assemble them instead of controlling the full thing" (interview AT n° 17 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou). But another Ghanaian said that his compatriots "want to take the glory for the full product and control the full production" (interview AT n° 22 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou), Africans in China, however, understand that the subcontracting model may be more suited to their conditions than controlling the entire production chain. "Au Sénégal l'investissement est trop lourd; ici il y a de la sous traitance pour tout l'emballage, la couleur, on délocalise la production. Au Sénégal, ce n'est pas productif parce qu'on veut dominer la chaîne de production d'un produit. Il y a trop d'investissement et ce n'est pas rentable [...] La sous traitance ça aide à dominer un marché" (interview LM n° 6 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Production at Home

Based on their observations in China, agents have also come to realize that one does not require Western complexity to produce in Africa. "En France pour faire quelque chose, ouvrir un bureau, il faut des diplômés [pour produire] des disjoncteurs là je n'aurais jamais pu les faire sans diplôme d'électricité" (interview LM n° 19 on 19.6.2013 in Yiwu). "Le system du business en Asie est très semblable à celui de l'Afrique" (interview LM n° 18 on 17.6.2013 in Yiwu). This idea has already been partly applied in Africa with the assemblage of imported spare parts. However, knowing what is done in Africa and comparing it to their perceptions of Chinese business, our informants want to see their home countries establish the productive contexts in which business endeavors can thrive for the benefit of the nation. "Ce qu'il faut apporter au Sénégal grâce à la Chine, c'est le transfert de technologie. Oui, on peut monter des machines à coudre au Sénégal et fabriquer des lampes basse consommation" (interview LM n° 3 on 12.6.2013 in Yiwu).

During their stay in China, many of our informants developed an increased awareness of how the import of commodities does not help Africa's development. One argued that "l'importation ce n'est pas bien pour un pays, l'export c'est mieux, mais c'est la production le plus important: je produis, c'est encore mieux" (interview LM n° 23 on 22.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Agents then try to pass the message on to their clients who are filling containers with commodities that could be produced in Africa, hoping to eventually sensitize them. They believe that with Chinese support in setting up production facilities, Africans can participate and make their own mark on globalization. As one businessman put it, "je n'aide pas les Chinois à s'installer en Afrique, mais à y investir et les Africains à produire, avec de petites unités. Les Européens font la même chose: il y a 20.000 Français en Chine inscrits à l'ambassade qui cherchent à investir comme les Africains, avec la Chine on est tous dans le même bateau" (interview LM n° 37 on 3.7.2013 in Guangzhou).

Infrastructure and Material Well-Being

Even the harshest critics of China acknowledge that on the level of infrastructure, China provides a good example for Africa in terms of showing that development is possible. Virtually all our informants mentioned the standard of roads, bridges and public transport systems when asked for their opinion on Chinese urban modernity; many admitted that it is thanks to the Chinese presence in Africa that there is progress in this area in their home societies. The functionality of urban structures especially impressed our informants. "After two weeks in China, I saw that they are not uncivilized as I thought. There are highways and buildings, everything is better" (interview AT n° 5 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu). Another interviewee said, "the Chinese are very modern. Look at the [Guangzhou] metro. And over there, they just built 2 hectares of skyscrapers in a couple of weeks" (interview AT n° 16 on 21.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

Other agents' clients seem to share this view and voiced an appreciation for a certain *savoir vivre* in the layout of the everyday environments. One noted that his "customers see China as a good place not just for the market. They like the roads, the apartments, the flowers along the streets, the airports" (interview AT n° 22 on 29.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Our informants expressed a wish to see public spaces in their home countries put to better use. "There are these nice parks in Hong Kong, although there are big lands in Accra, they don't think of this" (interview AT n° 29 on 14.7.2013 in Hong Kong). Another said, "What I like about China, they have parks to have your rest. The streets are named. Like you called me and I could tell the taxi driver where to find me. You can navigate" (interview AT n° 4 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu).

For one geomatic engineer, the territory of Hong Kong in particular stood out as an example for Africa in "the way they deal with their land scarcity. Less than 20 percent of Hong Kong has been developed, but they still have this awareness of the land's value and the need to preserve. We have to preserve land; we have to build vertically. Just one estate can cover a big area in Accra. We have to invest in higher structures to preserve space and control congestion. If we think about our future we have to make these investments. See the road structures. The flyovers are there due to scarce space, still the traffic is so much better organized, at least the heavy traffic corridors" (interview AT n° 30 on 16.7.2013 in Hong Kong).

While these perceptions are widely shared by our interview partners, some residents remain skeptical and do not want to be fooled by "Chinese modernity." "Guangzhou c'est le big town, à l'intérieur c'est la Chine: Il y a quelques villes globales comme ça mais en fait ils verrouillent tout" (interview LM n° 28 on 25.6.2013 in Guangzhou). In the end, our informants are convinced that the infrastructure needs to be developed in their home countries. However, they remain critical of Chinese gigantism and would therefore prefer more "humane" places like Yiwu.

While potential translation products aim at improving infrastructure, material well-being and comfort are also addressed. "They have a large population, but every supermarket has simple staples in abundance. In Ghana we should have something like noodles that everybody can afford" (interview AT n° 30 on 16.7.2013 in Hong Kong). A Ghanaian agent from Yiwu also expressed his appreciation: "In China, everything is in abundance. There are so many people yet there is food for everyone. All the goods are here in abundance" (interview AT n° 4 on 17.6.2013 in Yiwu).

This idea of well-being also translates into an increased awareness of product quality. Our interlocutors face the dilemma of wanting to export goods of higher quality to Africa, but are aware that many Africans will not be able to keep up with the rising prices; they always justify the poor quality of Chinese goods imported into Africa with the latter argument. However, they understand that it is ultimately their decision, knowing that China can also produce good quality. Here too, they think that they have to educate their clients: "Ghanaians think that

China is cheap but the quality is bad. We [agents] all tell them that they have to stop bargaining. If they start buying the quality, the country will be better. Because you waste money and time [going and buying again]. Here, time is money" (interview AT n° 5 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu). When it comes to product quality, this trader emphasizes how one has to take one's clients more seriously: "Moi, je fais des groupes electrogènes. J'ai changé ma politique. Avant les groupes duraient 6 mois; maintenant c'est de la bonne qualité: l'Africain a aussi fait son expérience, s'il a constate que c'est mieux, il est prêt à acheter plus cher mais il faut seulement qu'il voit une différence" (interview n° 36 LM on 2.7.2013 in Guangzhou). In fact, those who state that they cannot afford to sell bad quality products are numerous. "D'ailleurs les choses changent, les gens n'achètent plus n'importe quoi et pour construire leur maison, ils sont capables d'acheter plus cher, même s'ils ne peuvent se permettre les normes européennes" (interview n° 10 on 14.6.2013 in Yiwu). Yet, in other product ranges, our informants mention that one should also not overemphasize the issue of quality: "Le monde bouge vite, ce qui est bien hier ne l'est plus aujourd'hui. L'Europe avec sa bonne qualité, c'est fini. Ils vont imiter les Chinois: les gens consomment" (interview LM n° 27 on 24.6.2013 in Guangzhou).

In sum, these statements reveal how China shows our informants that things can be done differently – though the Chinese model is not simply absorbed uncritically. At first glance, our argument that our informants' perceptions of the issues raised above are shaped by their experience with China may appear challenged by the fact that our joint sample comprises transnational businesspeople for whom China is very seldom their first business destination abroad. Thus, their references and the issues they deem worthy of translation back home are not necessarily exclusively Chinese. "I was in Dubai before. I alighted in Guangzhou and after one week came to Yiwu. I called my friends in Dubai, 'China airports and skyscrapers we have in Dubai!' What is buildings? Coming from Dubai there is nothing like buildings for me in China" (interview AT n° 4 on 13.6.2013 in Yiwu). One Japan-based Nigerian entrepreneur in our sample said, "My father was a big international merchant. What I know of business is not inspired by China" (interview AT n° 2 on 16.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Despite these statements, we remain convinced that China offers a new reference point outside Euro-America. One Senegalese stated that "avec les Chinois, Dakar démystifie l'Europe. Ca change, quand je rentre, je ne me comporte pas comme un migrant d'avant: je reste avec mon T-shirt; je ne montre pas que j'ai quelque chose; j'ai ma dignité que j'aie de l'argent ou pas" (interview LM n° 30 on 26.6.2013 in Guangzhou). In the Ghanaian market, reference to the West remains important. For Ghanaian traders in China, however, the frames of reference have broadened: "When somebody comes into my shop, I tell them the bathtubs are from Europe otherwise they will not buy them. But [in reality] it is China that has allowed Africans comfort that Europe denied them. Europe has lost all influence over Africa" (interview AT n° 9 on 16.6.2013 in Yiwu).

Many more voices illustrate how our informants' frames of reference have taken on global dimensions. One Guangzhou-based agent said, "I went to the US and after one week I heard in my ears that I have to go back home. There is nothing in the US that you cannot get here" (Interview AT n° 20 on 28.6.2013 in Guangzhou). Explaining his view on these shifting references and their potential for Africa, a Senegalese said, "Notre culture est riche mais beaucoup de choses nous bloquent: on n'est plus des Africains, on n'est pas des Européens. [...] Les Chinois sont en train de changer la mentalité des Européens et des Américains et tout le monde est à la même enseigne; les Africains sont maintenant dans le bateau" (interview LM n° 37 on 3.7.2013 in Guangzhou).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented the heterogeneous situations of "Africans in China" – namely, their various activities, differential social and economic statuses, and the sociabilities maintained among them. Based on these insights, we were able shed light on the perceptions of China held by these "agents of translation" and their implicit and explicit comparisons with their West African home contexts. We have shown that West African trade agents and their associates in Yiwu, Guangzhou and Hong Kong have complex perceptions of and insights into Chinese society and business despite their different positioning within the Chinese administrative system, African community life, and business environment – all of which have an impact on one's experiences with and in China. We concentrated on the encounters and perceptions of intermediaries and agents residing in China, assuming that while their social characteristics may be different, they all possess interpretative authority because of their resident status in China.

We further isolated those perceptions that we deemed dearest to our informants and most likely to engender processes of translation insofar as they would influence life in our informants' places of origin and lead to improved working conditions and increased well-being. The areas selected here were professionalism and entrepreneurship as well as infrastructure, living standards and product quality.

Our informants have been inspired by China to change their ideas and practices. During our previous research, one dimension of the impact could already be verified: the habits of consumption in their home societies. It remains to be seen, however, whether and in which ways the potential translation of the objects identified in this paper will develop. Equally, for those of our informants who invest more substantially in production in their home societies, it remains to be studied whether these investments indeed follow local adaptations of Chinese business structures and rationales.

At this stage, we can state that the participation of China in the global arena has changed our informants' frames of reference. It is these new references that enable our informants to propose new future directions for their home societies. As one Senegalese informant put it, "en Chine, j'ai appris l'amour de mon pays malgré les difficultés" (interview LM n° 20 on 19.6.2013 in Yiwu). In a similar vein, a Ghanaian agent in Guangzhou pointed out, "like us the Chinese have been through critical times. Out of this they learned" (interview AT n° 22 on 29.6.2013 in Yiwu). It is this realization that copying the Western model has not helped Africa, and that Africans can find their very own – maybe less complex – way. At the same time, our informants are aware that the Chinese developments that fascinate them are due to the specific economic history and development of China. If they are to become relevant for Africa, there is no question that these models will have to be adapted to the African context. We now have the opportunity to go to Ghana and Senegal to confront the discourse of translation and the adaptation that is made in situ.

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