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# How Africans Pursue Low-End Globalization in Hong Kong and Mainland China

Gordon MATHEWS and YANG Yang

**Abstract:** This article looks at the livelihoods and lives of African traders coming to Hong Kong and Guangzhou. These traders are practising “low-end globalization”, involving small amounts of capital, and semi-legal or illegal transactions under the radar of the law. The article first considers who these traders are, portraying them as, typically, members of the upper crust of their home societies. It then considers these traders in Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong, a building that is an *entrepôt* between China and the developing world. Finally, it looks at traders’ livelihoods and lives in Guangzhou, South China, and traders’ efforts to succeed in mainland China. The article argues that one essential economic role China plays today is in manufacturing the cheap, sometimes counterfeit goods that enable Africa and other developing-world regions to experience globalization; the African traders who come to China help make this possible.

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**Keywords:** China, Africa, low-end globalization

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## Introduction

The topic of Chinese migration overseas has been widely addressed in the scholarly literature, and numerous books have been devoted to the topic; over the past few years, the *Journal of Chinese Overseas* has covered Chinese in societies throughout the world. “Migration with Chinese characteristics”, the title of the 2011 Association for Asian Studies panel for which the first draft of this article was written, is overwhelmingly thought of in terms of how Chinese sojourners have done business and settled across the globe.

However, another form of “migration with Chinese characteristics” has long existed: that of non-Chinese sojourning in China. To consider only the past 200 years, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was the colony of Hong Kong, along with enclaves, and concessions in Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou, among other cities (Bickers 1999, 2011; Bickers and Henriot 2000; Murphey 1975; Wasserstrom 2009). These enclaves of foreigners in China included British, French, Japanese, and Baghdadi Jews: an array of different people, with citizens of colonizing powers predominating. With the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, foreign migration to China all but ceased, but by the 1960s the number of foreign sojourners had once again begun to rise, these being primarily university students (see Sautman 1994 on African students in this era and the racism they experienced), as well as diplomats and other state-sponsored guests (Monson 2009). Since the late 1990s, there has been a rapid growth of entrepreneurs and business-people seeking to cash in on the lucrative Chinese market.

This new migration has been appreciably different from previous nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migration to China, and there are many reasons for this. First, China is no longer dominated by foreign powers, but is itself a rising world power. Foreigners in China today can thus no longer ride roughshod over the Chinese state, but must more or less adhere to its rules. Second, the types of people going to China today are different from those who sojourned there long ago: There are, to be sure, Western and Japanese financiers and other professionals in cities like Hong Kong (Knowles and Harper 2009) and Shanghai (Hou 2010), people who are not dissimilar to their nineteenth-century counterparts. But aside from these developed-world sojourners, there is also a very large number of sojourners from the developing world: the African, Middle Eastern and South Asian traders to be found in Guangzhou (Bertocello and Bredeloup 2007; Li et al. 2008; Zhang 2008; Li, Ma, and

Xue 2009; Bodomo 2010; Yang 2011; Haugen 2012), Yiwu (Le Bail 2009) and in Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007; Mathews 2011). This movement of developing-world entrepreneurs, particularly Africans, to China – a movement reflecting China's role in contemporary processes of globalization – is indeed a new form of migration to the country. As Li, Ma, and Xue write,

Whereas China [... earlier] had a limited number of African students and diplomatic personnel [...], never before in Chinese history has any Chinese city seen African migrants in any significant number [...]. The rise of African enclaves in China [...] has [...] rendered urban China socially and spatially more heterogeneous and multicultural (Li, Ma, and Xue 2009: 703).

This article adds to the literature on Africans in China by providing what has largely been lacking thus far: a close ethnographic portrait of African traders in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, depicting who they are and how they trade. But first let us discuss “low-end globalization”.

## Low-End Globalization

The Westerners, Japanese, and other developed-world citizens who come to China are typically agents of what we may label “high-end globalization” or “globalization from above”: They are often representatives of large corporations, largely working more or less within the law. However, these agents of high-end globalization are probably outnumbered in China today by those who represent “low-end globalization”, or “globalization from below”, which can be defined as the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes semi-legal or illegal transactions commonly associated with the developing world (Mathews 2011: 19-20; Mathews, Ribeiro, and Alba Vega 2012). High-end globalization is typified by the multinational corporations whose names everyone knows, from Apple to Nokia to McDonald's to Coca-Cola to Samsung, and by institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. It is globalization as championed by national states, as well as by such media outlets as the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist*; it operates, at least in theory, in a legal and transparent way. “Low-end globalization”, on the other hand, operates under the radar of the law. It may involve obtaining knock-off goods, whose logos have been appropriated from the brands of “high-end globalization”, and smuggling those goods across borders for sale by street ven-

dors in cities across the globe. High-end globalization can be grasped through statistics – for instance, corporate sales figures and national economic indicators of various sorts. Low-end globalization provides no such data; it cannot be measured because there are no reliable statistics, only rough estimates.

Low-end globalization has been analysed by a number of scholars in recent decades, from Hart (1973) to Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989) to Neuwirth (2011) as “the informal economy”: It typically involves self-employment, small-scale operation, labour intensiveness, skills obtained outside the formal educational system, and unregulated markets. The informal economy is to the formal economy as low-end globalization is to high-end globalization. In today’s world, the latter terms are more appropriate than the former terms because the world is becoming increasingly linked, and national economies cannot be seen as separate entities anymore. There are no autonomous national economies, but rather a single global economy (Arrighi 2005). Thus we must speak not of the “informal economy” in this society or that one, but rather of “low-end globalization” encompassing all societies. Low-end globalization can be found across the globe (chapters in Mathews, Ribeiro, and Alba Vega 2012 portray its processes in cities such as São Paulo, Kolkata, Ciudad del Este, Cairo, Mexico City and Washington DC, as well as Guangzhou and Hong Kong), but it is most readily apparent in the developing world. In many developing-world societies, low-end globalization is the only form of globalization that exists. In the DR Congo, 90 per cent of the economic activity has been officially invisible for 20 years (MacGaffey et al. 1991); an only somewhat lower figure is the case for many developing-world economies across the globe.

China plays an essential role in manufacturing the goods of low-end globalization. China is increasingly seen throughout the world as a manufacturing powerhouse, distributing goods to the whole world, but its particular role in low-end globalization is less commonly noted. China is a major supplier of cheap and often counterfeit goods to South Asia, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (Ribeiro 2006; Lin 2011), manufacturing goods that are often smuggled, transported through all the various means available in the informal economy. A major feature of Chinese manufacturing is goods of comparatively low price: goods that the developing world, as well as the developed world, desires not because of their flashiness or fashion, but because they are relatively inexpensive and of acceptable quality. Beyond this, and of criti-

cal importance in understanding China's role in globalization from below, is the fact that the rule of law remains quite flexible in China today, particularly in terms of knock-offs. Lin estimates that *shanzhai* (山寨) phones – copy or knock-off phones – comprise 80 per cent of the phones manufactured in China (2011: 21), and China is similarly lax in the production of many other kinds of goods. But even if the bulk of goods produced by China are not copies – despite the statistic cited above, most products aside from mobile phones and DVDs, are not knock-offs – they are certainly cheap. If it were not for China, globalization from below would not be happening, at least certainly not on its current scale.

This is the ultimate significance of China: It enables at least some of the fruits of global goodness, even if copied, to be spread throughout the world. Africa, as Allen and Hamnett have noted (1995: 2; see also Ferguson 2007: 25-49), is “off all kinds of maps”. China in effect puts Africa on the map again, just as it puts developing countries across the globe on the map once again. It is because of China that consumers in these countries can enjoy the fruits of globalization. This, we argue, is one of China's most important contributions to globalization in the early twenty-first century.

There are many entrepreneurs from China who have sojourned throughout the world to facilitate and profit from this trade, especially in Africa, as has much been discussed of late (Alden 2007; Rotberg 2008; Waldron 2008; Asche and Schüller 2008; Park and Tu 2010). Many traders from throughout the developing world – not least those from sub-Saharan Africa – have also gone to China to benefit from this trade. There are neighbourhoods in Guangzhou, such as Sanyuanli, that are virtually entirely African, where Chinese faces can only occasionally be seen; the same is the case in Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions, where Africans and South Asians far outnumber the Chinese in the building. All in all, there are perhaps as many as 200,000 Africans in China (Ghosh 2010).

In this article,<sup>1</sup> based on Mathews' five years of fieldwork in Chungking Mansions and his travels within China and to sub-Saharan Africa, and on Yang's year of research on African traders in Guangzhou, we seek to examine at an ethnographic level the connection between China

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and sub-Saharan Africa in the context of “low-end globalization”. We consider

- African traders between Africa and China;
- Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong, as a gateway to mainland China; and
- how African traders do business in and experience mainland China.

This examination will provide both a brief example of how low-end globalization is working in a Chinese context at the beginning of the twenty-first century and a glimpse of a new type of migration to China in an era in which the influence of the Chinese economy has spread throughout the world.

## Traders between Africa and China via Hong Kong

Let us begin with a newly arrived, middle-aged Tanzanian trader in Hong Kong’s Chungking Mansions, a ramshackle 17-storey building in the heart of Hong Kong’s tourist district, full of wholesale businesses and cheap guesthouses, where African and other developing-world traders intermingle with Indian, Pakistani, and mainland Chinese merchants. While this Tanzanian trader arrived in Hong Kong with no connections, he did have two decades of business experience in East Africa and considerable background knowledge from the East African traders with whom he had previously spoken about what to expect in the building. He immediately began pricing the different kinds of mobile phones within half a dozen phone shops in the building, including used phones, new China-made phones, China-made copies, and 14-day phones – European- and Korean-made phones that have been returned by their original owners and then shipped to Hong Kong. Then he phoned Dar es Salaam, to consult his investors – fellow wholesale phone buyers with a stake in his goods – and potential customers, the first of many such calls he would make over the next three days. He also haggled over prices with various phone-stall proprietors in Chungking Mansions, a task that, because phones lack price stickers, requires much knowledge and care. Seventy hours after his arrival, he departed for the Hong Kong airport to return to Tanzania with 820 phones – both genuine and copy – in his luggage, which were to be sold for a substantial mark-up in his home country. The 110 copy phones he carried back in his luggage could conceivably have been subject to confiscation by agents at the airport in

Hong Kong, exposing him to prosecution, but he has never heard from his friends of such a thing actually happening; he can always claim that he had no idea that the phones were copies. Thus he leaves with little concern – at least until he arrives back in Tanzania and faces the uncertainties of customs in his home country.

There are countless other traders like him in Chungking Mansions from Africa, India, and throughout the world; some 80 per cent of traders in the building are from sub-Saharan Africa. They buy goods ranging from mobile phones to computers to clothing to electronic accessories to building tiles, carrying their goods in their luggage, or sending them by air freight or by shipping container. Some traders bring gems – “stones” – from Africa to China, but most of the movement is in the opposite direction: from China back to Africa. Mathews has estimated that 20 per cent of the mobile phones now in use in sub-Saharan Africa have come through Chungking Mansions, with many more bought in China and then stored in or near Chungking Mansions before being carried on flights back to Africa (2011: 106; see also Shadbolt 2009). Many traders, particularly those buying mobile phones or computers, do their buying in Chungking Mansions, deemed a safer place than mainland China to buy most electronic goods. Many other traders – buyers of not just phones, but also clothing, electronic accessories, building materials, and an array of other goods – venture into the southern mainland province of Guangdong to do their buying, after having obtained Chinese visas in Hong Kong. It is common practice for a trader to buy a particularly attractive item of clothing in Hong Kong or elsewhere and then get at least 10,000 copies made in mainland China under the trader’s own label to send back to various African countries.

Many traders in Chungking Mansions are from Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria and Ghana. Citizens of the former two countries are given 90-day, visa-free access to Hong Kong, an unusual status vis-à-vis citizens of other African countries; citizens of the latter two countries tend to come to Chungking because of their comparatively better economic statuses. South Africa is underrepresented, perhaps because its laws against bringing in clandestine goods are more stringently enforced. However, Mathews has met traders in Chungking Mansions from nearly every sub-Saharan African country, from Mali to Madagascar to Zimbabwe, from Equatorial Guinea and Gabon to Burkina Faso and Benin.

Some 90 per cent of traders are male, and the few female traders we met from East African countries deal primarily in clothing: As one fe-

male Kenyan trader told me, “I can understand fashion better than men can. That’s why I can succeed in this business.” (There are also several dozen sex workers from Kenya and Tanzania in and around Chungking Mansions, from which these female traders take pains to distinguish themselves.) Simply by the fact that they are able to summon up the money to fly half a world away to China, these traders are marked in their home countries as being members of the upper crust. Many of the traders claim to be well-connected – “My uncle is the Ghanaian commissioner of prisons,” one said, and many others make similar claims – and while some are no doubt lying, others are probably telling the truth. Mathews was sometimes surprised by how well educated some of the older traders he encountered were. For example, one morning, by chance, he had breakfast in Chungking Mansions with two traders, a Tanzanian and a Kenyan, and found that the former had a master’s degree in agronomy and sought to buy farm equipment in China, and that the latter had a master’s degree in biochemistry and was investigating pharmaceuticals in India and China.

There are many who lack such education, of course, and some traders are amazingly ignorant of the world. To take one example, a Nigerian trader in Guangzhou told Mathews of how a young compatriot approached him in the subway and asked, “How do I get to Japan?” as if it were a few stops away on the local line (see Lo 2006 for a fuller picture of such traders). But by and large, traders are indeed wealthier and often better educated than their fellow citizens in the African countries from which they come, which is why they have the means and motivation to leave their home countries and fly halfway around the world in pursuit of the pot of gold beckoning from beneath the elusive rainbow of globalization.

Profits from trade are indeed elusive; trading can bring much money, but it is fraught with risk. These risks include getting cheated in Hong Kong and China; fluctuating currency (all traders are dealing in US dollars between their home countries and China, and exchange rates between various African currencies and the US dollar may fluctuate wildly); and getting caught at customs either between China and Hong Kong (where knock-offs can be, and occasionally are, confiscated) or in traders’ home countries, where bribery or uncertainty may be the rule (particularly for smaller traders, who lack an agent to smooth things over). Another risk is misjudging the market in one’s home country: Experienced traders estimate that fewer than half of first-time African traders

coming to Hong Kong and China make enough profit to come back a second time; many return home in shame, having lost their backers' money through miscalculation or because they were cheated. Rojas (2009) describes how, among young Nigerian Igbo traders, success in their initial trade in Hong Kong and China means that they have "graduated" and become full-fledged adults, able to support family members; but many traders, to their regret and chagrin, never attain this status.

Among the traders carrying phones in their luggage, such as the Tanzanian described above, profits, after air tickets and other expenses are subtracted, are typically as little as 400 USD per trip. However, those who are successful enough to be able to finance their return – as this small profit often enables – may engage in journeying between Africa and China for many years on end. Some traders remain in mainland China. Generally they are either those who are the most successful – having long-term Chinese visas and serving as brokers between African traders and Chinese factories from which they receive commissions – or those who are least successful, overstaying their visas and making a living while avoiding the police, who might arrest them at any moment and subsequently deport them. Others, particularly those in Hong Kong, stay only briefly – within the limits of their 14-, 30- or 90-day visa-free entry to the territory – but may make half a dozen or even a dozen trips per year between Africa and Hong Kong/ China.

This trade between Africa and China is relatively recent. More experienced traders have told me that in the 1990s they bought their goods in Jakarta or other Asian locales, and that South China emerged as the centre only in the late 1990s (and indeed, African traders can be found throughout the world: see MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000 on Paris; Stoller 2002 on New York). China has become the source of so many of the world's goods today, particularly the cheaper goods that many in the developing world most desire. The chief competition of these African traders in China is Chinese traders and companies in Africa; the two groups are competing to be the dominant middlemen of this trade. An East African trader told Mathews of how, after he sent three shipments from Shenzhen to his African address, the Chinese manufacturing company he had been dealing with sent its own representative there to steal his business; they could undercut his prices, he complained, and he feared losing his livelihood. The greater the Chinese presence in Africa – not the Chinese government and its officials, but small- and medium-sized Chinese companies, which, like African traders, often

operate at the margins of the law – the less necessary and profitable the African presence in China. But for now, these African traders are holding on, and indeed even flourishing.

## The Cultural Panorama of Chungking Mansions

Chungking Mansions plays a unique role in bridging the gap between mainland China and the world outside: In effect, the building plays the same role for the developing world that Hong Kong has played throughout much of its recent history for the world at large, that of China's *entrepôt* (see Welsh 1993; Tsang 2004). Chungking Mansions exists for three reasons:

- Most important, China, as the world's manufacturing powerhouse for low-end goods, is a magnet for traders.
- Hong Kong's relaxed visa regulations attest to its reputation as the world's freest economy (*Reuters* 2011) and its desire to be a tourist magnet.
- Due to its complicated history (Mathews 2011: 33-38) as a building with no unified ownership, Chungking Mansions has experienced decades of notoriety as the cheapest place to stay in Hong Kong, and has a reputation as a place where profits are made through volume rather than high prices, making it a comparatively inexpensive attraction for developing-world traders.

Many traders come to Chungking Mansions rather than going directly into mainland China because flights are more plentiful into Hong Kong, and because visas into China are easier to obtain in Hong Kong, and in Chungking Mansions itself, than in their home countries. Hong Kong, despite being a part of China since 1 July 1997, maintains its own, separate immigration and legal procedures (see Mathews, Ma, and Liu 2008), which include visa-free entrance into the territory for citizens of many developing-world nations (citizens of Nigeria and Pakistan, among others, must obtain visas in advance).

Traders also prefer Chungking Mansions over China for linguistic reasons – English is the *lingua franca* of Chungking Mansions, and most traders speak English but not Chinese – and also because goods like mobile phones are considered more reliable when bought in Chungking Mansions rather than in China. In fact, the China-made goods sold in Chungking Mansions are typically the same as those sold on the main-

land. But the merchants in Chungking Mansions, often Pakistanis who have lived in Hong Kong for many years, conduct business with customers in English, while merchants in China do not. Merchants in Chungking Mansions also often offer limited, three-month guarantees, which merchants in China typically do not. It is generally claimed that traders can be more easily cheated in mainland China than in Hong Kong: Traders maintain that while cheating certainly happens in Chungking Mansions, the language barrier as well as the lack of reliable contracts in China make getting cheated more likely in mainland China. Traders from Francophone sub-Saharan and North African countries are more likely to go to China than traders from Anglophone countries, because English is largely irrelevant in China, and many traders in cities such as Guangzhou have relatively limited English skills (see Bodomu 2010: 701). Of course, African traders in Chungking Mansions may also cheat Pakistani and Chinese merchants – one often-noted scam is for a long-term, African customer of a Chungking Mansions phone stall to get credit from the stall merchant for a large order and then simply vanish, presumably back to Africa.

Chungking Mansions represents an astonishing cultural mix. Most of the traders in the building are from the spectrum of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, while the majority of shopkeepers are from South Asia – Pakistanis and Indians who are permanent residents of Hong Kong, and whose families may have been in Hong Kong for generations. Sometimes they are temporary workers from India who fly back and forth between Hong Kong and Kolkata every 42 days, or simply asylum seekers trying their luck. There are a few Hong Kong Chinese proprietors, but the number of mainland Chinese merchants is rising, as they are running shops linked to mainland factories, attempting to undercut the prices of the South Asian intermediaries. There is also an astonishing range of additional nationalities, including asylum seekers and tourists staying at any of the building's 90 guesthouses. Examining guest registers at these places, Mathews has counted 129 different nationalities, making Chungking Mansions perhaps the most globalized building on earth.

Consider, for example, Osaka Guesthouse, on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor in Block C of Chungking Mansions. Despite its name, the guesthouse's most prominent feature is its posters outlining the lineage of the prophet Muhammad. Mathews asked the Indian manager why a guesthouse celebrating Islam should be named "Osaka", and he said that the Chinese owner had named it Osaka because he wanted to bring in Japanese tour-

ists as guests, whom he could charge more money; but in fact the people coming to the guesthouse were typically African Muslim traders from Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, and other countries, who found the posters comforting. Occasional Japanese tourists have come as well, and are sometimes baffled or astounded by what they find – both, as indicated to Mathews, by the posters and the ethnic mix of guests.

Consider, too, this interaction in a cramped Chungking Mansions elevator: A Chinese guesthouse manager is telling a Nigerian trader that he should not stay in an Indian guesthouse with his Filipina girlfriend because “Indian guesthouses are filthy.” There are countless interactions like this every day in Chungking Mansions; cross-cultural interaction is inevitable.

Much of what goes on in Chungking Mansions is illegal: Many goods are copies; many businesses are unlicensed; many workers were admitted to Hong Kong as tourists or as asylum seekers and are not allowed to work. However, the Hong Kong government seems to turn a blind eye to such illegality most of the time. In terms of illegal workers, this is largely because they are so difficult to catch. When policemen – even undercover policemen (who are, strangely enough, easily recognizable) – enter Chungking Mansions, lookouts instantly dial their friends, and illegal workers vanish from behind their counters to become customers and onlookers, safe from prosecution.

South Asians can easily be hired as illegal workers, since a South Asian storekeeper can simply claim something along the lines of “He’s not working illegally. He’s my brother visiting me, just helping out.” There are many South Asian workers who are legal Hong Kong residents, so illegal workers can easily blend in. Africans cannot easily be hired, as there are many African traders but only a few Africans reside legally in Hong Kong. Some Nigerians and Ghanaians work upstairs in Chungking Mansions in the guesthouses – in the five or ten minutes it would take the police to negotiate Chungking Mansions’ crowded elevators or climb the stairs, any worker will likely be told via mobile phone who is coming, and can then exit a given guesthouse to become a guest or passerby. Chinese storekeepers are also more or less excluded from hiring illegal labour in the context of Chungking Mansions. One Chinese storekeeper complained,

I’d like to hire a Pakistani or an African to work for me, but since he’s not Chinese, I couldn’t claim he was my relative. So it’s too dangerous.

Illegal mainland Chinese workers can be found throughout Hong Kong, but generally not in Chungking Mansions, which is not in most respects Chinese, but rather an island of the developing world in Hong Kong's heart. Hong Kong Chinese have long tended to see Chungking Mansions as a very dangerous place; some of my students have told me that their parents forbid them from going there. But this attitude has shifted in the last few years – Chungking Mansions has become “cool”, and mass media outlets in Hong Kong have to a remarkable degree shifted their portrayal of the building: It is no longer depicted as a “heart of darkness” that should be torn down, but instead as an emblem of Hong Kong's internationalism that should be celebrated. The celebration of Chungking Mansions is partly due to changes in the building itself, which has become more secure, with the building's incorporated owners having installed CCTV cameras to decrease crime. But the celebration of the building also has to do with Hong Kong's general reluctance to embrace China (Mathews, Ma, and Liu 2008) and its on-going desire to characterize itself as international rather than fully Chinese.

As earlier noted, the dominant African presence in Chungking Mansions is that of traders, who make up as many as half the people in the building at any given time, except January through March, when Chinese factories are closed for Chinese New Year; the large majority of traders are African. There are also a few African shopkeepers on the ground and first floors of the building – at present, two Ghanaians and a Somali – who have married Hong Kong Chinese and thus attained Hong Kong residency; and there are several unlicensed African restaurants upstairs in the buildings, which offer Malian, Nigerian and Tanzanian cuisine and have video cameras at their entrances to examine potential guests before letting them in. There are probably a hundred or so African visa overstayers at any given time in the building, primarily Nigerian. Many of the roughly 700 African asylum seekers in Hong Kong are also present; many of these come from Somalia, and to a lesser extent from Nigeria, but there are also asylum seekers from a wide range of other countries: Eritrea, Ghana, Uganda, the DR Congo, Cameroon, Guinea, Kenya and Egypt.

Once in Hong Kong, these asylum seekers can file their claims with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or with the Hong Kong government, or with both. After an initial imprisonment by immigration authorities for several weeks, these asylum seekers are allowed to live freely in Hong Kong, on a penurious allowance of roughly 2,100

HKD per month, given in kind (e.g. groceries and rent vouchers) rather than cash, as they are not allowed to work. It is impossible to live on that amount of money in Hong Kong, so these asylum seekers are essentially forced to work. Some are able to gather enough money to send goods back to Africa that their confederates at home are then supposed to sell, the profits of which the latter are supposed to send back to the traders in Hong Kong. This is dangerous, however, because often those confederates pocket the money instead; it is often assumed that anyone who has made it to Hong Kong must be unimaginably wealthy, so some may feel no compunction about pocketing the profits owed to entrepreneurial asylum seekers eking out an existence overseas.

Nonetheless, a few of these asylum seekers do very nicely indeed. Mathews knows one Central African man with a comfortable apartment in an outer district of Hong Kong who works his telephone every night between midnight and 4 a.m. to sort out the orders of his African customers; he is able to make a good living for himself and for his fellow entrepreneurs back home. Other former asylum seekers have married Hong Kong women, and have thus been able to gain residency and start businesses. Those asylum seekers who are from Somalia can typically gain refugee status in the United States, and can thus leave Hong Kong after several years of waiting. But most asylum seekers live in limbo, waiting for refugee status or for love that may never come, barely surviving a notch above homelessness.

Hong Kong Chinese shopkeepers in Chungking Mansions sometimes tell Mathews that they feel lonely:

Twenty years ago, most of us on the ground floor were Chinese, but now there's only a few of us left: The Indians and Pakistanis have taken over.

A new wave of mainland Chinese merchants has recently become visible in Chungking Mansions, but thus far most of these merchants have failed, in part because of their inability to speak English, the *lingua franca* of Chungking Mansions, and also because of their cultural ignorance of the world beyond China. As one experienced Guinean trader maintained, "Chinese have been in a bottle too long" and have trouble understanding the world outside China, at least as it is manifested in Chungking Mansions. Nonetheless, these Chinese merchants may be the wave of the future. As a Pakistani merchant in Chungking Mansions said, "Between the Chinese and the Africans, maybe in a few years there will be no room for the Pakistanis anymore." Once, Mathews saw a mainland Chinese

woman trying to sell wallets and belts, speaking not a word of English or apparently of any other language aside from Mandarin. She was following the pattern of so many new immigrant merchants, stepping into new territory she knew nothing about to try to sell her wares. And she succeeded: Within 30 minutes, a line of Africans and South Asians formed, buying wallets from her, thanks to her low prices. The same may be true of the phone merchants fresh from mainland China who set up shop here and whose negotiations with traders may be wordless, comprising only numbers punched on a calculator.

Nearly all the goods for sale in Chungking Mansions, except for 14-day phones, which are mostly from Europe, and some foodstuffs brought in from India and Pakistan, are China-made, a significant portion of which are copies, as earlier noted. Indeed, between phone merchants and their customers, the term “China-made” means “copy” – China-made copies of Nokia, Samsung or other phones – despite the fact that there are increasing numbers of legitimate China-made branded phones for sale in the building. We have been told that the fear of “fakes” and of low-quality goods has led to a degree of disdain toward China-made goods among many African traders, and indeed, throughout sub-Saharan Africa in general. A Filipina food-stall manager said that she never carried Coca-Cola with Chinese lettering because customers complain that it is not “real Coca-Cola” – an unfounded complaint (as Coca-Cola canned in China has Chinese lettering) but one that reveals the depth of mistrust. It is not that all China-made goods are of low quality (but see Midler 2009); rather, the kinds of goods, whether genuine or copy, that traders buy for their developing-world customers are of low quality, since they are all that most customers can afford, and this poor reputation is extended to Chinese goods as a whole.

Nonetheless, traders still go to China: “The big fish go to China. We little fish stay in Hong Kong. China is there for large scale: for the big fish, not the small fish,” said a Tanzanian trader (Mathews 2011: 135) in a comment of a kind often repeated in Chungking Mansions. China is where the unwary may lose everything, but where the skilled, smart and lucky have a chance at making a fortune.

## Traders’ Experiences of Mainland China

Over and over again in Chungking Mansions, Mathews heard stories of traders’ travails in mainland China. Such talk serves partly as a justifica-

tion for being in Chungking Mansions rather than pursuing fortunes over the border, but it also reflects the very real difficulties of doing the business of low-end globalization in China, the “wild west” of contemporary capitalism. As an experienced West African businessman said:

The problem with the [mainland] Chinese is that they will agree to anything until they get your deposit. But once they have your money, you have to follow their will. They will deliver whatever they want to you. You have a contract, but for them it has no meaning at all. It's like a piece of toilet tissue. [...] It's the hardest thing I've ever found, working with Chinese. Harder than working with any other people on earth! Most of the time, they're trying to cheat you (Mathews 2011: 118-119).

A Ugandan clothing trader said of her Chinese suppliers:

If you give them a style and say “Make this in this color and this style,” they might not do it. If they don't have the sample you need, they'll just take another one and put it there. If you need seven of something, they might give you two, and put in five of something else. They do this always! Always you have to check before you pay anything.

Clever traders in mainland China can overcome these problems. One described how, when the goods he has bought are being packed in the container, he takes photographs of every step, and the owner of the mainland Chinese company makes a CD, giving one copy to him and keeping a copy, so that both sides have an exact record of what was packed. Another described to me how, once he learned that he was being charged a premium because he was not ethnically Chinese, he avoided confronting his Chinese supplier, but instead hired a Singaporean Chinese to serve as his intermediary, to whom he gave half the money he thereby saved. These traders have the sophistication to circumvent the obstacles they face in mainland China.

Many of the traders in Chungking Mansions also trade in mainland China, particularly in Guangzhou, as we have seen. But there are distinct geographic differences between the two places. Within Chungking Mansions' cramped confines, all of sub-Saharan Africa is intermingled. Guangzhou, on the other hand, is more segregated: Igbo, from southern Nigeria, who are mostly Christians, predominate in the Sanyuanli District. Muslim Africans and Middle Easterners are to be found in the Yuexiu District (Haugen 2012: 5) and particularly in the area around the Tianxiu Building. Guangzhou has a population of African traders that

dwarfs that of Hong Kong: 20,000 or perhaps considerably more (see Haugen 2012: 5; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009: 704). The following discussion focuses primarily on the Igbo and other West African traders in the San-yuanli District, where Yang conducted her research.

Many of these Igbo traders make use of their family connections to do business in mainland China, ordering their goods and sending them to their families. Often they worked as apprentices in their youth, learning business techniques before taking their money to China. One trader Yang interviewed worked for nine years (starting at age 13) as an apprentice in a clothing shop in Lagos. In the course of his experience there, he learned sales techniques and the nuances of the clothing market. After completing his apprenticeship, he bought a one-way ticket to Guangzhou in 2008. He did not have enough money left over to start a shop or to stock inventory, so he talked to a few people like himself and found employment in a Ghanaian logistics shop in Guangzhou, where he became a labourer, preparing bulk goods for shipment. He worked for two years and, through great diligence, accumulated enough money to open shops both in Guangzhou and Lagos; in the latter city, his sister's family sells the goods to local wholesalers and retailers. He is now married to a local Chinese woman and both work in the shop selling clothes and offering consultancy services to short-term traders; he is an African success story in Guangzhou.

Localized traders like the young man mentioned above call themselves consultants and can easily attract a large client base simply by establishing a successful business and having a good name in the markets in mainland China. Many traders who are newcomers to China pay localized traders to be their guides in purchasing goods in various Chinese cities. These traders usually have lived and traded in mainland China for a long enough time that they know how to communicate in Mandarin, where to find inexpensive goods, how to travel between and within different Chinese cities, and how to bargain with Chinese wholesalers. Among the production centres in mainland China, Guangzhou is seen as the premier wholesale centre for goods of all sorts; Yiwu is known as an export centre for small commodities, from cigarette lighters to sunglasses; Shunde is where traders purchase furniture; Foshan is known for inexpensive lighting products; Wuhan is known for building materials; and Wenzhou is reputed to be a good place to find footwear.

To succeed in mainland China, traders can travel back and forth between China and their home country, but many of the most successful

devise ways to be able to stay in China. In Hong Kong, traders can remain if they can come up with an investment totalling 200,000 USD, or if they marry a Hong Kong resident, conditions impossible for most traders to fulfil. In mainland China, the situation is both easier and murkier: Traders can start a business with only a few hundred dollars in hand, but they can also lose everything if they get cheated or arrested for visa problems, both of which are frequent occurrences.

Chinese visas are difficult to obtain because they shift in accordance with different policies. During the Beijing Olympics in 2008, for example, they were all but impossible to obtain, whereas for periods in 2007 and 2009, they were relatively easy to obtain. These fluctuations in policy further complicate matters for African traders, since the fluctuations are not publicly acknowledged, and largely depend on the applicant's nationality. In both the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, it was much harder for Nigerians to obtain or renew their Chinese visas than it was for traders from other African countries to do so. In August 2010, two months before the Asian Games, Yang went with a Nigerian trader to a visa agency to renew his visa, which was to expire in a month, and was told by the agent that it would be possible only if he held a Cameroonian or Ghanaian passport – anything other than a Nigerian one. The reason for this, she said, was that there were too many Nigerian migrants in China. Some traders believed that they were denied visa renewals because it would create a “bad image” for the metropolis to have so many black people living there. After the international games, the visa policy was relaxed.

Many African traders hold one-month travel visas or three-month business visas when they arrive in mainland China. While some manage to place orders, purchase goods, and ship those goods within this limited time, others cannot finish. Time runs out quickly for short-term traders, because they need to trade enough goods to make the trip profitable, or because they simply need time to wait for the Chinese factories to finish manufacturing the goods they have ordered.

Igbo and other West African traders and labourers in Guangzhou sometimes choose to overstay their visas in order to carry on with their business. To avoid being caught by Chinese police, they hide in their apartments or run away from the marketplace when a police raid is anticipated. Some traders who have established shops in the market bribe Chinese security guards to inform them once the police enter the market. If an overstaying trader is caught, he will often attempt to bribe the po-

liceman, sometimes to no avail, usually offering 10,000 CNY. As a trader once told Yang,

Sometimes the policeman asks for a certain amount, like 15,000 yuan, and we have to pay him, because it's more economical than paying the 5,000 yuan fine and also paying for a flight ticket home.

When illegal African migrants are deported, their fingerprints are also recorded, prohibiting them from re-entering mainland China. Sometimes bribery does not work, as in the case of a trader who, in July 2009, severely injured himself jumping out of a police station window, leading to riots in the African community in Sanyuanli (Branigan 2009; Zhai and Tam 2009).

Some Chinese manufacturers delay making the goods that an African buyer has ordered, so when the buyer's visa has expired, the manufacturer can hand over poor-quality goods or simply disappear, leaving the illegal trader without any recourse. Many traders blame this on the Chinese legal system, but regardless of their grievances, the huge potential economic profit they can earn makes the risk worth taking, traders say. When the risk is not worth taking anymore, the traders will most likely leave. Since 2009, the cost of labour and raw materials – such as cotton – have been on the rise. At the same time, the value of the yuan has been rising relative to the US dollar. These factors greatly reduce traders' profit margins. Some West African traders have returned to their home countries while others seek cheaper goods in Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia, where labour and materials are cheaper.

It is difficult for many Igbo and other West African traders to become knowledgeable about China, in large part because of the language barrier: Unlike Chungking Mansions, where almost everyone speaks English, very few Chinese merchants speak anything other than Mandarin or Chinese dialects, languages unknown to most traders. Thus, many rely on calculators and hand signals, or on the array of interpreters waiting to be hired, often female Chinese university students who are fluent in English. Around the Tianxiu Building in Guangzhou, a centre of commerce between Chinese merchants and traders from Africa and the Middle East, there are street vendors of Arabic–Chinese and French–Chinese phrasebooks, phrasebooks that we have seen traders engrossed in studying. Without some knowledge of Mandarin, traders can be easily cheated, with Chinese merchants blithely talking with one another about deceiving the oblivious African buyer before them.

Many male traders in China seek to become romantically involved with Chinese women, either the aforementioned interpreters or the occasional female shopkeepers they encounter. Marriage to a Chinese typically brings only a six-month visa, but potentially makes one's stay in China less legally tenuous. The brief visas that can be obtained did not deter a dozen traders from proposing to Yang in the course of her fieldwork in Guangzhou in 2011, during which she acted as an interpreter as well as a researcher. This took place despite the fact that she was also suspected by some of being a Chinese government agent, a suspicion she dispelled only by bringing her white American boyfriend to meet her informants, something that in their eyes significantly enhanced her credibility. Mathews came to know a Yemeni trader in Chungking Mansions who waxed rhapsodic about the Chinese secretary he had employed whom he sought to make his second wife. Mathews visited him in Guangzhou in his high-rise office, and met this woman, who was apparently deeply in love with him but had no idea that he had selected her to become not his first wife but his second, supplementing the family he had left back home in Yemen.

While it is considered prestigious by many Africans for an African trader to marry a Chinese woman, such cross-cultural marriage is stigmatized by the Chinese community. Chinese women in marriages or relationships with Africans are socially marginalized and some form exclusive support groups among themselves. It was shocking to this group of women when Lou Jing, an African-Chinese girl born and raised in Shanghai, went on a television singing contest and subsequently suffered heated racist remarks from Chinese audiences (see, for an example of such attacks, *chinasmack* 2009). Some African traders married to Chinese women, after hearing about this situation, said that they would bring their children and wives back to their home countries in Africa. One African trader asked Yang to help his wife give birth to her child in Hong Kong so that the child "can be a Hong Kong citizen and grow up in an equal society".

Beyond romantic love, there are a few traders who fall in love with Chinese culture. These are rare – Africans in China, and to a lesser extent Hong Kong, generally claim no interest in the societies they are travelling to, seeking, they say, only to make money. Many vociferously disparage China: "They will all go to hell for their racism against Africans!" a Congolese trader exclaimed to Mathews. But at least a few carry a more positive feeling from their experiences in China. There is a Tanzanian trader

who regularly stays in the home of a factory owner in China. “Is he your friend?” Mathews asked him. The trader responded, “Well, no, he’s really like my father.” He eats meals with this man, and relishes the opportunities he has to “learn Chinese culture”. Another, a Nigerian trader, said, “I call myself a black Chinese – I’m part of China! I wouldn’t mind living in China 20 years from now” (Mathews 2011: 147). This, again, is highly unusual: While in Hong Kong, as earlier noted, the attitude toward non-Chinese, and Africans in particular, has become more positive in the last few years, in Guangzhou that attitude remains largely negative, as Li, Ma, and Xue discuss (2009: 713), with a remarkable degree of mutual distrust apparent.

But this distrust can be overcome. Mathews visited one affluent Kenyan broker in Guangzhou who makes his living by taking aspiring African traders around to different Chinese factories and manufacturers; in watching him at work, it was clear that he was just as much at home joking with Chinese factory managers in Mandarin as he was talking with his fellow East Africans in Swahili. He, truly, was bicultural. It is in characters like this man that low-end globalization transcends the purely economic aspect to become a sort of cultural globalization as well. But he was an exception among the traders we have known: Low-end globalization, for the African traders we have met, is predominantly a matter of money alone.

The traders in Sanyuanli in Guangzhou differ from the traders in Chungking Mansions in terms of their background and degree of success. Many of the traders in Sanyuanli are less educated than traders in Chungking Mansions, and probably an even larger percentage do not succeed in their endeavours because the obstacles they face are so many. But all in common are players at slightly different strata of low-end globalization. All of them are working with relatively small amounts of capital compared to the corporate financiers in the skyscrapers of Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Most are in a semi-legal or illegal zone in their transactions, violating copyright laws in their purchase of goods; many are working or residing illegally in Hong Kong or China; and many more are crossing borders with goods that are smuggled, using bribes to get past customs. Most are engaged in dealings below the radar of the law; if they are cheated, they have little or no recourse to courts. The African traders in Hong Kong and China we have portrayed here represent a range of representative participants in the activities that constitute low-end globalization.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed “migration with Chinese characteristics” in terms of African traders practising low-end globalization. We have examined low-end globalization in the context of who these traders are, how they earn their livelihoods, and the risks and rewards of their trade. We then considered Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong, as a gateway for many traders; with its greater degree of security and with the prevalence of English, the building provides a safe gateway into China, in effect the “wild west” of low-end globalization in its dangers and promise of great rewards. We then explored traders’ experiences in South China in both an economic and a cultural context. Traders must exercise considerable business sophistication if they are to prosper; many manage to stay in China, whether legally or illegally.

Unlike high-end globalization, whose activities can often be conducted at a distance through computer and telephone connections, low-end globalization generally requires that its participants be physically present in order to consummate deals and ensure that they are not being cheated. This is why there are so many African traders in Guangzhou and in Hong Kong’s Chungking Mansions. This is “migration with Chinese characteristics” in the context of low-end globalization. It is not migration as traditionally thought of in social science literature: a largely permanent process whereby a first generation immigrates to a new land, a second generation grows up in that new land betwixt and between the old and the new, and the third generation grows up more or less assimilated. This new form of temporary migration, enabled by the new technologies of easy jet transportation and even easier mobile phone communication, is distinctly temporary, as practised by most traders. Traders of earlier eras, from Silk Road merchants to seafarers, also practised such temporary migration. However, their movements took place over years rather than over days; the speed and transience of today’s trade connections are what make today’s low-end globalization unprecedented.

We discussed earlier how most traders have little interest in understanding China in a cultural sense; with a few exceptions, most know little or no Mandarin and care nothing about China’s heritage. Even their romantic interests in Chinese women seem largely practical. Mathews has heard both Chinese and African consular officials discuss the wonders of understanding one another’s cultures, but this is of little interest for most of the African traders we know. Their interest is economic. In bringing the array of cheap goods made in China back to their home countries on

a continent that has largely been neglected by globalization, they bring the fruits of globalization to a population that might otherwise never obtain these fruits. This, we argue, is one of China's great contributions to the world today, a contribution that in the history of globalization may come to be seen as being of enormous significance.

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