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Journey to the East: a study of Ghanaian migrants in Guangzhou, China

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ABSTRACT
In the late 1990s and early 2000s, nationals of sub-Saharan Africa who had initially settled in the Middle East and other parts of Southeast Asia moved in unprecedented numbers to Guangzhou, China in response to the 1997/8 Asian financial crisis. They were later joined by many more as the Chinese economy improved and the economic relationship between China and Africa strengthened. This paper discusses the experiences of identifiable sets of Ghanaian actors in Guangzhou, China in the last two decades. It outlines their respective characteristics, main activities, migratory trajectories and their motivations for traveling to China. The paper also analyzes their coping mechanisms in this relatively new destination and concludes that despite the current turbulence that characterizes the stay of Africans in China, the future of the Ghanaian community, and largely, Africans in China is bright.

I. Introduction
Despite the presence of Africans around the globe, China, until recently, was not a known migrant destination among Africans. This situation began to change in the late 1990s in response to the financial crisis that negatively altered the economic prospects

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of African migrants in the Asian tiger regions (Bodomo 2012; Darkwah 2002; Vogel 1992). In response, Africans who had migrated and worked in these regions began to move to places in Southern China, especially Guangzhou and Hong Kong, because these were financially stable throughout the crisis (Bodomo 2012). It must be noted, however, that the presence of Africans and people of black origin in China dates as far back as the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) (see Li 2015 for a historiography of Africans in China).1

These migrants who left these “Asian tigers” later set up shops to facilitate the export of Chinese manufactured goods to various African countries (Bodomo 2012) and to encourage African traders to visit China and import goods. They also served as the sociolinguistic bridge between the locals and the new arrivals (Bodomo 2010). The population of Africans in China today has expanded beyond this transient population. Currently, there are more Africans in China than ever before and they are engaged in different activities. In recent times, however, the future of Africans and the dreams that they have in China have been questioned. Many newspapers and other social media platforms and discussions at some academic fora have suggested that the African presence in Guangzhou, China is fast dying out (see Marsh 2016). These reports have claimed that areas that were traditionally marked by the conspicuous presence of Africans in the city are now emptying out. The rationale for the reported decline include dollar drought, but most importantly increasing hostilities towards Africans and the refusal of local authorities to grant them working permits and visas amidst threat of imprisonment. Although works on Africans in China currently exist (Bodomo 2012, 2018; Matthews and Yang 2012; Cissé 2013; Li 2015), these works have mostly concentrated on a broad term, “Africans in China.” While this may be useful in understanding a broad picture of the African condition in China (since Africans in China are subjected to about the same treatment from Chinese citizens and authorities, irrespective of nationalities), but to have a deeper understanding of African community organizations, including specific cultural features, motivations and activities in China, we need to turn to the study of specific sub-groups such as national groups (Bodomo 2016). This article singles out Ghanaians and pays close attention to their activities. It highlights three identifiable groups, their respective characteristics and migratory trajectories. The paper also discusses the motivation for migrating out of Ghana, the coping mechanisms and the prospects in China. The findings indicate that contrary to the dominant view that suggests that the “China Dream” for Africans is dead or dying, there are many Africans in China with the prospects of more arriving. It is concluded that the continuous presence of these Ghanaians in China in the face of mounting challenges is a demonstration of African agency in the Africa-China relationship which hitherto had been hijacked by what Raine (2009) described as elite-to-elite exchanges (see also Amoah 2012). It is therefore not in doubt that Africans, and for that matter Ghanaians, are not only responding to the policies of China but are also shaping China at the people to people level (Amoah 2012, 107). Before proceeding to the main discussion, below is an overview of Ghanaian international migration.

II. Ghanaian international migration

In a study conducted by Margaret Peil (1995, 357) on the locations of Ghanaians abroad, she discovered that, in addition to the traditional destination points such as the United
Kingdom and the United States, respondents had relatives living in places as diverse as Australia, Belgium, Burma, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Switzerland. Following this observation, it has been suggested that Ghanaians can be found everywhere in the world, irrespective of the countries’ security, economic or diplomatic status with Ghana. As Darkwah (2002, 148) suggests, there is some underlying truth to this statement. Recent estimates suggest a large percentage of Ghanaians reside abroad: from a few million (Twum-Baah 2005; Owusu-Ankomah 2006) to almost a fifth of the population (Peil 1995; Teye, Alhassan, and Setrana 2017).

The realization that such a large proportion of Ghanaians are estimated to live abroad, according to Tonah (2007), is a recent phenomenon. Owusu (2000) estimates, for example, that there were only about 100 Ghanaian immigrants, most of them scholars, in Canada in 1967. This group of Ghanaian students and scholars left the country for advanced training abroad during the 1950s and 1960s (Jenkins 1985) and were regarded as the first generation of migrants abroad (Tonah 2007). They were sent to pursue advanced training that could not be obtained within the country (Anarfi, Awusabo-Asare, and Nsowah-Nuamah 2000). This Ghanaian project and the general desire for higher education was so successful that, by the time of independence, Ghana had a much greater supply of bureaucrats and professionals than many other African nations (Peil 1995). Many returned to Ghana while others remained abroad and constituted the group of highly qualified Ghanaian professionals (medical doctors, engineers, social scientists, etc.) living abroad.

The second stream of migration was spurred by dwindling economic fortunes of the country in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Ghanaian economy was characterized by balance of payments deficits, rising unemployment, and increasing levels of crime and smuggling (Anarfi et al. 2003; Bump 2006; Laryea and Akuoni 2012). As a result, Ghanaians began moving overseas in large numbers, mostly joining the educated elite in the USA and the UK (Tonah 2007). There were a few who traveled to Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy, and to a lesser extent, France, Spain, and Portugal. These groups of largely young migrants were commonly referred to as “burgers,” a German term that was used for all migrants irrespective of the country to which they migrated. This was probably because of the ostentatious dressing and lifestyle of Ghanaian migrants who had returned home or were visiting from Germany (Jeanett 2004; cited in Tonah 2007).

Political instability from the late-1960s to the mid-1980s worsened the already poor economic conditions in Ghana. The formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 offered an option to people who desired to migrate because one of its objectives was to facilitate freedom of movement, goods, residence, and employment within the community (Bump 2006; Laryea and Akuoni 2012). Citizens of ECOWAS could enter other member states for a period of 90 days without a visa. Working was technically not permitted, but many people who travelled to some of the countries within the region stayed beyond the 90 days. An estimated two million unskilled and semi-skilled Ghanaians left between 1974 and 1981 to Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire to find work (Bump 2006). These were complemented later by a significant number of skilled professionals working as doctors, engineers, surveyors, pharmacists, teachers, and nurses (Bump 2006).
The situation was reversed in the early 1980s because of the abrupt end of the “oil boom” in Nigeria and the devaluation of the CFA Franc in Ivory Coast. Both countries, consequently, expelled large numbers of Ghanaians (Anarfi et al. 2003; Adepoju 2005). It is estimated that about 1.3 million Ghanaians in Nigeria were repatriated (Brydon 1985; Bump 2006). Some decided to join Ghanaians in Europe whilst others returned home. Although Ghanaians continued to migrate to other West African countries, greater numbers left Africa than in the past (UN, DESA 2013). In all these, Asia was hardly a target destination.

Similarly, some of the industrialized European countries also experienced economic decline in the 1980s. Populist politicians blamed migrants for the ensuing job losses (Ter Haar 2005; Tonah 2007). Most of the European Union countries replaced their liberal asylum laws with stringent immigration policies, making entry into the EU almost impossible for ordinary Ghanaians.

The desire to live and work outside Ghana led to the exploration of alternatives. Therefore, as the opportunities for migration to Europe and North America got slimmer during the 1980s and 1990s, Ghanaians saw other opportunities open in Southern Africa in the newly-independent states of Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, and South Africa. Many highly trained and professional Ghanaians, therefore, migrated to Southern Africa. Others who desired to travel to Europe engaged in what Ravenstein (1885) described as “step-wise migration,” a practice where emigrants who failed to satisfy the immigration criteria of Europe opted to travel to “lower status, easy visa” countries from where they hoped to eventually relocate to a “higher status” country (Konadu-Agyemang 1999). South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan served as such destinations in Asia. Later, Southeast Asian cities such as Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and later Dubai in the Emirates region were added. The Asian countries became important because they doubled as major import destinations for Ghanaian businessmen and women (Darkwah 2007). The number of Ghanaians and Africans in such destinations increased over time as these step-wise migrants prepared and mobilized resources for their eventual departure to a higher status country. As these people waited, those who found themselves in the commercial cities began to serve as business brokers, mediating between African transnational traders and their trading partners in the host country. Mainland China hardly featured in their route, owing to language and perceived cultural barriers (Bredeloup 2012). However, language and cultural barriers to entry were waived in the late 1990s and the early 2000s when the East Asian financial crisis which started in July 1997 threatened the economic livelihood as well as survival of mainland Chinese (Mitton 2002).

In response, the African migrants in Southeast Asia moved in droves to places in Southern China, especially Guangzhou and Hong Kong, and began to explore the region further. They were joined by other Africans from the continent and elsewhere in their numbers (Bodomo 2009, 2012). The number of Africans in China, however, remains debatable. Bodomo, for instance, estimates that as many as 500,000 Africans could be found in Greater China, with 100,000 of them in Guangzhou alone. Castillo (2013), on the other hand, projects not more than 10,000 Africans to be in Guangzhou. At the peak of the Ebola outbreak and to assuage the fears and concerns of residents, the Guangzhou government estimated Africans in Guangzhou to be 16,000, of which only 4000 were resident (Watt 2016). Marsh (2014) however, estimated the number to be between
20,000 and 200,000. As inconclusive as these numbers are, what is not in doubt is the increasing numbers of Africans in Guangzhou. Significantly, with the exception of Castillo, all researchers included in the migrant stock, the transient population, such as transnational traders. These transnational traders regularly import manufactured items into Africa for sale at profit. For many Africans, China today is synonymous with imported manufactured products (Haugen 2011). China and Chinese products have become household names in Africa (Marfaing and Thiel 2011; Giese and Thiel 2012).

Bodomo further reports that an overwhelming majority of Africans in China are from West African countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and Ghana. In his sample of over 300 participants, Ghanaians ranked as the fourth largest group of Africans in Guangzhou. The first three spots were occupied by Nigeria, Mali, and Guinea. Reasons for the West African dominance include the size of their population and a historical conviviality between leaders of this block and the Chinese communist state, particularly during the Cold War (Bodomo 2012, 27–29). There are currently many Ghanaians in Guangzhou who are engaged in different activities. This paper answers the following questions: who are these Ghanaians; what were their migratory trajectories; what motivated their migration; and what is the future of the Ghanaian in China?

III. Research method

The base data for this paper was transnationally collected in Ghana and Guangzhou over a sixteen-month period (between May 2012 and August 2013) as part of a bigger research project. This involved employing multiple ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and photo-taking. This approach helps to address some of the methodological gaps identified in the study of Africans in China (see Bodomo and Pajancic 2016). This paper is based on data collected in Guangzhou from sixty-four Ghanaians; fifteen shipping agents and business brokers, fifteen Ghanaian tertiary students and twenty transnational traders who were in China to import goods. Interviews were also conducted with two leaders of the Association of Ghanaians in China. The rest were five interviews with Chinese suppliers who traded mostly with Ghanaian importers, two interviews with executives of the National Union of Ghana Students in China (NUGS-CHINA), three business executives and two leaders of the Pentecost Church of Ghana, China Branch. The interviews were supplemented with participant observation which involved accompanying traders on their itinerary, attending the inauguration of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) China Branch and attending church services and community meetings. The interviews were conducted in two Ghanaian languages (Twi and Ga) and English. These were transcribed, manually analyzed and discussed under themes which were informed by theoretical considerations and others that emerged during the analysis of the data. Although the discussions are done based on the broader themes, to illustrate some positions, specific cases are cited and presented verbatim to illustrate such positions. The names used in such instances are pseudonyms created by the author.

IV. Ghanaians in Guangzhou, China

The 2013 UN migrant stock by origin and destination report gives an account of only 264 Ghanaians in mainland China, 221 males and 43 females (UN, DESA 2013). This is an
underreporting of the population of Ghanaians in China. Even though the exact number of Ghanaians in China is not known, it is estimated that the number is large and continues to rise. A 2018 publication by Bodomo puts the Ghana population as the second largest only behind Nigeria (Bodomo 2018, 68). The population of Ghanaians in China can roughly be divided into two categories: the transient population and the semi-permanent population. The former is represented mostly by transnational traders who globetrot in search of global consumables, usually for sale in Ghana and other West African countries (Obeng 2015). Their major destinations are Guangzhou and Yiwu (Bodomo 2012; Obeng 2018). The other categories of the transient population sampled in Guangzhou included business executives of Chinese multinational corporations operating in Ghana. These executives are periodically sponsored to visit China for short training or vacation. Among companies whose workers were sampled in the study were Huawei Technologies Company Limited and Sinopec Limited.

The second category of Ghanaians in China is the semi-permanent population. It is semi-permanent because the researcher never met any Ghanaian who had a permanent residence and could not be directed to meet any permanent resident Ghanaian, a status which is perceived as difficult to be obtained in China, even though some of the respondents have lived in China for over ten years. This is the result of the cumbersome bureaucratic process including the demand on migrants to spend not less than nine months in a year for three consecutive years in the country. This category includes entrepreneurs, diplomats, teachers of English Language and the largest group, tertiary students. The paper discusses the transnational traders as an example of the transient population. The entrepreneurs and Ghanaian students are also discussed as examples of the semi-permanent population in China.

A. Ghanaian transnational traders

A new trend can be observed to be emerging in the newer migratory literature. Prominent in this new wave of migration are transnational traders who import manufactured items for sale in Ghana (see Darkwah 2007; Awumbila et al. 2011; Bowles 2013). Consistent with the migratory patterns of Ghanaians, the destinations of these traders have expanded to include China who in the process have popularised Made-in-China products (Obeng 2018).

The traders can be grouped variously depending on the criteria used. By volume of import, the traders are grouped into large-scale and small-scale importers. Large-scale importers usually import wares in volumes not less than a twenty foot container and the small-scale traders import in smaller volumes, usually less than a Container Load (LCL) and thus they resort to sharing a container with others in a practice known in the industry as “groupage.” The traders can also be categorized based on time commitment: full-time and part-time traders. Thirdly, using the history of international trade, three groups are identifiable: “novices,” to whom China represents an entrance into transnational trade; “West African Coasters,” whose international trading exposure, until China’s emergence, was limited to trading along the coast of West Africa; and globe-trotters, constituted by the experienced large-scale transnational traders. Importing from China for the latter indicates a shift from traditional destinations such as North America.
and Europe. In addition to these destinations, some had imported previously from the Middle East, particularly Dubai.

The motivations for importing from China are also varied, but a predominant reason is the desire to maximize profit. Importing from China also offers the importers a greater variety of goods to suit the different purchasing powers of Ghanaians. For others, China was a means to guarantee their business survival. The traders who import on a part-time basis also do so because it offers them additional streams of income. These are possible because the transport fares are lower and immigration processes are less cumbersome, culminating in a cheaper cost of imports.

The profiles of the traders defy the initial description of traders as people who fail to find space in the formal economic sector and thus perch on the verge of the economy to survive (Hart 1973). Recent studies conducted on Ghanaian transnational traders importing global consumables have revealed that traders have their companies or trading ventures registered with the Registrar General’s office and pay their annual taxes to receive annual tax clearance certificates (a document that is needed for any application for a visa). The traders are well educated and equally qualified to be players in the formal sector. Except for one importer who had no formal education, all the respondents were well educated even to the level of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Twelve of the twenty importers had tertiary education while seven had secondary education. Additionally, some of these traders have voluntarily left formal sector employment. This was mostly due to the greater financial rewards (see Bodomo 2012) in addition to other social factors such as prestige and freedom that characterize the enterprise compared to the so-called formal sector. The traders are therefore in the sector by choice and not because of the lack of access in the formal sector.

Another important observation is the gendered nature of imports. Female traders dominate the import of “soft” commodities such as jewelry, clothes, textiles and footwear whilst the males import “hard” commodities including wall and floor tiles and vehicle parts. Similar observations have been reported by Awumbila et al. (2011) and Ofei-Aboagye (2001) to partly explain the financial inequality that exists between men and women (see Asiedu et al. 2013). This notwithstanding, traders who crossed the perceived gender boundaries entered those respective arenas in grand fashion and made their mark in those sectors. For instance, the largest importer of jewelry and beautification ornaments, a typical feminine field, is a male. Similarly, one of the largest importers of vehicle spare parts is a female.

To import from China, the traders procure at least two agents: A Visa Contractor (VC) in Ghana to facilitate the procurements of a valid visa and an itinerant agent in China. The latter’s main responsibility is to assist the trader to identify, procure and transport commodities. To guarantee the credibility of the agents, the procurement of the agents is mediated by a Trusted Experienced Transnational Trader (TETT), a person who has engaged the services of these agents previously and therefore could testify to their trustworthiness as well as their capabilities (Obeng 2017, 7). The role of the itinerant agent in China is central to the success of the importer because of the language barrier and lack of familiarity with the business district. The agents, most of whom are Ghanaians and speak a Chinese language, serve as the bridge between traders and their Chinese suppliers (Bodomo 2010; Qizuo 2013).
The prospects of the import business, however, appear dim for many of these Ghanaians. Three factors are identified. The first is the increasing numbers of Chinese nationals operating retail outlets in Ghana. The Chinese distributors in Ghana are currently able to distribute their products in Ghana at a substantially lower price than the Ghanaian importers, thereby competing with and eventually driving them out of business. Factors such as cheaper access to capital (facilitated by the Exim Bank of China) (Brautigam 2011), better negotiating skills and other sociocultural factors (Giese and Thiel 2012; Giese 2014) account for the pricing differentials. Haugen (2011) made a similar observation in Cape Verde where the Chinese questioned the viability of African competition in the import business.

The second is the purported “conspiracy” of officials of the Chinese consulate to deliberately deny Ghanaian importers visas in order to create opportunities for Chinese citizens. The commentary below by one of the importers, as she compares the current state of things with the past, summarizes the growing difficulties with visa acquisition.

When we began this business about six years ago, refusals [visa application] were rare. At first, you could be given six-month multiple visa within a few days of submitting the application. Today, even the single entry 30 days have become a challenge. Sometimes, you apply four times before you get one approved. So now if you have never been to China, then I am sure you will have no chance. (Charlotte, Guangzhou 2013)
To make matters worse, no specific reasons are offered when applications are refused, making it difficult to determine what needs to be changed in subsequent applications.

The third factor is the fashion sensibilities of the Ghanaian. With the rising middle-class population in Ghana, it is estimated that more people will prefer to buy items that stand out from the regular mass Chinese imports. As a result, the traders have begun exploiting newer destinations such as Brazil and Turkey.

The entrepreneurs and students are discussed next as examples of the semi-permanent resident Ghanaians in China.

**B. Ghanaian entrepreneurs in China**

This set of Ghanaians are mostly based in Guangzhou, the business district of China, and are mainly involved in the brokerage and shipping industry. A sizeable number are also into guest housing, wholesale and retail of fashionable items and as itinerant agents facilitating the import activities of transnational traders. They possess two major skills that are required to work as business brokers and trade agents: language competencies and familiarity with the business districts. They therefore serve as the “mouthpieces” and “eyes” of the traders as they undertake their businesses (see Matthews, Lin, and Yang 2017; Obeng 2017, 16).

There are two types of these agents: those with designated offices in China and the freelancers. The former is more established in China and have sister companies in Ghana that refer clients periodically to them. Their clients are mostly large-scale importers. The operations of the freelancers, on the other hand, are usually casual in nature. Unlike the first group, their charges are relatively low and they usually serve the small-scale importers. They are also usually accused of duping their clients because they cannot be traced to a definite space, an accusation they deny and suggest that such accusations are orchestrated by their competitors, the registered agencies.

Another feature of these Ghanaians is that they all own retail shops in Ghana. They are therefore constantly in search of new products to export to Ghana. This practice also serves the interest of their clients because they tend to be familiar with developments in the market.

The agents operate three payment systems. The first is a percentage-based commission which ranges from 5% to 10% of the cost of purchases made by their clients. This option is usually applied to the large-scale traders and comes with post procurement duties as well. The second is the “pay as you go” system. This is used mostly by the small-scale traders. The fee ranges from US$ 50 to US$ 100 per day. The third is token-based remuneration, which applies to traders whose relationship with the agent has moved from an economic one into a more social one and, as such, there are no official terms of engagement. In addition to the official payments, meals, transportation and accommodation (when they travel to other cities) are provided by the clients.

To raise additional income as well as to overcome the incessant harassment from state officials, some have converted parts of their apartments into guest houses to accommodate their clients and also as a trading post (Bodomo 2018, 64). The apartments-turned-guesthouses are preferred by some of the traders because they offer them a sense of community. The opportunity to cook in such guest houses ensures that for the two or more weeks that these traders stay in China, they can enjoy Ghanaian foods.
and avoid the risk of experimenting with unknown foods and other consumables (Bodomo and Ma 2012). This is summarized by Agyeiwaa, who used to lodge in a hotel until she found the Ghanaian operated guest house below:

One of my initial challenges, was what to eat, particularly after returning to the hotel. I struggled to eat the food that was served. So, I ended up eating either biscuits or bread for the two weeks … being here [Ghanaian apartment] solves this challenge. We can cook whatever we choose to eat … I bring corn-dough or yam and some sauces for dinner. You cannot be trying with foods when you are staying for that short period. (Agyeiwaa, Foshan 2013; emphasis added)

In Guangzhou, these entrepreneurs are found in two main areas. The first is around the central railway station where most of the wholesale markets for the following items are located: clothing, shoes, leather and cosmetics. This area hosts some of the famous sales outlets including the Canaan building, Tong building, Kowloon hotel, Tangqi and Yulong plaza, all stretching towards the Guangzhou San Yuanli subway. The second is the “Xiaobei lu” area in the Yuexiu district along the main circle line. Many business buildings are used mainly by African traders, the most famous one being the Tianxiu building. Even though earlier researchers have emphasized a supposed divide between Anglophone and Francophone African entrepreneurs, my fieldwork shows that this divide is exaggerated as both Anglophone and Francophone citizens are found in both spaces. In the case of Ghana, Li, Ma, and Xue (2009) suggest that this is because Ghanaians share African languages with some francophone countries; an observation that finds validation in this study.

The trajectories to China for the respondents are varied. While some relocated to Guangzhou from other Asian countries, particularly from Singapore and Hong Kong, others came from Nigeria with the intention of using China as a transit point en route to Japan and other European countries. There are a few who were in Guangzhou because their families in China invited them to assist in managing their businesses. Most of the participants, however, came to China from Ghana as importers and later set up their agencies to facilitate the activities of other importers (a fact that explains why all the agents operate retail outlets in Ghana).

Demographically, all those sampled in this category were men within the active population age group. In terms of education, they mostly have either a middle school certificate or tertiary education. This observation is consistent with works such as Bodomo (2012, 2018) and Marsh (2014), to the effect that at least 40% of African migrants in Guangzhou have had tertiary education. Those married did not have their families with them in China, a reflection of how difficult it is for them to integrate into the Chinese society. Bodomo (2018), for instance, reports that the majority of Africans at this phase of their sojourn do not try or even strive to fit or integrate into Chinese communities. This is true even for the few Africans who are married to Chinese nationals. They all appear content to only interact businesswise and cross-culturally in markets and workplaces with their host.

In Guangzhou, weddings or marriage ceremonies between African traders and Chinese brides take place every day (see https://africansinchina.net). Though there are no official figures on Afro-Chinese marriages, a visit to any trading warehouse will reveal scores of mixed-race couples running wholesale shops, their “coffee-coloured, hair-
braided children racing through the corridors” (Marsh 2014), but the lack of citizenship rights for these husbands and a crackdown on foreign visas means families live in fear of being torn apart (Marsh 2014). The story is told of Amadou Issa, a Nigerien trader interviewed by Marsh (2014) who has mastered the export business. He is reported to have arrived in China in 2004 with $300 capital and now ships 200 containers a year to Niger and Central America, making an average of $2,000 on each shipment. But he cannot legally open a bank account in China, and despite being married to a Chinese woman, he does not qualify to apply for citizenship unless there is a change in the law. Both these factors hinder his economic integration.

Kwadjo Ampofo, who has been married to a Chinese for four years and has two children with her, explains this further. He states:

... being married to a Chinese woman does not make you a citizen. I have had to renew my visa and work permit periodically. My children are citizens yes! But for the Chinese, it makes no difference. I work in China because I qualify to and not because I am married to a Chinese woman. If I fail to show documents to guarantee my stay, they will deport me. (Kwadjo Ampofo, Guangzhou 2013)

With experiences such as Kwadjo’s, the dominant response of the respondents is to view Guangzhou as a duty post with hopes to return to Ghana or move to other places either within or outside China. Interestingly for those who plan to return to Ghana, the majority are not certain when this will happen.

Almost all these people are members of the Ghanaian Association in China. This association, according to its General Secretary, Mr. Appiah Kubi, was formed to promote the welfare of the population of Ghanaians in China including the many traders who doubled as their clients. The association has also enabled them to receive support from the Ghanaian embassy in China.

The entrepreneurs are also members of religious and political party sub-groups. The biggest religious organization was the Pentecost Church, which had a vibrant student wing. The two major political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), had recognizable external branches in Guangzhou with executive committee members. They are vibrant particularly during the election season in Ghana and play major roles in the printing and supply of party paraphernalia during elections in Ghana. It must be emphasized that their activities are mostly indoors, as Chinese law forbids such public gatherings.

The major challenge facing these entrepreneurs is their persistent tourist status which predisposes them to official harassment. Irrespective of how long these people might have stayed in China, they are considered as tourists who are required to renew their residential status frequently. What makes things more complicated is the refusal of the Guangzhou municipality to renew their residential status after two renewals. To avoid being arrested and sent to prison or confrontation with the police and immigration authorities, these people regularly spend huge sums of money to procure permits from less busy provinces, which pose massive financial constraints on them.

Worsening the situation for the African population is the increasing spate of violent attacks on them sometimes leading to clashes between them and the police. Africans have resisted and protested this violence in major demonstrations against police dating back to 2009, with two prominent demonstrations being held in 2009 and 2012.
following the death of Nigerian migrants (Bodomo 2018, 64). Although the pronouncements of central government suggest that Africans are welcome, recent draconian visa legislation coupled with the behaviour of the police send a contrary signal: Africans in China, even the highly prosperous, educated economic contributors, are not welcome (Marsh 2014; Li 2017).

The narrative of a participant in Bodomo’s work captures the threats and hostilities faced by Africans in China succinctly:

You want to know what it is like for me in China? . . . Every day before I leave my house . . . to go to the market . . . factories . . . or even to come here for dinner . . . for African food in this restaurant, I spend about, what . . . ten minutes gathering all the documents that prove that I am legally resident in China; I cannot walk out of my house . . . my hotel without my passport, my room key, and anything that shows that I am legally resident in China. And I have done this for the past three years that I have been in and out of China. (culled from Bodomo 2018, 76)

Even people who have licenses to operate various businesses are not spared these random checks, though there are other foreign businesses operating within the same or similar communities that are not subjected to such treatment.

As challenging as these incidents are, a significant proportion of Ghanaians remain at post and continue to devise new strategies to cope with the changing trends. Yes, they may not be seen in as large numbers as in the past, but they are present nonetheless. This reflects the tenacity and resilience of the African migrants in the face of adverse occurrences that threaten their survival. This conclusion finds further support in the work of Bodomo (2018) and Amoah (2012) who contend that reports of the collapse of the African-Chinese dreams are exaggerated. The fact is that the population of Africans, and for that matter Ghanaians, in China is moving to other areas such as Yiwu and Wuhan, because these provinces have a more receptive attitude towards African migrants than Guangzhou.

C. Ghanaian students in China

Ghanaian students currently pursuing higher education in China are mostly under the age of thirty. Males and females are equally represented with the males slightly ahead in the sample for this study. Ten out of the fifteen who participated in this study were denied admission into their preferred programs in Ghana for lack of space (though they met the admission criteria). Four were admitted but abandoned the offer at various stages to take up positions in China. The last participant in the group did not apply to any university in Ghana after completing secondary education. The practice of Ghanaians seeking education abroad began in the colonial era and was pursued aggressively after independence by Kwame Nkrumah, who himself studied abroad (Hevi 1963). For Nkrumah, sending Ghanaians abroad for further studies was a critical component of his “Africanization program”; a project that aimed at ensuring that the administration of the civil service, the police, the judiciary, defense and external affairs and internal security would come under African personnel instead of the Governor and British nationals (Nkrumah 1973, 147). On assumption of office, Nkrumah undertook measures to significantly increase the number of educated Ghanaians to take over from
the Europeans. The destination for such scholarships included China (Hevi 1963), though a greater number of Ghanaians were sent to Western Europe and the United States of America (Tonah 2007).

Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, who shared the state centric model of governance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and China, negotiated scholarships for Ghanaians to be trained in essential areas for the rapid transformation of the national economy. This project was, however, short-lived as his government was overthrown in 1966. Nkrumah’s overthrow also coincided with the gradual decline in the economies of most of the center-left and the disintegration of the USSR. Subsequently, studying in these regions took a nosedive amongst Ghanaians. A few, however, continued to go to China and over time formed the National Union of Ghana Students, China (NUGS-China) on 5 February 1988 to coordinate their activities and welfare. The union enjoys a close collaboration with the Ghanaian embassy and the mother Association of Ghanaians in China, head-quartered in Guangzhou, as well as Chinese companies with interest in Ghana.

The union, aside from members’ welfare, uses its platform to educate potential Ghanaians who desire to pursue further studies in China. For instance, on 25 March 2010, 30 January 2012, 20 September 2013 and 8 March 2016, NUGS-China issued press statements to caution and to update prospective students on new developments in the educational sector in China and urged all to verify all educational opportunities from the Chinese embassy. This was deemed necessary because since 2006 a significant number of Ghanaians have been looking to China as an avenue to pursue further studies. This was spurred in large part by the Chinese government, which offered in 2006 to annually sponsor 20 Ghanaians to study various courses in China. The number was increased to 75 in 2009. This number is a part of the Chinese government scholarships for African students, which sponsors about 5500 students per annum (Brautigam 2011, 204; Daily Graphic 12 August 2009). In a news item filed by the Ghana News Agency on 24 August 2016, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that more than 4000 Ghanaian students have benefited from Chinese training programs. This is in addition to the many self-financing students. In January 2018, the Counselor of the Chinese Embassy in Ghana, Jiang Zhouteng, disclosed that there were 5,516 Ghanaian students studying in various tertiary institutions in China. This number makes Ghana the African country with the highest number of students in China (Zurek 2018).

These students, just as was documented by Baitie (2013), with their “dark skin,” “long braids” or “short haircut” always stand out in most places they visit and, in many cases, become instant topics for discussion. Not all these students take kindly to the spectacle and scenes that their presence arouses in their schools and the community. Some admit to instances where some of the questions, actions and attitudes demonstrated towards them made them very angry to the point where sometimes they almost threw a fist. Some also accuse their Chinese counterparts of being racist. These experiences notwithstanding, the students generally have a positive outlook on their stay in China. They are comfortable with the Chinese culture, including their food, unlike the transient traders who constantly wanted to eat African dishes. They rarely eat Ghanaian dishes except on occasions such as Ghana Day, celebrated every March to commemorate Ghana’s independence. The respective schools have also facilitated the assimilation process for the students. Some of the students are actively involved in extracurricular activities of their schools, which also contribute to their integration into the system. They are involved in
activities such as student governance, sports and other outdoor activities. The schools annually host international week for foreign students to showcase their national identities in both soft and hard artifacts. Most of the students speak a Chinese language fluently with some boasting of their ability to read and write Mandarin. This is to be expected because these students take Chinese language proficiency classes, but unlike others, the Chinese lessons are not taken to engage in business but are primarily to facilitate their studies and, for some, to assist in their visa renewal. Except for one student who was in a romantic relationship with a Chinese woman, all the students reported that they had no intentions of marrying and staying in China. This may partly be explained by their desire to return to Ghana after training.

1. Ghanaian medical students

Although Ghanaian students in China are studying different courses, this paper singles out medical students for closer examination because of their dominance, and the currency of the subject to Ghana’s socio-political discourse. Mr. Addipa-Adipo, the president of NUGS-China and a medical student himself, lists the low intake of medical students in Ghana, the prestige associated with the profession and the low numbers of medical practitioners in Ghana as the factors accounting for the massive interest in the study of medicine abroad. Linked to the above is the assurance of ready employment with a respectable income and other associated fringe benefits upon successful completion.

There are currently five public medical schools in Ghana: the University of Ghana Medical School in Accra, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) School of Medical Sciences in Kumasi, University for Development Studies (UDS) School of Medicine in Tamale, University of Cape Coast (UCC) Medical School and the recently established University of Allied Health Sciences in Ho, Volta Region as well as two private ones. Basic medical education lasts for six years. Entry into these medical schools is highly competitive and is usually based on success in the Senior High School Examination. The University of Ghana Medical School has, however, introduced a Graduate Entry Medical Program (GEMP) to admit undergraduates with mainly science-related degrees into a four-year medical school program.

These universities cumulatively graduate less than 500 medical doctors annually. This is in spite of the poor doctor-patient ratio of 1: 8,808 (Ghana Health Service (GHS), 2018). The total number of doctors, which is 3,263, is disproportionately distributed across the country. The Greater Accra region (39%) and the Ashanti region (21%) host 60% of all doctors in the country. The Upper East and West Regions have doctor-to-population ratios of 1: 24,722 and 1: 31,148 respectively.

Notwithstanding the shortage of doctors, only a few qualified Ghanaians are selected annually to be trained as medical doctors. For instance, in the 2014/2015 academic year, the University for Development Studies admitted only 122 out of a total of 1,582 qualified applicants, representing 8% of the total number of qualified applicants. The highest numbers are trained by the University of Ghana, which produces 150–200 medical doctors and other allied health workers a year. In 2014 the University of Ghana graduated 156 medical doctors, twenty-one dentists and 156 students with Bachelor of Science in Medical Science. For the 2016/2017 academic year, University of Ghana admitted a total of 180 students to pursue
the Bachelor of Medicine & Bachelor of Dental Surgery. In 2015, the University for Development Studies graduated only thirty-three medical doctors, six more than the previous year. The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, the second largest medical school in Ghana graduated a total of 176 medical doctors and dentists in 2016.\textsuperscript{8} With such low intake, the rest of the qualified students who desire to pursue medicine and other allied health sciences must go beyond Ghana. China thus comes in as one of the many attractive destinations.\textsuperscript{9}

The participants cited the increasing metropolitan status of China, the cheaper cost of training and lower cost of living for their choice. The cost of medical education ranges from US$ 3,400 to US$ 6,000 per year compared to about £61,000 in the UK (Borland 2014). A few of the students whose education was being financed by traders mentioned the opportunity to gain extra income by exporting items for sale in Ghana as an additional motivation. Others cited the availability of required facilities and equipment for training, the ease of admission and the flexibility of training. Vivian Okoe, a medical student at the Wuhan Normal Chinese University, who read Food Science in a secondary school in Ghana and would be technically barred from reading medicine in a Ghanaian university, used herself as an example of how admission into medical studies in China is flexible. Prospective medical students are required to meet the set requirements such as the completion of secondary education and, unlike other places, are not required to pass any test. Secondly, they had the privilege of choosing the medium of instruction as either English or Chinese, making it easier for them to pursue their medical studies (Amoah 2012; Mishra 2012).

The major challenge envisaged by these students is their absorption into the Ghana Health Service upon completion. To practice in Ghana, they are required to pass a local examination organized by the Medical and Dental Council (MDC) of Ghana, a constitutionally mandated body that regulates standards of training and practice of medicine and dentistry (NRCD 91).\textsuperscript{10} The subject of the local examination is a contentious one amongst doctors trained outside Ghana, particularly those in China, Russia, the Czech Republic, Cuba, and Ukraine because of the low pass rate. Some attributed the high failure rate to the nature of the examination itself; there are no materials, or designated syllabus to guide the candidates’ preparation. The students advocated for adoption of the United States and the United Kingdom module, where candidates preparing for such examinations are given sets of reading lists and other related materials to facilitate their preparation. This is critical because the field of medicine is broad with specialized fields such as surgery, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics and public health. Preparing for such an examination without any guidelines on what to expect poses a major challenge to the candidates.

Reacting to these complaints, the Registrar of the MDC refuted the assertion that they deliberately fail some students. He explained and justified the need for the students to take the examination. He states:

\begin{quote}
… the Council deemed this examination as a very critical component in their work because they have realized that there are certain limitations to the training outside. For example, because these doctors are trained in developed countries, where usually there are no endemic diseases, it becomes difficult for them to handle such cases, because they may have just read about them with little or no practical exposure to such diseases. The examination and on-the job practices under the supervision of seasoned practitioners are to help ground them within the Ghanaian terrain. (Ghanaweb.com, September 14, 2010)
\end{quote}
These challenges, however, do not deter the students from returning home. They are very optimistic about their performance on the examinations. To better their chances, they have resolved to return home annually to intern in some health facilities in Ghana to acquaint themselves with developments in Ghana. These are rational actions because the option of integrating professionally in China rarely exists for these migrants. In addition, they cannot even engage in private practice without certification by MDC. There are, however, a few who have opted to venture into other fields instead of returning to Ghana to practice medicine. The Business and Finance Times, an online news portal in Ghana, recently published interviews with about five such graduates in China. They have opted to stay in China and be employed as English instructors because they make more money than their colleagues make as medical practitioners (Afful 2018).

V. Conclusion

Ghana and China’s relationship dates as far back as 1960 when the two countries first established diplomatic contacts (Hevi 1963; Li 2015). Economic exchange between the two countries has intensified since China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. As the Chinese economy began to grow, it identified Africa as a new source of energy to fuel its economy (Bodomo and Ma 2012, 3). At the same time, African traders began to explore the Chinese economy in a more organized and systematic manner. This was first, through the Canton fair in Guangzhou and later other cities and provinces. Today, there are many Africans in China just as there are many Chinese in Africa seeking to achieve their respective dreams. Among the notable nationals in China are Ghanaians. The population of Ghanaians in China has expanded beyond the commodity importers to include students, professional English language teachers, and business brokers and logistics suppliers. This paper has focused on the dominant groups of Ghanaians in China, namely transnational traders, entrepreneurs and medical students, and demonstrates how different internal factors deemed to inhibit the actualization of their personal ambitions compelled them to travel to China in a bid to secure their futures. At the same time, perceived conducive factors in China attracts Ghanaians to China. For example, while the limited capacity of Ghanaian universities to admit large numbers of qualified Ghanaians to study medicine in Ghana compel the students to leave Ghana, they are similarly lured to China because of factors such as cheaper cost of training, flexibility of academic work and the opportunity to acquire extra language and to make extra income while studying. The future of the Ghanaian population in China is also shaped by these same sets of factors but in a reverse manner. Thus, the post-training challenges of securing employment in China after their training make it untenable for them to dream of staying in China after their training. At the same time, readily available employment opportunities together with other fringe benefits after a return to Ghana make it attractive for these doctors to leave China after their training.

In the case of the traders, the availability of a ready market for imported products, guaranteed by the weak manufacturing base in Ghana, makes the import business very lucrative. China currently offers one of the most competitive options to these importers. The activities of the importers have been facilitated enormously by their compatriots who earlier explored the market and subsequently established brokerage services to provide both linguistic and logistic support. The import business and the prospect for business people
who provide logistics and linguistic support are currently being challenged by happenings within some major provinces. Whereas some traders increasingly find it difficult to secure visas to embark on their businesses in China, authorities in China also continue to make their stay and business of the brokers more unfriendly and expensive. These challenges notwithstanding, and contrary to the dominant thesis, Ghanaian traders and business brokers are not abandoning China. Yes, some are exploring other territories both within and without, but as the cliché goes, some are leaving but more are arriving.

On the strength of these observations, I argue that the future of Ghanaians seeking to pursue university education in China, particularly those who intend to read medicine and other allied health science disciplines is bright. This is because no significant progress has been made by Ghana to address the push factors that drive Ghanaian secondary school graduates to seek medical training outside the Country and neither are there more competitive destinations.

The prospects for the importers and the entrepreneurs in Guangzhou is, however, temporarily challenged (see Kuo 2016; Liu 2017), but guided by the history and the fortitude demonstrated by Ghanaians and Africans in the twentieth and twenty-first century and the fact that migration remains a livelihood strategy for many, Ghanaians will continue to migrate to whatever destination they deem appropriate to survive. The Chinese dream should thus be seen as challenged but not dead, especially now that Ghanaians have a working relationship with the Chinese (Ghanaians are now marrying Chinese women and having children with them, Ghanaians are speaking Mandarin to near perfection and Chinese women are seen putting on African fabrics and braiding their hair in African styles). It can thus be said that for as long as the Chinese continue to dream about Africa, Ghanaians and Africans will also continue to dream about and explore China just as they continue to explore Europe and America despite the tight immigration policies. Ghanaians will find innovative ways to remain and survive in Guangzhou.

Notes

1. The origin of these Africans, however, remains inconclusive. Whereas Zhang (1963) points to Africa, Ge (2001) suggests Southeast Asia. Li (1982) therefore suggests that the most appropriate response to the origin of Africans in China during the Tang dynasty should be multiple origins.

2. This comprises citizens of African countries or people who consider themselves to be from Africa or of African origin and who reside in or visit mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan (Bodomo 2012, 5).

3. Additional data for this paper come from key informants within the Ghanaian community in Guangzhou gathered between December 2015 and May 2018 and other cities within the Guangdong province.

4. The LCL or Groupage implies that two or more importers hire a container and share the cost based on the space occupied by their respective goods.


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