



# BAOHAN STREET: An African Community in Guangzhou (China)

Documentary Photographs  
by Li Dong

Exhibition catalogue  
edited by Michaela Pelican

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# BAOHAN STREET: An African Community in Guangzhou

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With contributions by:  
Li Zhigang, Alexander Demissie, Li Dong, Michaela Pelican, Wang Shaobo, Séverin Kaji

Cologne 2014

OCTOBER 15 - NOVEMBER 15, 2014

# PHOTO EXHIBITION

BAOHAN STREET: An African Community in Guangzhou (China)

by Li Dong (artist) and Michaela Pelican (curator)



UNIVERSITY OF COLOGNE,  
Main Building (ground floor)

Vernissage and panel discussion with the artist:  
October 16, 2014, 6 pm  
Neuer Senatssaal (Main Building)

Guided tour with the artist:  
October 18, 2014, 3-5pm



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## EXHIBITION PROGRAMME:

BAOHAN STREET: An African Community in Guangzhou  
Photo Exhibition by Li Dong (artist) and Michaela Pelican (curator)

Venue: University of Cologne, Main Building, Ground Floor  
Date: October 15 to November 15, 2014

### Events:

Vernissage and panel discussion with the artist, Main Building, Ground Floor  
October 16, 6pm, University of Cologne, Main Building, Neuer Senatssaal

Guided tour with the artist  
October 18, 3-5pm, University of Cologne, Main Building, Ground Floor

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We appreciate the fruitful collaboration with colleagues in China and Germany. Most importantly, we thank the residents of Baohan Street for sharing their daily lives, experiences and ideas with us.

Photographs © Li Dong

## CONTENT

Organizers and Contributors .....	8
<b>Preface .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Photographer Li Dong's Exploration of an African Street in China	
by Li Zhigang .....	12
A Photographic Take on Sino-African Relations	
by Alexander Demissie .....	14
<b>Baohan Street: An African Community in Guangzhou .....</b>	<b>17</b>
Photographs by Li Dong .....	18
<b>Images and Stories .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Excerpts from Li Dong's Diary .....	32
Contextualizing Li Dong's Photographs	
by Michaela Pelican .....	37
<b>Epilogue .....</b>	<b>47</b>
An African Mirror by Wang Shaobo .....	48
Representing African Migrants in China – a critical appraisal	
by Sévérin Kaji and Michaela Pelican .....	50

## ORGANIZERS

### **Li Dong**



After working in petrochemical engineering for 15 years, Li Dong turned to documentary photography. He is interested in the striking social and economic transformations in China's recent history and the emergence of migrant communities as the "new Guangzhou residents".

In March/April 2014, his exhibition was shown in Guangzhou, which was the first time to provide a glimpse of Baohan Street and its African residents by a documentary photographer. The exhibition generated vibrant discussions among members of the public, academics and artists, and resulted in media coverage and internet debates. It has been documented in various international media outlets, including *China Daily*, *Global Times* and *National Geographic*.

### **Michaela Pelican**



Michaela Pelican is Junior Professor in Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Cologne. She has worked on migration within Africa as well as from Cameroon to the Gulf States and China. Her current research project (together with Prof. Li Zhigang, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, and Prof. Björn Ahl, University of Cologne) focuses on recent transformations in China's immigration policy and its impact on African migrants in Guangzhou.

"As an anthropologist I am interested in the lives of people, their stories, experiences and visions. Li Dong's photographs help us to grasp the realities of African migrants in Guangzhou, and stimulate our urge to learn more about Baohan Street and its residents."

## CONTRIBUTORS:

**Li Zhigang**, Professor of Urban Studies and Planning, Sun Yat-sen University. He has worked on African immigrants in Guangzhou since 2006 and has published extensively on the subject, both in English and Chinese.

**Alexander Demissie**, co-founder of the ChinaAfricaBlog (<http://chinaafricablog.com/>). He has been interested in China-Africa relations since 2003, and is currently a PhD candidate at Bonn University with a project on Sino-Ethiopian relations.

**Wang Shaobo**, professional photographer, art collector and businessman. He worked and lived in Africa and Europe for a number of years, and has a particular interest in African culture and art.

**Séverin Kaji**, PhD candidate in Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Cologne. Drawing on his own experience as a student in Cameroon, Norway and Germany, his research focuses on African student migration to China.



# PREFACE

## Photographer Li Dong's Exploration of an African Street in China

by Li Zhigang, Professor of Urban Studies and Planning, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou

The People's Republic of China is becoming a new destination for international immigrants. Historically, travelling to the West or working abroad was the dream of many Chinese. Now, the flow of immigration to China is becoming a key topic in a globalizing world, particularly in Guangzhou, Li Dong's second hometown.

Guangzhou, with a long tradition of international trade and as the aptly-named 'world factory', has attracted anywhere between 200,000 to 500,000 Africans, living there and doing business. A so-called 'African Street', named Baohan Street, has become famous. The street, always crowded with people coming and going, is located next to Xiaobei Metro Station in Yuexiu District, Guangzhou's oldest district. It is an international place with a decidedly global outlook. Even the pricing board of the melon store (illustrated on the catalogue's title page) claims "the cheapest melons in the world". Li Dong chose Baohan Street to do his photography because of its internationalization; it is a key space for Africans in Guangzhou.

It was difficult to take pictures of the African inhabitants of Baohan Street, as they are careful to protect their privacy and portraiture rights. Li Dong moved into a rented room in Baohan Street only five square meters in size, and got to know his neighbour Monem, an African trader. After becoming friends, Monem helped Li Dong form a relationship with the African community, drinking beer and chatting with them in the street. Li Dong also used to wander around with his camera. The inhabitants were reluctant first, but gradually got used to his photographic work. He found he could avoid misunderstandings as long as he smiled or tried to explain his aim to the people he wished to photograph. In the end, he lived and worked on Baohan Street for two years.

Between March and April in 2014, a photographic exhibition on the African Community in Baohan Street was held in Guangzhou itself, marking the end of Li Dong's two years of photographic work. At one time, Li Dong used to take romantic and artistic photos with themes such as water. Later he turned his attention to documentary photography. Compared to his artistic photography focusing on beauty, he found photography concerning cultural ecology and existence to be more meaningful. His series of pictures of Africans in Guangzhou's streets is a practical illustration of this idea. There are many meaningful topics in China today, and it is a time that photographers can shape history. Li Dong argues that a good topic should fulfil three criteria: first, it should be a topic of the time; second, it should deal with social issues; and third, it should be academically valuable. As a subject, the Africans in Guangzhou meet all three.

At the opening of the exhibition in Guangzhou on 27 March 2014, Li Dong organized an interdisciplinary seminar, bringing together journalists, scholars, photographers and residents of Baohan Street. In the seminar Li Dong said, "I am just a photographer, not a scholar studying sociology or humanity. Therefore I can only judge issues from instinct, touch, and feel, and present the truth." But, compared to academic studies, documentary photography can inspire more interest, and lead scholars and the public to exchange opinions and thus bring social issues that have been neglected or hidden to people's awareness. As such, I believe work such as Li Dong's "Baohan Street: An African Community in Guangzhou" will not only record an important moment in time, it will also change history, and make it better.



## A Photographic Take on Sino-African Relations

by Alexander Demissie, PhD candidate China-Africa relations, Bonn University,  
co-founder of [ChinaAfricaBlog.com](http://ChinaAfricaBlog.com)

Guangzhou, a megacity of 14 million on the Pearl River Delta, attracts traders, sellers and masses from remote places, Chinese and non-Chinese, searching for business and a better life. In Yuexiu District, the city hosts the so-called 'Chocolate City' or 'Little Africa', a bustling business district harbouring a microcosm of Africa in China. Walking through this part of the city – as I did in 2005 – gives you the inevitable impression of being part of a pan-African culture within a far-eastern setting. The colourful West African garments, the stylish Afro-look of Angolan female traders or the cacophony of Yoruba, Amharic or Swahili, are witness to the diversity of this particular place. No other city in China has been as attractive to Africans. While Beijing and Shanghai attract the educated and better-off, Guangzhou has been a magnet for traders and those trying their luck in China. It is a place of promises, cheap labour, cheap products and fast money. To fulfil this promise, many Africans overstay their visas, living with the threat of deportation hanging permanently over their heads.



Nevertheless, the busy Baohan Street has become the visible face of the China-Africa encounter. It is here we find the origin of many (cheap) products sold to millions across Africa. During the day, 'Little Africa' is a gigantic market place, with services spanning the whole African continent. Nigerians, the dominant nation in Yuexiu district, directing merchants from other African countries, Somali go-betweens solving transportation and logistics issues, and Chinese wholesalers making profit out of every item sold to the businessmen and women from Africa. For many Chinese in this part of the town, Africa seems to be one huge country with abundant business opportunity.

The locals have equally understood how to service the traders, offering similar services as they would find back home; grilled snacks, shoe-shining and express tailoring. At night, the same place becomes a melting pot of dance and music, with the latest sounds arriving from the capitals of Lagos, Accra or Kinshasa. Here one witnesses Chinese, Americans, Europeans, Indians and Arabs dancing to the tunes of Africa, underscoring the dynamics and internationalization of this particular district.

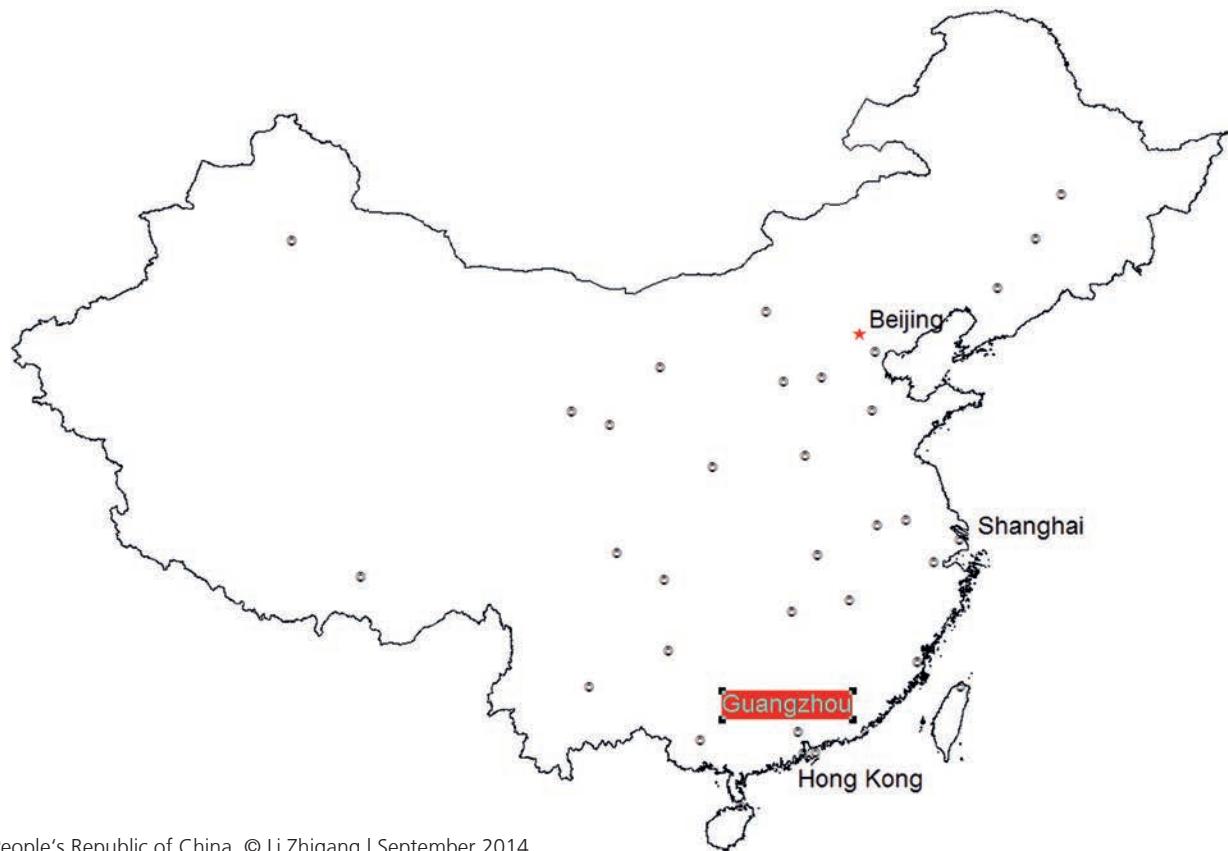
In the past 15 years, burgeoning China-Africa relations have created new forms of South-South interaction, which take place outside of the historically rooted North-South relationships. As a rather new phenomenon, this development is raising new questions, especially for observers in the Global North. How do we understand the China-Africa encounter, is it a threat or an opportunity? How do we understand a new phenomenon of which there is no prior knowledge? The dilemma is on the one hand observing the highly dynamic development of China-Africa relations, and on the other hand knowing little about this relationship. With the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China and Africa have created a space to promote their mutual development without Western influence. Decisions made in FOCAC are a precursor to the images we witness in Li Dongs' pictures: The easy visa access, the thousands of scholarships and the generally open and welcoming business environment in China encourage many Africans to go to China, to stay and introduce their values, norms and beliefs into the Chinese culture. Although there is a language barrier, China is seen by many Africans as a chance to succeed.

It is equally important to see this exhibition as an introduction to the growing China-Africa relationship, as this growing relationship will influence how the world perceives Africa. As Africa is rising, places like Baohan Street will gain more importance due to the established interaction pattern it has created between China and Africa. Li Dongs' pictures convincingly depict this phenomenon.



# Baohan Street: An African Community in Guangzhou

Photographs by Li Dong













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## **IMAGES AND STORIES**

## Excerpts from Li Dong's Diary



**May 26th, 2013**

After having carried some books there, I officially moved into Baohan Street. I was familiar with the street, knowing that it would be lively after five o'clock in the afternoon, so after taking a few minutes rest I went out to the street with my camera. In the first few days, I would just try to blend into the background of the place, by intuitively taking photos.

March in Guangzhou is wet. It is humid, hot and rainy all day long, and things get mildewed very easily. When I was walking in the street one day, dense clouds gathered after the rain. Such a gloomy and humid day was in perfect harmony with the feeling of this north-south main road. So, when I saw the skyscraper beside the TV station far away, I knew it would be a very good view for giving the context of the environment and location. Once I was in position and had set the camera ready, some Africans appeared in the foreground. As it was supper time, there were Africans on the street walking home to prepare food or going out for dinner. And as they had to pass through the street on their way home, I could take photos of the African passers-by at any time.



At six o'clock the street was still not very busy or lively, but just a few hours later at ten, dozens of people showed up, particularly in several Halal Muslim restaurants. The settlement of and trade by Africans in Baohan Street was first brought about by the settlement of Muslims from Xinjiang and Ningxia who opened Muslim restaurants and *nang*-bread bakeries (actually, the most popular are owned by Kashmiris.)

For example, the restaurant at No.51, which has a barbecue stall outside the entrance and a three-floor restaurant inside, is one of the busiest due to its authentic Muslim food and central location on Baohan Street. The barbecue stall is always surrounded by many African people and also attracts customers to the watermelon stall next door. The Ankara restaurant is the most exclusive on the street, and stands out due to its extravagant style. One strange thing I noticed is that the street has as many as four or five fruit stores, and they all seem to do a roaring trade...

May 29, 2013

Although I have been walking on this street for two years, I still do not know what the dawn looks like. Driven by my curiosity, I woke up at five in the morning, and went out onto the street with my camera. It was dark at five, and a few Africans were still drinking beer, chatting loudly and excitedly in front of a store. They seemed suspicious of me, and I was worried that if I tried getting involved with them arbitrarily, it may have backfired. So I just glanced at them, slammed the security door and swaggered off to the business district.

However, at the entrance of the business district, all the shops were closed, except a shop that sells *nang*-bread twenty-four hours a day, as well as a Muslim vendor from Ningxia who was still selling dumplings. The sellers knead the dough and bake *nang*-bread day and night, and they definitely make good money.



I walked inside the vegetable market. Sellers were busy with their work, dealing with the freshly delivered vegetables, getting rid of the stale ones and arranging the rest neatly. There was a vendor selling a kind of fried bread sticks outside the market. Local Cantonese do not like them because they think that kind of fried food may cause 'internal heat', which is not good for health in Guangzhou's hot and humid climate. I like them but I can rarely get such fresh ones. I think they may sell well because there are many inhabitants there from the north of China.

It was five thirty in the morning. A few Africans were walking into and out of the street. And then, just past six, the sky began to lighten up, and more and more people gradually showed up. Usually, there would be many people going to work or school at this time; but these people are few in this kind of place. Obviously, the main inhabitants here are not white-collar employees or permanent residents. So the scene common in other parts of the city, of elderly people getting up early and escorting their grandchildren to school, was rare in Baohan Street. However, there were still a few.

I stayed at a breakfast stall taking photos of grandparents taking their children to school. Suddenly, an African wearing a stars-and-stripes shirt walked toward me; his shirt caught my attention. He knew I was taking photos and turned away, obviously he was unwilling to be photographed. So I placed myself in front of the breakfast stall and turned around, taking pictures of the street cleaners. It seemed he was attracted to the breakfast. And as he was buying some soybean milk, I pressed the shutter, only once, and then looked in his surprised eyes and gave him a friendly smile.

After a period of irregular contact, I found out that he was an international student at South China Agricultural University. Once, at two in the morning, he tried to introduce me to an African prostitute in a telephone booth, saying that only 400 yuan (= 50€) would be ok.



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## Contextualizing Li Dong's Photographs

by Michaela Pelican, Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Cologne

In the past ten to fifteen years, China has attracted many visitors and migrants from different parts of the globe. In particular, the city of Guangzhou, an ancient centre of trade and global connections situated in the country's southeast, has experienced the arrival of tens of thousands of traders and migrants from Africa. Many have been attracted by the Canton fair, held in spring and autumn every year. The majority are visiting traders and short-term residents who frequent local markets and factories to purchase manufactured goods to be shipped in bulk to Africa. By 2009, the number of Africans permanently based in Guangzhou was estimated at about 200,000. While their number is below 1.5% of the city's overall population (estimated at 14 million in 2013), it is their conspicuous presence in the city's public life that has made them to stand out.

The presence of Africans in Guangzhou has brought about changes in the city's sociological landscape. It has fostered the rise of what is currently referred to as 'Chocolate City'. As Li Zhigang and his co-authors explain, this term was first used by local Chinese taxi drivers and later became popular after being picked up by media reports. The name is intriguing, as it denotes not only the exotic flavour of the place, but also involves the issue of skin colour, and reveals a problematic imagination and representation of African migrants in Guangzhou.<sup>1</sup>

As the photographs in this exhibition illustrate, the African presence in Guangzhou takes various shapes. While some images allude to the opportunities and pleasures that living in this global city offers to its inhabitants, others shine a light on the challenges of integrating in a foreign culture and administrative system. We wish to make it clear that the photographs in this exhibition are not a comment on the situation of African migrants in China in general, but they reflect a very selective and subjective view on this topic by focusing on a specific social environment, namely Baohan Street in Guangzhou.

<sup>1</sup> Li, Zhigang, Michael Lyons, Alison Brown. 2012. China's 'Chocolate City': An Ethnic Enclave in a Changing Landscape. *African Diaspora* 5: 51-72.



In Baohan Street the majority of inhabitants are single men. Most Africans who have their children or families with them prefer an environment with a higher living standard, such as in the nearby Jinlu Villa or the trendy Zhejiang New Town, if they can afford it. Conversely, Baohan Street in Yuexiu District is a low-end area. It is popular not only among Africans but also Chinese migrants from different parts of the country. For many, it is the place to start out, to build up social and economic capital so as to venture into Guangzhou's countless markets.

We discussed this photograph with Li Dong's landlady, who acts as an agent, renting out apartments in and around Baohan Street. While she did not recognize the people in the picture, the conversation turned to one of Li Dong's former neighbours, a man from Guinea. As the landlady explained, the man was in a relationship with a Chinese lady who at first was working as his shop assistant. When they fell in love, they decided to move in together and rent a small apartment in Baohan Street. However, they soon realized that the apartment was too basic to allow the lady to cook. So, they decided to move to Jinlu Villa as soon as they could afford it. In the meantime, they have had a baby.

Originally, many people did not like to rent out apartments to Africans; but as money started to flow, this was no longer a problem. The landlady entered the business in 2002 and is managing some hundreds of rooms in this area. Currently, about ten percent are rented by Africans, while the majority are occupied by Chinese migrants, and a few by people from the Middle East and India. The landlady has no problem renting rooms to whomever – on the condition that their visa is in order and the rent is being paid. Nationality or religious affiliation generally does not matter to her, although she prefers not to rent out to Chinese ethnic groups, especially Uighur, as they are allegedly associated with political unrest. In her experience, paying their rent in time seems to be a problem for many African tenants, and she often has to call them two or three times to ask for the rent. She thinks that Africans are generally nice people. If they have money, they like to share it with their friends. But from a business point of view, this attitude is a problem, because they then can no longer pay their rent. However, she has come to understand that this is the 'African way'. And since, eventually, most African tenants complete their payments, she can cope with it.

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赤岗  
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客村  
Kecun

6号线

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Connect start

This is Monem, Li Dong's former neighbour in Baohan Street. As he told Li Dong, he came to Guangzhou on the invitation of his elder brother, who has lived in China for eight years and runs an export company. Monem and Li Dong spent some time together in April 2013, hanging out and visiting the Canton Fair. As Monem was interested in generators and construction equipment, Li Dong showed him the stand of the Senpoo Electric Machinery Group. Another day, Monem took Li Dong to the mosque where he observed the prayers. In the evening, they went to a Sudanese restaurant close to Baohan Street. Here, they met Monem's brother who is fluent in English and also speaks a little Chinese. Conversely, Monem only speaks broken English, but this did not hinder Li Dong and Monem from becoming friends.

As two months went by, Monem's stay gradually came to an end. Li Dong got the impression that while the elder brother had brought Monem over to assist in the business, he did not do well enough and had to return home when his visa was about to expire. The evening before his departure, Monem invited Li Dong to his apartment. As they were chatting, he told Li Dong about his plans to return to Guangzhou in the future to do more business. Li Dong suggested lending him one of his cameras, so Monem could take pictures of his family and friends in Sudan, and bring along the photographs and camera on his next visit to China. But Monem told him he would rather buy a camera by himself for his family and later bring the pictures. For Li Dong, this was an honest move, as Monem could have easily taken the camera and never returned. Maybe he knew that he was not coming back. Li Dong has not seen him since.

During his two years in Baohan Street, Li Dong met several African men who came to Guangzhou to do business and who intended to extend their stay as long as things were moving. Many spent some months in and around Baohan Street, but then disappeared. As Li Dong had the contact details of some of his acquaintances, we tried to reconnect with them – with divergent outcomes. For example, Monem's brother's company was no longer at the address on the business card, and there was no indication of its new location. At the same time, we were able to reconnect with another person who, in the meantime, had moved to a different district and was now running a restaurant. This attests to the volatile character of much of Guangzhou's business environment and the transient social setup of Baohan Street.



On the second day of Li Dong's stay in Baohan Street, at about ten thirty in the morning, he heard some noise down in the alley. He went down and found policemen encircling an African guy lying on the ground and being surrounded by a group of onlookers. He asked the storeowner opposite his house what was happening. The storeowner explained that this was a common scene, and that the man had been caught without a valid visa. Looking at the onlookers' facial expressions, Li Dong felt that they pitied the African guy who was taken away by the police in handcuffs.

Li Dong's interpretation of the onlookers emotions was also based on a story his landlady had told him on another occasion. She explained that she felt sympathy for some of the Africans who came to stay in China with little money and whose visas had expired. There was one case where a person had jumped out of a window when pursued by the police. He did not die but injured his leg. They took him to the hospital; but because he had no money, he could not pay for the proper treatment and remained disabled. The landlady was ashamed about the police's harsh treatment of the African man.

At times, Chinese residents are not happy with their African neighbours because they tend to be noisy and stay up late. So they may ask the community police to settle the matter. However, as the landlady intimated, some policemen may use this opportunity to carry out random visa checks. Moreover, as compared to earlier years, police controls have increased in Baohan Street. This may be partly related to recent incidents, allegedly initiated by terrorists from Xinjiang Province. At the same time, the landlady had also noticed an increase in police checks on African migrants. Li Dong suggested that some Africans may have moved to Foshan, the neighbouring city, instead. As the landlady argued, when some people move to a new place, they tell their compatriots if life is good there, and so others join them. In Guangzhou, and in particular in the area of Baohan Street, the police make regular visa checks. At nine in the morning, they come and knock on people's doors. But many Africans are still asleep, as they go to bed late and get up late. So when the police come in the morning and knock on their doors so vigorously many Africans get annoyed, as they feel that their rest and privacy is being disturbed. That is why some have moved to other places, such as Foshan or elsewhere, even if their papers are still in order.



We met Ben over tea in a popular restaurant-bar in Baohan Street when he accompanied a friend who was Li Dong's acquaintance. Ben admired Li Dong's artistic skills and was wondering about our intentions in using the pictures. As we talked, he became more and more determined to share his impressions and experiences of the challenges that Africans face in Guangzhou.

Ben explained that many Africans come to Guangzhou first and foremost to do business. And actually, Guangzhou has much to offer. African businessmen know that there are many useful goods they can export from China to Africa. They typically come with a capital of 5000 to 6000 USD to buy goods and export. But once they want to extend their visa, they run into problems. In Ben's opinion, overstaying one's visa is not a crime. It is not comparable with dealing in drugs, engaging in fights or other infringements of public order. It is just an administrative matter. Thus, Ben argues that renewing one's visa should be made easy. In order to conduct good business and consequently contribute to the economic growth of the place, it is necessary to make things easy for business people. So, issuing visas is one way. If the Chinese government feels there are too many business people, they should reduce the number of visas from the very start. That is, rather than allowing anyone to come in at random, they should limit the number of visitors and give preference to those who are already in the country, and who have demonstrated their good intentions and economic contribution.

Moreover, Ben continues, the Chinese government should also consider the reasons that push people from Africa to China. Rather than pressurizing African migrants, the Chinese government should give them the freedom and time to establish themselves and achieve something. Conversely, African governments allow Chinese entrepreneurs to set up themselves without pressurizing them in the same way. While acknowledging there is a general tendency that Africans are treated badly in many parts of the world, Ben considers the treatment of Africans by the police in Guangzhou as particularly harsh. He then calls on a real partnership and understanding between China and Africa, not just on the governmental level, but also on the local level.



# EPILOGUE

## An African Mirror

by Wang Shaobo, photographer and art collector, Yangzhou

Accompanied by Mr Li Dong, I visited the African Street in Guangzhou, which is similar to streets in overseas Chinatowns. Li Dong is at the same time a persistent and emotive person. Because of his engineering background, he has a deeply rational and speculative mind that filters through his sensitive photography. At times, his theoretical ideas and comments on photography lead me to believe that he is a seasoned theoretician rather than an experienced photographer. However, after taking a closer look at his photographs of Guangzhou's African Street, I have changed my mind: he is an excellent photographer.

When I saw Li Dong's "Baohan Street: An African Community in Guangzhou", what immediately crossed my mind was *Le Quartier Latin* in Paris, as well as the African-American neighbourhoods of Brooklyn and Manhattan. They seem so similar to the African Street in Guangzhou, though the latter is far less well-known. The photographs also remind me of African-American achievements, such as Jazz, and the seminal figures of Martin Luther King and President Barack Obama with his Kenyan background. It appears that racial discrimination is largely a subject of the past – despite the recent police scandals in Ferguson earlier this year. This is also reflected in Li Dong's photographs of the entanglement of African and Chinese civilizations. The famous British historian Arnold Toynbee argued that we need a fundamental change in our objectives, thoughts and behaviour, which is an indispensable condition to a perennial human existence. Li Dong's photographic work on the African Street in Guangzhou aligns with this prescription. Moreover, it offers a picture of the Chinese government's approach of 'building a harmonious house' regardless of colour, nationality or language as well as a path to universal fraternity. There are also many oeuvres that highlight the plight of African migrants visible in Li Dong's work, such as fatigue, decadence and the effects of perpetual movement. At the same time, his photographs show Africans firmly rooted in our land, buying vegetables at a fruit stall, taking breakfast in the street or socializing in front of a bar.



The character seems to truly believe that Mao Zedong will bring him more luck than Jesus.

Unlike those portraying Africans as victims of poverty, disease and war, Li Dong stresses human strength and dignity by focusing on his subjects' initiative and undertakings under difficult circumstances. The current living conditions of Africans in China serve as a mirror to us, as it resonates with the situation of Chinese overseas migrants in the past. I believe the Global Village needs the existence of an African Street in China; for, it mirrors not only Chinatown and *Le Quartier Latin*, but also the confrontations and entanglements of civilizations that Li Dong intends to shed light on. His work also raises the question of how to achieve a win-win situation. Peaceful coexistence means prosperity for all. I believe this is the primary message of Li Dong's photographic work and therefore, it deserves to be presented to the world.

Despite a few youths indulging in alcohol consumption and getting pulled in by the police who consider them illegal, these Africans eventually have succeeded in settling in China.

The work of Li Dong ensues from a sharp investigation of universal human feeling. For example, the photograph of an African man watching the Pekinese opera on television while sitting in a room with Mao Zedong's picture hanging on the wall is a reassuring scene of feeling at home, as if no longer in a foreign land.

## Representing African Migrants in China – a critical appraisal

by Séverin Kaji and Michaela Pelican, Department of Anthropology, University of Cologne

As Sino-African relations have deepened over recent years – both in terms of diplomatic relations and the mobility of people and goods between the two regions – there has also been a growing interest among journalists, academics, artists and policy makers in the presence of African migrants in China. There is a flourishing body of research, involving scholars in and from China as well as from academic institutions in Germany, Africa and other parts of the world. In this sense, Guangzhou has not only attracted a growing number of African migrants but also researchers who follow them on their paths.

So far, only some of the results of the burgeoning research activities have been made publicly accessible, as academic publications generally move slowly. Conversely, much current information has been conveyed in media reports, online forums and blogs. They provide a wide variety of representations of and commentaries on the situation of Africans in China; each of them tackling the subject from its own angle. While some speak from a decidedly Chinese perspective, others convey the viewpoints of African migrants. But also within these perspectives, there is considerable variation. Some highlight the economic and social benefits of China's opening to the world; others have a nationalist undertone and emphasize the disruptive influence of foreigners. All of these comments and representations are necessarily partial.

The same applies to Li Dong's photographic account of Baohan Street. It is a partial account that focuses on a particular group of African migrants in a particular social environment. Beside the dominant category of small-scale traders, there are other groups, such as professionals or students, whose number is also impressive. Moreover, not every African in China experiences difficult living conditions. Some have success stories to tell; they own companies or have a lucrative job, are happily married and enjoy a good life. Yet, most likely, they do not live in Baohan Street.



We enjoy working with Li Dong, as we share the idea that the photographs shown in this exhibition are not meant as an authoritative account, but as an invitation to engage in a controversial debate – about the situation of Africans in China, the ongoing changes in Chinese society, the effects of globalization, and so on. For example, with his focus on African migrants, Li Dong emphasizes the multi-ethnic nature of the new Chinese society. This inclusive and welcoming character has also been highlighted by Wang Shaobo in his commentary. However, the apparently peaceful social landscape of China is open to doubt. Drawing on media discourses and the testimonies of African migrants, many discriminatory practices have been reported. Whether this is true or not, the question of racism seems rather topical and needs to be raised. We hope the photographs in this exhibition have provoked many more ideas and questions, and look forward to stimulating and ongoing debates.

Also, while Li Dong's photographs highlight the African community in Baohan Street, the area hosts a variety of urban communities, including rural migrants from different parts of China. This is the subject of another photographic project that Li Dong has embarked on and that will contribute to a more diversified account.

We greatly appreciate Li Dong's work for his artistic skill and thorough observation. It speaks to all our senses and raises not only the desire to experience the sensations of Baohan Street, but to see and learn more about Guangzhou and its 'new residents'.



**BAOHAN STREET: An African Community in Guangzhou**

**Documentary Photographs by Li Dong**

**University of Cologne, Main Building, Ground Floor**

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Over the past two decades, the People's Republic of China has become a new and attractive destination for migrants from all over the world, including Africa. The city of Guangzhou, with its long history of international trade, has attracted between 200,000 and 500,000 Africans, primarily to do business. A famous 'African Street', named Baohan Street, has emerged in Yuexiu District, one of the oldest districts of Guangzhou.

The daily lives of Africans who make themselves at home in Baohan Street have been documented by the photographer Li Dong for over two years. Li Dong has been interested in the striking social and economic transformations in China's recent history, and the emergence of migrant communities as the 'new Guangzhou residents'. This catalogue presents a selection of his photographs and places them in context.



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