

China

Gordon Mathews with Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang, *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace*

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Any observant traveler to cities in Asia will at some point cross paths with conspicuous foreigners living and working there. Despite millions of such foreigners crafting interesting livelihoods for themselves, scholarship on this topic remains scant compared to Europe and North America. *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace* helps fill this gap by providing a fascinating ethnographic inquiry into the lives of African traders operating in southern China. The work is authored by Gordon Mathews, author of *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong* (another fascinating ethnographic study of globalization in Asia), and two of his former graduate students, Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang. Their work is interesting, accessible, objective, and broaches important topics that transcend the scope of China and the work itself.

The book is based on several years of fieldwork, where Mathews and his students would travel to Guangzhou to interview and spend time with African traders pursuing the “Chinese dream” (29). While the book makes mention of foreigners from many backgrounds, the focus is on sub-Saharan Africans and the ways they are connecting African consumers with Chinese products. The book is comprised of eight chapters, each of which discusses a different dimension of African-China encounters. The chapters contain a healthy balance of overview, analysis, and ethnographic data, and broach topics such as the lives of African traders, the difficulties they face living and operating in China, racial and ethnic dynamics, legal issues, marriage and relationships, religion, and the logistics of working in China, among others.

The book has many positive aspects, but arguably the interesting ethnography combined with earnest and accessible analyses are what make the book so enjoyable. Mathews's writing style and honest depictions make the book compelling for anyone broadly interested in this topic. While written for a broader audience rather than an academic one (4), the book still engages with many important ideas that are of interest to academics. The most central of these is “low-end globalization,” defined as “the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes semi-legal or illegal transactions, often associated with ‘the developing world’” (81). This spotlights the micro-level agents that make these movements of “low-end” goods possible. The book covers the dynamics of such processes in considerable detail, highlighting the logistics of how these operations work and incorporating ethnographic data from the African continent, which further elucidates the interconnection between Africa and China.

The book also delves into ethnic and racial tensions that underlie the dynamics of the southern China marketplace. These include racial conflicts between Africans and Chinese, conflicts between Africans of different national and ethnic origins, and religious conflicts between African Christians and African Muslims. This “low-end glo-

balization” provides an interesting backdrop for cross-cultural relations and tensions, and the authors do an excellent job of showcasing how these relations play out on the ground. For example, they highlight the importance of religion in the lives of Africans and how religious backgrounds position different groups of Africans differentially in relation to Han Chinese and Hui Muslims and Uighurs (chapter 7).

Arguably the biggest contribution this book makes is the insights that it provides into topics that transcend African-Chinese dynamics and speak to larger themes in contemporary Asia. One such theme is the focus on interracial relationships, how they emerge, what their implications are, and how they impact the lives of people involved. The presence of so many Africans and their impact on the local landscape leads the authors to posit the question of whether China will ever have their version of Barack Obama (chapter 8).

Another important dynamic is how Western racial paradigms are both imposed on African-Chinese relationships (and foreign-Chinese relationships more broadly), but also how these racial paradigms can have a different impact depending on the actors involved. For example, the authors note that “for a foreigner in Guangzhou, nationality, skin color, and gender are hardly determinative” (38) and that “it is unclear how much racism is primarily a matter of one’s skin color and how much it is a matter of wealth and nationality” (45). In other words, “racial” dynamics in the China context do not neatly map onto Western racial classifications, and there are more complex and intersecting factors at play when considering how race impacts relations on the ground in China. This also echoes a point made by Frank Dikötter and others about how Western racial ideologies do not accurately capture the ways race and identity manifest themselves in Asia. These points, and many others throughout the book, were strikingly similar to observations I made when researching immigration in Japan, which lends further substance to the universality of the analyses within the book.

Overall, *The World in Guangzhou* provides readers with a lively and interesting perspective into the lives of foreigners living and working in China. One may critique the book for not incorporating more “theory,” as is often common in ethnographies, but in my opinion, this does not detract from the quality of the book. It is filled with endnotes and references to other scholarly works. This book will be of benefit to anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, Sinologists, African Studies scholars, and anyone interested in how globalization unfolds in practice.

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