

# “Clean, safe and orderly”: Migrants, race and city image in global Guangzhou

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## Abstract

This paper examines an urban renewal project in Xiaobei, a neighborhood that has become a gathering place for African traders in the Chinese city of Guangzhou. Drawing on documentary analysis, interviews and site visits, the paper argues that, while there is a racial element to the project, we should be careful about ascribing it solely to anti-black racism. The project is as much characterized by pejorative discourses about internal migrants as it is about Africans. Moreover, the project is not unique to Xiaobei, and should also be understood in the context of Guangzhou’s efforts to become a competitive “global” city.

## Keywords

China, African traders, global cities, urban restructuring, migrants

## Introduction

During the early 2000s, the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou became an increasingly popular stopover for traders from sub-Saharan Africa (Lan, 2015).<sup>1</sup> This was partly the result of China’s rise as an economic powerhouse,

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<sup>1</sup>The exact number of African arrivals is difficult to estimate. Until 2008, researchers estimated that there were between 15,000 and 20,000 African residents in Guangzhou, including undocumented migrants (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2014: 140). This corresponds with numbers released by city officials in 2014, which set the number of long-term African residents in Guangzhou at 16,000 (P. Zhang, 2014). But it differs widely from the 2009 claims made in the Guangzhou-based newspaper, the *Southern Weekly*, which estimated 20,000 registered African residents and proposed the staggering figure of 200,000 illegally resident Africans (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2014: 140). This figure seems highly unlikely at

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but it was also related to Guangzhou's particular regional geography. Following the East Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, Guangzhou's proximity to older trading routes in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia helped promote the popularity of the city among global traders looking for alternative markets (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007). Guangzhou is also located in the industrial heartland of the Pearl River Delta, giving traders direct access to factories and lower prices than in established trade centers such as Hong Kong. For the vast majority of the African traders, Guangzhou was one stop on a broader international trade circuit. A small minority established longer-term businesses in Guangzhou, while others arrived simply hoping to try their luck in China (Castillo, 2014; Lyons et al., 2012).

French-speaking Africans began to congregate in Guangzhou's Xiaobei neighborhood, partly as a result of the area's proximity to the central train station and trade fair venues (Li et al., 2009b). Seeing a new opportunity, local developers built multi-storey wholesale trading malls that were filled with tenants selling goods and services catering to an African clientele. Late into the night, the streets were crowded with sidewalk vendors, kebab sellers, halāl butchers, illegal moneychangers, panhandlers and elderly women providing an array of services from shoe polishing to eyebrow threading. Journalists dubbed the neighborhood "Chocolate City," apparently hearing the name from a local taxi driver (Pang and Yuan, 2013). In an urban landscape that is predominantly Han Chinese, Xiaobei clearly stood out. Read as evidence of China's growing economic clout and a lively example of "globalization from below," Guangzhou's African community became a popular subject for Chinese and foreign journalists, scholars, filmmakers and photographers (Bonnah, 2016; Li et al., 2009a; Mathews and Yang, 2012; Osnos, 2009; The China Africa Project, n.d.).

But in the past few years Xiaobei has changed dramatically. In November 2014, the city began an urban renewal project in Xiaobei as part of a broader policy to create a "clean, safe and orderly" Guangzhou (Marsh, 2016; *Nanfang Ribao* (Southern Daily), 2014; Van Wyk, 2016). As a result of the clean-up, the vendors and kebab sellers have disappeared, the butchers have moved their meats inside, and the money changers have migrated to a park across from the neighborhood. The streets and storefronts themselves were cleaned up, planters and bollards were added to keep vehicles out of the main square (now emptied of vendors), and a new Foreign Affairs Service Center (which will be described later) was built. Figure 1 shows Dengfeng Square, a main gathering place in Xiaobei, prior to the renovations and Figure 2 shows Dengfeng Square after renovations. Because Xiaobei has been so widely associated with African traders in domestic and foreign media, it is tempting to view the clean-up as

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best, but is revealing of how prominent Guangzhou's African neighborhoods have become in the imagined geographies of journalists, residents and officials (Castillo, 2014; Lan, 2015).



**Figure 1.** The underpass by Dengfeng Square, 2014 (photograph: Kelly Simiao Liang).

targeting African visitors (Marsh, 2016). At the same time, however, Xiaobei is not just an “African” space; it is also what is known as a *chengzhongcun* (literally, village-in-the-city).<sup>2</sup> These areas, former rural villages that were enveloped by urban expansion and now provide cheap housing for rural migrants from elsewhere in China, have been targeted by post-reform urban administrators seeking to modernize the cityscape (Liu et al., 2010). How, then, are we to understand the renewal project reshaping Xiaobei? Is this a case of “normal” neoliberal urban restructuring processes, or are black Africans being specifically targeted by the city government?

The case of Xiaobei speaks to recent calls to foreground the urban scale—and neoliberal urban restructuring processes—in thinking about transnational migration and mobility. Perhaps, most influentially, Glick Schiller and Çağlar have argued that migrant integration in particular locales is

<sup>2</sup>These *chengzhongcun* are sometimes referred to as “urban villages” but because the English language term, “urban village,” has distinct connotations in urban planning and sociology (Chung, 2010), I prefer to use the Chinese term, *chengzhongcun*.



Figure 2. The underpass by Dengfeng Square, 2015 (photograph: Karsten Giese).

shaped by the cities' positioning in global, hierarchical fields of power. The authors write:

By examining the ways in which cities have variously experienced neoliberal restructuring and rescaling processes, migration scholars can more readily compare the different local urban dynamics that migrants confront and in which they actively participate. Such an approach will also allow researchers to investigate situations in which migrants' agency may contribute to the efforts of a city to reposition itself globally, or maintain its position of dominance. (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2009: 189)

They critique the global cities literature for focusing on "top-scale" cities at the expense of smaller (though no less globally connected) cities, and lay out an analytical scheme that also includes "up-scale," "low-scale," and "down-scale" cities. But while Glick Schiller and Çağlar helpfully expand beyond "top scale" global cities, their examples are all drawn from North American and European contexts. Collins (2012) points out that we can end up with very different understandings of the relation between cities and migration if

we work from different geographical starting points. As an example, Collins (2012) suggests that, for many cities in the Asia-Pacific, transnational mobility is best characterized as *permanent temporariness*. This pattern, which does not presume to be a model of settlement and integration, raises a different set of questions about the relation between migration and cities (Collins, 2012: 332). I agree that cities in the Asia-Pacific offer different understandings of the migration-cities nexus, but want to return to Glick Schiller and Çağlar's initial preoccupation with the scalar politics of global city building. While Glick Schiller and Çağlar note that migrants can play an active role in city leaders' efforts to reposition their city in a global hierarchy, their analytical framework seems to rank cities according to more or less quantifiable measures of cultural, political and economic power. But, as Roy and Ong (2011) observe, urban policy in many Asian cities is dominated by diverse projects of "worlding" that seek alternative ways of being global. In this context, I suggest that global city *imaginaries* are at least as important as measurable rankings in shaping urban policy toward migrants, and are, moreover, powerfully intertwined with ideas about race.

This paper argues that Xiaobei's clean-up is best understood in the context of Guangzhou's drive to become a global city. This is very much in line with Glick Schiller and Çağlar's (2009) call to situate migrant integration at the city level in the broader context of global neoliberal restructuring processes. At the same time, however, I also highlight how Guangzhou's vision of the global city became tangled with Chinese discourses about "quality" (*suzhi*) that excluded not only African traders, but also other residents of Xiaobei. The paper is thus a plea for centering questions of race and racialization in understanding the governance of migrant spaces, even as we consider the role of migrants in urban restructuring processes. The following section outlines the ambiguous role of migrants and migrant spaces in the widespread drive to create "global cities" that has dominated urban policy-making since the 1990s. The third section examines Guangzhou's efforts at repositioning the city in regional, national and international circuits. An intensely felt need to compete at all of these scales has led to urban regeneration projects and a heightened focus on city image. In Guangzhou, as elsewhere, the urban imaginary of the global city celebrates the white-collar professional class at the expense of other categories of migrants. In the fourth section, I describe the concrete policies and rationales involved in Xiaobei's clean-up project and examine how neighborhood officials framed the project in terms of improving city image and attracting high quality talent. Finally, I discuss how the Xiaobei case highlights a need attend to how race and urban restructuring are intertwined in the discourse and practice of "worlding" (Ong, 2011) cities.

This paper grew out of a larger group project, examining how West African traders experienced and translated their encounters with Chinese urban

modernity, that began in 2013.<sup>3</sup> It draws on interviews and observations collected during two six-week trips to Guangzhou in October–November 2015 and again in March–April 2016, as well as a review of policy documents and newspaper articles collected in print and online. My colleagues on the project, Karsten Giese and Kelly Simiao Liang, shared previously collected archival materials, photographs and interview notes, providing me with a sense of how the neighborhood had changed over time. I conducted over 40 semi-structured interviews (in Mandarin) with shopworkers, as well as representatives of the local village committee (*cunweihui*) and Dengfeng Street Office (*jiedao bangongshi*) officials.<sup>4</sup> I also visited Xiaobei's new Foreign Affairs Service Center to interview volunteers and observe a Chinese language class. Finally, I visited other *chengzhongcun* in Guangzhou and spoke with researchers based at those sites. I did not target Xiaobei's transnational migrant population for formal interviews, although I interacted casually with other "transnationals" on a daily basis in the area. But rather than focusing on the experiences and practices of Xiaobei's transnational migrants, my own interests lay in understanding the specific content of urban renewal in Xiaobei, how the renewal project was being justified, and how the content and rhetoric of the Xiaobei renewal project differed from other *chengzhongcun* in Guangzhou.

### Migration and global city "imagineering"

Emerging in the mid-1980s, global cities theory posited cities as key units of analysis in an increasingly globalized economy. Perhaps most influentially, Saskia Sassen (2001) proposed that the globalization of production—combined with improvements in information technology and the dramatically increased mobility and liquidity of capital—meant that cities such as London, New York and Tokyo were able to take on key "command and control" functions within a networked global economy. Cities were conceived of as competing for dominance in this world system of cities and networked production. Sassen further pointed out that global cities were home not only to the headquarters of large

<sup>3</sup>The larger project was entitled "West African Traders as Translators between Chinese and African Urban Modernities" and was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as part of the SPP Priority Programme 1448: Adaptation and Creativity in Africa. The research team consisted of two China scholars (Karsten Giese and Kelly Simiao Liang) and two Africa scholars (Laurence Marfaing and Alena Thiel), and together, the team made several visits to Dakar, Accra, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Yiwu. I joined the team from 2015–2017, and was able to benefit from discussions and fieldnotes shared by other team members.

<sup>4</sup>The street office is the lowest level of official government representation in urban China, below which are "grassroots" organizations such as residents' committees (for citizens registered as urban) and villagers' committees (for citizens registered as rural). The area colloquially known as Xiaobei does not have any official jurisdiction, but is rather used to indicate the rough geographical area around Xiaobei Street and Baohan Street. It is part of the Dengfeng urban village, under the jurisdiction of the Dengfeng Street Office.

multinationals, but also to a specialized service sector, including the legal, accounting and public relations services necessary to run an advanced corporate economy. One of Sassen's initial hypotheses suggested that the growth of high-end producer services would result in increasing spatial and socio-economic inequality, with a lower-end (but vital) economy occupied by migrants and migrant spaces (Sassen, 2001, 2005).

This division between a "high-end" and a "low-end" economy means that migration occupies an ambiguous place in the global cities literature. Price and Benton-Short's (2007) research indicated a strong correlation between global cities and migration: although not all world cities are immigrant gateways, many are (Tokyo, for instance, does not exhibit the same diversity as New York and London in terms of residents' countries of origin). Empirical work by Sanderson et al. (2015) subsequently supported the thesis that the global centrality of cities was linked to larger immigrant populations. But the global city scholarship of the 1990s focused predominantly on the white-collar service sector (Samers, 2002). This led other scholars to argue that global cities analysis should move beyond the transnational business class to include "unskilled" migrant labor and "globalization from below" (Malecki and Ewers, 2007; Price and Benton-Short, 2007; Samers, 2002). The need to highlight the contributions of "unskilled" migrants became particularly cogent as the global cities framework became not merely an academic framework for understanding the relationship between cities and globalization, but a hegemonic "mental map" for urban governments around the globe as they sought to put their cities at the top of global cities rankings (McCann et al., 2013). In most cases, there was very little (or no) link between academics' conceptualization of the global city and local governments' pursuit of global city status. As Timberlake et al. (2014: 162) write, "It is not that governments and entrepreneurs are actually influenced by the scholarship on global cities; rather, they are motivated by the prestige of having their city appear in the top ranks of cities worldwide."

Imbricated with the spread of neoliberal entrepreneurial governance strategies, many of these global city projects are merely a repackaged form of urban boosterism. As such, they tend to be heavily focused on city branding and urban renewal in order to make cities accord with a utopian vision of the "world-class" city. Paul (2005: 2109) writes that such practices constitute a "global imagineering" of the world city—marking urban space not just as a site of capital accumulation, but also as a means of narrating and advancing a particular definition of the city. This fixation on creating a global image can have dire consequences for marginalized populations. Ghertner (2011), for instance, describes how world-class city building projects in Delhi displaced nearly a million slum-dwellers over ten years beginning in 2000, a project facilitated by court orders that equated slum clearance with environmental clean-up and visual improvement.

The implications of this fixation on “global imagineering” for migrants and migrant spaces are ambiguous. Lin (1998: 314) observes that some US immigration gateway cities have attempted to use ethnic neighborhoods as “polyglot honeypots” to attract transnational capital. Hatziprokopiou and Montagna (2012) describe the differential incorporation of Chinatowns in Milan and London, where Milan’s Chinatown has been construed as an obstacle to prosperity, while London’s Chinatown has been revalorized as a place of leisure and consumption that helps “brand” London as a multiethnic city. Key to understanding the divergence between the two, they argue, is the differential positioning of the two cities within global economic processes. In this, they follow Glick Schiller and Çağlar (Glick Schiller, 2010; Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2009) who argue that migration scholars have focused too intently on the “ethnic lens,” at the expense of paying insufficient attention to the link between neoliberal urban restructuring processes and migration.

I argue here that we should not be too quick to cast aside an “ethnic lens.” More specifically, in order to understand whether an ethnic “enclave” becomes construed as a “problem” or a “resource” in global city-building projects, we need to examine not only cities’ global positioning, but also racialized discourses about migrants and migrant spaces. For instance, Hatziprokopiou and Montagna (2012) note the role of ambivalent cultural associations of Chinatown as a closed, illicit, mysterious space—what they term “Fu Manchu” syndrome—in shaping residents’ attitudes toward Chinatown in both London and Milan. Similarly, Kay Anderson, in her study of the state’s efforts to manage Vancouver’s Chinatown, points out that Chinatown is largely a European creation, and that “... assumptions about Chineseness and Chinese ‘difference’ have informed the policies of powerful government institutions toward the Chinese enclave and its inhabitants in ways that demonstrate the considerable material force and effect of beliefs about a Chinese race and space” (Anderson, 1991: 10).

In an interesting parallel with Western perceptions of Chinatown, Chinese journalists and netizens have engaged in similarly essentializing and pathologizing discussions of Xiaobei (Cheng, 2011; Li et al., 2009a). Negative perceptions of Xiaobei are in turn linked to ideas of race in China, which have been influenced by a combination of long-standing perceptions of Han cultural superiority and colonially-inflected discourses of “Yellow” and “White” superiority over “Black, Brown and Red” races during the 19th century (Dikotter, 1990). Yet, ideas of race in China, as elsewhere, are shifting and heterogeneous. Colonial ideas of race were supplanted by—or at least supplemented with—Mao-era discourses of Third World solidarity that saw Chinese and Africans united in a common struggle against colonial Western powers (Dikotter, 1994; Fennell, 2013). But this solidarity was challenged by China’s economic reforms in the late 1970s, which gave rise to widespread feelings of insecurity and fed hostility toward African students in China in a series

of sometimes violent conflicts during the 1980s and 1990s (Sautman, 1994). These incidents were relatively confined, however, and the majority of China's population had little direct contact with Africans (Sautman, 1994). Since the early 2000s, the central government has revived the Mao-era narrative of Sino-African friendship, attempting to pursue closer cultural ties with African countries and bolster China's "soft power" abroad (Fennell, 2013; Lan, 2015). The recent increase in trade, investment and cultural exchange between Africa and China has led to more direct contact between the two groups than ever before, generating both conflicts as well as increased mutual understanding (Fennell, 2013; Lan, 2016; Zhou et al., 2016). In Chinese media and online fora, African bodies are frequently associated with disease, uncleanliness and unruly sexualities (Cheng, 2011; Hood, 2013; Pfafman et al., 2015). However, in Guangzhou, where there is a higher concentration of African visitors than in most other Chinese cities, Lan (2016) observes an array of reactions to black Africans in the city. She writes that, "[a]lthough blackness functions as a racialized identity in Guangzhou, the meaning of blackness is far from uniform" (Lan, 2016: 308).

One way that mixed messages about blackness in China operate is through the discourse of "quality" or *suzhi*. *Suzhi* is a heavily laden term that encompasses moral behavior, education attainments and physical appearance (Kipnis, 2006). In post-reform China, it is the body of the rural migrant that is most widely inscribed with a low *suzhi* (Anagnost, 2004). In fact, Han (2010) argues that *suzhi* serves to naturalize the inferiority of migrant bodies in contemporary China, effectively racializing a group that is not "ethnically" different than urban citizens. Haugen (2012) writes that local media depictions of Africans position them as also lacking in *suzhi*. On the other hand, Lan (2016) notes that because *suzhi* is not specifically race-based, good personal behavior can sometimes outweigh skin color in determining whether individuals have "high" or "low" *suzhi*. But the interpersonal evaluations of *suzhi* that Lan cites do little to counteract widespread perceptions of "low-quality" Africans. Moreover, perceptions of "quality" in China have become entangled with local governments' global city building projects, as they aspire to build a white-collar service sector for a post-industrial economy. This was particularly evident in Guangzhou, where the city has struggled to leave behind its image as a low-end industrial center. Both the African buyers and the Chinese sellers in Dengfeng, engaged as they are in "low quality" trade, are excluded from this vision of the global city. It is through this discourse of "quality" that Guangzhou's world city aspirations have come to devalue racialized bodies and spaces.

## Guangzhou: Aspirational global metropolis

Roy and Ong (2011) understand Asian cities as intensively engaged in an art of "worlding," or assembling a range of regional and global policy models

that symbolically re-situate the city in the world. These practices are particularly evident in China, where the (perceived) imperative to build a global city has driven urban policy-making in small and large cities alike: by the end of the 1990s, over 43 Chinese cities had announced plans to become global cities (Ren, 2011: 12). To a large extent, global city status has been pursued through image-building projects focused heavily on upgrading the urban built environment, hosting mega-events and undertaking spectacular architectural projects, often designed by world-renowned architects (Ren, 2011; Shin, 2014). Since the early 2000s, however, there has been growing concern about the “softer” infrastructure of global cities, in particular, attracting the white-collar skilled labor force considered crucial to supporting the command and control functions of global cities (Wei, 2010). A somewhat ominous 2005 report published by McKinsey & Company warned of a looming “talent shortage” in China that would lead to a “talent war” as multinational companies competed for recent graduates and poached competent managers from each other. The authors advised:

To avoid this talent crunch and to sustain its economic ascent, China must produce more graduates fit for employment in world-class companies, whether they are local or foreign ones. Raising the quality of its graduates will allow the country’s economy to evolve from its present domination by manufacturing and toward a future in which services play the leading role—as they eventually must when any economy develops and matures (Farrell and Grant, 2005: 5).

This association of white-collar service work with a “modern” economy (and the attendant association of manufacturing with a “backward” economy) carries particular weight in Guangzhou, which emerged as a national economic powerhouse in the 1980s as a result of explosive industrial growth in the Pearl River Delta. But this reputation as “the world’s factory” has become a liability rather than an asset in the national drive to move China toward an advanced, post-industrial economy. Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta are perceived to lag behind China’s other city-regions, and since the 1990s, Guangzhou has struggled to maintain its third-place position as a key national city after Beijing and Shanghai (Xu and Yeh, 2005). Moreover, at a regional level, the interurban competition in the Pearl River Delta is also intense. Although Guangzhou is the administrative capital of Guangdong Province, its dominance in the region was challenged by newer urban centers, such as Shenzhen, Dongguan and Zhuhai, that mushroomed around the Delta following economic reforms in the late 1970s. By the 1990s, Guangzhou’s urban environment was beginning to show the strain of rapid industrialization, domestic migration and urban growth, inviting unfavorable comparisons with the more recently developed cities in the region. The re-integration of Hong Kong in 1997 intensified

Guangzhou's struggle to stake out a distinct functional position in the Pearl River Delta (Xu and Yeh, 2005).

The pursuit of competitiveness—at regional, national and global levels—has thus been a driving force in Guangzhou's policy-making since the 1990s (Xu and Yeh, 2005). In the late 1990s, city officials attempted to reposition the city as a "regional center in the world" capable of providing a good physical and business environment. This entailed a combination of both extensive growth and intensive urban redevelopment, including upgrading the city appearance and investing in logistics and transport infrastructure. Key targets for intensive redevelopment were Guangzhou's notorious *chengzhongcun*. These are rural villages that were incorporated into Guangzhou as the city expanded after China began experimenting with market reforms in the late 1970s. While the city appropriated much of the village agricultural land, village collective groups were allowed to retain some development land and farmers were allowed to retain the use rights to the land that their homes stood on (Wong, 2015). To replace lost farming incomes, farmers often built additions to their houses in order to rent out rooms to migrants from other areas of China. This created "under-regulated" pockets of densely packed buildings with narrow streets and poor service provision (Zhu, 2004). While these neighborhoods have both filled a need for affordable housing for migrants and provided income for landless farmers, city administrators generally consider them to be eyesores and safety hazards, emblematic of Guangzhou's still-unfinished transition to modernity (Liu et al., 2010; Schoon and Altrock, 2014; Wu et al., 2013)

In the early 2000s, these *chengzhongcun* became the focus of local policy-makers, who issued a series of guidelines and resolutions aimed at upgrading and integrating them into the urban fabric. Because of the great variation across *chengzhongcun*, as well as the number of stakeholders involved in the redevelopment process, many of these projects faltered (Schoon, 2014). Guangzhou's selection as host of the 2010 Asian Games provided new impetus to these redevelopment projects and boosted urban elites' ability to attain "world-class" status (Shin, 2014). A crucial part of this "worlding" project was a focus on creating the appearance of a modern, global city. For instance, the orientation of the city was transformed from being centered on the old urban core to a multi-centric layout consisting of several so-called "New Towns" that were studded with massive flagship projects, such as a stadium and opera house designed by renowned architect, Zaha Hadid (Ren, 2011: 9). In the process, several strategically located *chengzhongcun* were demolished. In late 2009, the city attempted to unify the redevelopment of *chengzhongcun* under the policy of the "three olds redevelopment" (*sanjiu gaizao*). The "three olds" consisted of old towns, old industrial plants and old villages, though the majority of the targeted areas (54 percent) were *chengzhongcun* (Schoon, 2014: 108).

But the city government's approach toward *chengzhongcun* seems to have shifted since the "three olds" policy of 2009 from whole-scale demolition to one of gradualist renovation (Liu, 2015). This was marked by the adoption of a three-year project of renovating *chengzhongcun* (*chengzhongcun zhengzhi*) starting in 2014, during which time the city pledged to invest CNY 10 billion to reduce security risks and improve the living environment (L. Zhang, 2014). These security risks include addressing fire safety issues, reducing the "spider web" telephone lines that are a distinctive visual marker of the *chengzhongcun*, and improving water drainage (Zeng and Huang, 2014). The *chengzhongcun* renovation project was, in turn, part of a larger citywide vision to build a "clean, safe and orderly" (*ganjing zhengjie ping'an youxu*) Guangzhou. Importantly, the new policy clearly links physical and social order. For instance, in addition to "cleaning up" the *chengzhongcun*, the "clean, safe and orderly" Guangzhou policy includes a "multi-dimensional patrol system" made up of an integrated system of over 500,000 video surveillance cameras across the city, as well as a team of 1,300 people monitoring the video feeds 24 hours a day. It also includes about 11,000 auxiliary police officers (double the previous amount) who operate in 1,100 patrol teams across the city (Zhang, 2016).

A 2014 article in the *Southern Daily* highlights the role of the "clean, safe and orderly" city policy in Guangzhou's overall development vision (*Nanfang Ribao* (*Southern Daily*), 2014). Guangzhou will continue to be not only a "key national city," but also an important hub under the central government's new Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>5</sup> As such, the city aims to be a center for international logistics and financial services. Moreover, under the new provincial plan for the Pearl River Delta, Guangzhou was given the functional role of "spearheading innovation and development" (*chuangxin fazhan de longtou*). This requires a "high quality urban environment" (*gao pinzhi de chengshi huanjing*) that will attract high-level talent in financial services and scientific research. The author further describes rapid growth in Guangzhou's population from 6.93 million in 2000, to 10.3 million in 2009, to over 16 million in 2015. Against this backdrop, the "clean, safe and orderly" urban environment policy is not just about improving the city's appearance, but is more importantly, a means of improving social management. The reporter interviewed grassroots officials throughout the city, who were described as being at the frontline of the modernization and development of an "international metropolis." Xiaobei, as the famous "African village," was touted as an exemplary

<sup>5</sup>The Belt and Road Initiative (originally known as "One Belt One Road") was introduced by President Xi Jinping in late 2013 as part of a push for China to play a larger role in international affairs. The focus is on building shared cross-border infrastructure, funded by the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Materially, the project consists of a Silk Road Economic Belt connecting China to Europe over land, as well as a Maritime Silk Road linking south-east China with Southeast Asia, Bangladesh, India, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, ultimately also ending up in Northern Europe (Ferdinand, 2016; Yu, 2017).



**Figure 3.** The renovated Dengfeng Square, 2015. The poster above the shop awnings reads, “Build a clean, safe and orderly urban environment” (*Jianshe ganjing, zhengjie, anquan, youxu chengshi huanjing*) (photograph: Karsten Giese).

model of both the “clean, safe and orderly” Guangzhou policy and the *chengzhongcun* renovation project (Figure 3).

### The making (and unmaking?) of Xiaobei

Since as early as 2009, observers have been forecasting the imminent demise of Xiaobei as an “African” space (Osnos, 2009). Li et al. (2012) lay out three phases of the area’s trajectory: the “emerging enclave” (1990–2003); the “prosperous enclave” (2004–2007); and the “collapsing enclave” (2008–present). They argue that local state policy has been a determining factor in the neighborhood’s ebb and flow, and characterize Xiaobei as a site of “transient globalization.” But five years after the publication of their paper, it is rather the astonishing *persistence* of the African presence in Xiaobei that demands attention. Understanding this persistence requires accounting for the agency of Africans and Chinese alike in creating an “African” space in Xiaobei, alongside state regulatory practices. Here, Collins’ suggestion to adopt the lens of “permanent temporariness” to think through migration in the Asia-Pacific is helpful. Permanent temporariness highlights two important dynamics: the

legal restrictions and enforcement practices that suspend people in a condition of “temporariness” on the one hand, and the continual presence and place-making practices that support a degree of “permanence” on the other (Collins, 2012: 322).

Because of the difficulties associated with maintaining an official residence status and starting a business as a foreigner in China, many of the place-making practices that have helped make Xiaobei into an “African” neighborhood have been carried out not only by Africans themselves (Castillo, 2014), but also by Chinese entrepreneurs (Liang, 2015). In the early 2000s, Xiaobei was experiencing economic stagnation relative to other neighborhoods in Guangzhou (Li et al., 2009b). But property developers and business owners recognized an opportunity in the increasing numbers of African traders (Li et al., 2009b). Soon, Chinese wholesalers had populated the lower levels of flagging trading malls with shops selling low-end consumer products, while African entrepreneurs rented upper-level offices. The establishment of Halāl restaurants, as well as logistics and translation services catering specifically to an African and Middle Eastern clientele, increased Xiaobei’s locational advantages (Li et al., 2009b). A majority of those working in Xiaobei’s trading malls and restaurants are themselves migrants from other areas of China, and China’s Hui and Uyghur Muslim minorities play a visible role as vendors, (informal) money-changers and restaurateurs (Liang, 2015). To add to Xiaobei’s complexity, it also attracts a significant number of traders from the Middle East, meaning the area might be best conceived of as *translocal* space rather than merely an “African enclave” (Castillo, 2014).

Despite the variegated cultural landscape that characterizes Xiaobei, the local press portrayed it largely as an “African” space. In 2005, the *Guangzhou Daily* published an article that was widely circulated online, “Face to face with Guangzhou’s African tribes” (*Lingjuli shenfang Guangzhou Feizhou buluo*). Although sympathetic to the problems facing Africans in Guangzhou, the article’s author also evoked the image of “uncivilized” Africans through the use of Chinese words like *buluo* (tribe) (Cheng, 2011: 566). At the same time, the press associated Africans with rising crime rates and places where Africans stayed became seen as a threat to public security (Li et al., 2009b). Prior to about 2007, the city government appeared to turn a blind eye to the influx of African visitors. But in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, police started carrying out visa inspections in the street, often specifically targeting black Africans. Tensions between police and Africans escalated in 2009 when two Nigerians were injured when jumping out a window to evade inspection. Guangzhou’s hosting of the 2010 Asian Games provided further impetus for increased control of foreigners, and it became increasingly difficult to obtain or renew visas in nearby Hong Kong (a common practice for foreigners seeking to stay in China without a long-term visa) (Lan, 2015).

In 2011, the government of Guangdong Province, of which Guangzhou is the capital, passed the Guangdong Act. The Act was intended to manage migrants by targeting the so-called “three illegalities” (*sanfei*): entering illegally; staying illegally; and working illegally. Lan (2015) describes the Act as part of an “anti-immigration campaign” that grants local police expanded authority over foreigners and aims to prevent the growth of neighborhoods such as Xiaobei. These heightened efforts to manage the African population in the city resulted in increased tensions. In 2012, another conflict broke out between police and African traders over the death of a Nigerian man in custody. This was followed by the outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa in 2013, which prompted new efforts to manage the African population in the city and an overt association of Africans with the spread of disease. The Guangzhou government responded by expanding police powers, increasing the frequency of passport checks, and penalizing hotels and landlords who fail to verify and register foreign tenants (Lan, 2015).

To some extent, the 2014 “*chengzhongcun* renovation” carried out in Xiaobei can be read as an extension and systematization of these policing practices, which Haugen (2012: 77) has characterized as “ad hoc” responses in places where the immigrant population was seen to have grown too large. On the morning of 18 November 2014, two teams entered Xiaobei,<sup>6</sup> including nearly 300 members from the police, urban management, industry and commerce, and food and drug supervision departments (Zhang, 2015). Their first task was to address the “six disorders” (*liu luan*) associated with *chengzhongcun*, a term that refers specifically to street vending, loitering, graffiti, illegal advertising and signage, illegal parking and littering, but may be expanded to refer more broadly to other forms of social or spatial disorder (Yang, 2002). A 24-hour patrol was initiated to prevent reversion to the former state of chaos and congestion. The second stage focused on orderly business management, and a system of “three certificates and four systems” was instituted that established a system of punishments for vendors in the neighborhood’s wholesale markets who were caught selling counterfeit and shoddy goods. The third stage targeted landlords and tenants, and focused on ensuring that all residents in the village were properly registered.

During an interview, Yuan Xiuquan, director of Dengfeng Street Office, was eager to assert that foreigners (i.e., black Africans) were not being specifically targeted during Xiaobei’s clean-up:

First, renewal is not directed at specific people; we very much welcome legal foreigners to come live and do business here, but regardless of whether a person

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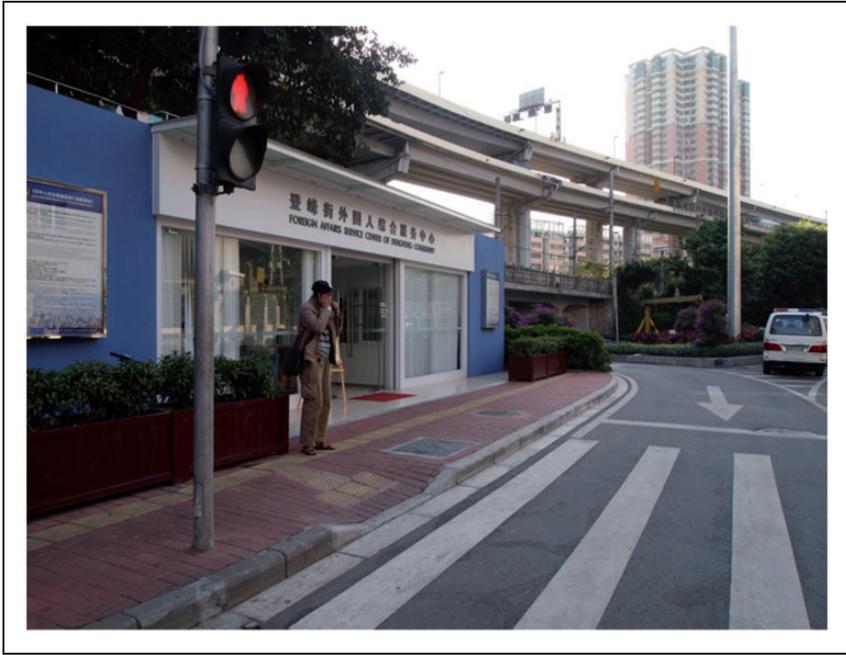
<sup>6</sup>Dengfeng Street, as an administrative unit, occupies a total area of about 4.7 km<sup>2</sup>. This includes a number of office buildings, apartment blocks, restaurants and shops aside from the densely built up Xiaobei urban village centered on Baohan Street, which occupies only about 1.5 km<sup>2</sup>. The clean-up project focused on this smaller area.

is local, non-local, ethnic minority or foreigner, if they are engaging in illegal activities, they will be dealt with according to the law. Furthermore, remediation is not targeting one specific thing; it is not limited just to regular symptoms of urban disorderliness. It also includes business norms, market management and environmental improvement. (Zhang, 2015)

The recent national rhetoric of Sino-African friendship means that local state actors are keen to avoid charges of anti-black bias (Lan, 2015). Distinctions, then, are not made according to racial lines; rather, the divide is between legal and illegal, between order and disorder. But these categories are easily interchanged with racial categories. Lan (2015) describes how illegality has been constructed along racial lines in Guangdong Province; while the “three illegalities” (*sanfei*) had also become a policy issue in other Chinese provinces during the 2000s, in Guangdong Province, *sanfei* was primarily associated with African migrants (Lan, 2015). The prominence of “business norms” and “market management” can be best understood in the context of Guangzhou’s efforts to escape its reputation for low-cost industrial production and build a service-oriented economy and a world-class image. One journalist criticized the “fake and shoddy goods” in Xiaobei’s wholesale markets, and explicitly drew a comparison between African traders and white-collar transnationals:

Compared with Western developed countries, with large companies sending white-collar workers, African businessmen in Guangzhou have distinctive “grassroots” features. They do not have a lot of money to deal with large orders or attend the official trade fair, but come with USD 20,000–30,000 to buy goods in Guangzhou’s wholesale markets and then sell it for several times the price back home, earning intermediate profits. (Zhang, 2015)

Here, white-collar is not just a professional description, but also a marker of “Western” origin, and, according to local geographic imaginaries, whiteness. Because African traders arrive to purchase inexpensive goods, a crackdown on “low-quality” goods also targets “low-quality” purchasers. Many of these practices – physical renovations, cracking down on counterfeit goods and registering tenants – have been carried out in other *chengzhongcun*. What distinguished Xiaobei, according to official and journalistic accounts, was an innovative “service management” approach (Zhang, 2016). This label appeared to rest largely on the construction of a new Foreign Affairs Service Center at the edge of the main square (Figure 4). The center offers rental and registration services, currency exchange services, legal advice, language classes and cultural activities intended to help foreigners integrate into the local culture. The center is staffed by professional social workers, English and French-speaking Chinese volunteers, and occasionally, African volunteers



**Figure 4.** The Foreign Affairs Service Center of Dengfeng Community, 2015 (photograph: Author).

as well. However, aside from two small rooms near the front of the building, the majority of the space at the Foreign Affairs Service Center is reserved for the auxiliary police officers that patrol the area. This makes it unlikely that undocumented migrants would use the services there, particularly since another component of the Xiaobei model is the establishment of a specialized *sanfei* (three illegalities) team led by public security offices at the city and district levels.<sup>7</sup> The *Guangzhou Daily* reported that in recent years they have carried out 18,000 inspections and discovered 110 illegal visitors (Zhang, 2016). “Service” in this model seems to be a euphemism for managing and monitoring foreigners.

At the same time, foreigners were not the only targets of Xiaobei’s new socio-spatial management model. Xiaobei forms part of the larger Dengfeng Street jurisdiction. Of Dengfeng’s approximately 90,000 registered residents, only 1,200 are non-Chinese foreigners (Zhang, 2016). A somewhat larger number—2,100 people—are members of Chinese minority groups (Zhang, 2016). Most of these are Hui or Uyghur Chinese Muslims who play a visible

<sup>7</sup>When I visited a Chinese language class at the Foreign Affairs Service Center, it did not appear to be well attended: there were two African men being taught by a group of six Chinese social workers and volunteers.

role as vendors, (informal) money-changers and restaurateurs serving the large number of West African and Middle Eastern traders who frequent Xiaobei. In recent years, Uyghur Muslims have become an object of special interest for municipal police forces. The country has been waging its own “war on terror” against Uyghur separatists in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Clarke, 2010), a battle which, particularly in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, was extended to urban areas across the country (Yu et al., 2009). Xiaobei’s strategy included cooperating with police to establish a new leading group to investigate terrorism, which claims to have arrested 23 people as of 2016 (Zhang, 2016). Another part of Xiaobei’s strategy includes establishing a professional security team made up of two police officers from the Dengfeng Street police office, as well as four Uyghur auxiliary officers (Deng, 2016). This is supposed to help in mediating disputes and promoting “ethnic harmony.”<sup>8</sup> Here, it becomes evident that policies espousing integration and ethnic harmony can be as effective regulators of unwanted bodies as policies of exclusion and segregation.

By 2016, the 4.7 km<sup>2</sup> area of Dengfeng Street (Zhang, 2016) was completely covered by a network of 230 surveillance cameras (Yuexiu Qu Xinwen Zhongxin [Yuexiu District Information Centre], 2016). Xinhua journalist Qingzhao Li quoted the Secretary of the Dengfeng Street Party Working Committee, Bo Xu, as saying that a “clean, safe and orderly” urban environment not only makes residents feel more comfortable and gives them a stronger feeling of security, it also attracts human capital and investment. Secretary Xu described a good urban image as an important “intangible asset,” and saw the clean-up of Xiaobei as an important part of Guangzhou’s world city image-building project:

In the past, because the environment was so bad, my relatives would never come to visit Baohan Street [the main street in Xiaobei]. Now they come frequently. In terms of a city, the key to attracting people to work, live and develop is whether or not the city image is attractive. This series of environmental improvements has really addressed a lot of problems that the masses face, improved their quality of life and promoted citizens’ own personal quality (*cujin tisheng le shimin zishen de suzhi*). The more beautiful the urban environment that we live in is, the more civilized people become. (Li, 2016)

Xu clearly sees a direct connection between upgrading the environment and upgrading the “quality” of people in that environment. Although the last sentence seems to imply that current residents can be improved along with their environment, the opening sentences also suggest a displacement

<sup>8</sup>The phrase, *minzu tuanjie*, is sometimes translated as “national unity,” but at the neighborhood scale, it makes more sense to describe the goal as being one of “ethnic harmony.”

of “low-quality” by “high-quality” people. Newspaper reports from 2016 suggest that this is in fact what has happened (Marsh, 2016). While there are still a number of shops and restaurants catering to an African clientele, the number of African buyers in Xiaobei has declined precipitously. Some have relocated to other areas of Guangzhou or neighboring cities in the Pearl River Delta, or are exploring options in other Chinese trading centers such as Yiwu. A small number appear to be avoiding China entirely, though this may have more to do with rising prices in China and currency fluctuations in their home countries than with changes in Xiaobei (Van Wyk, 2016; Yi, 2016). Shopkeepers unanimously complained about the drop in business over the past couple of years, and entire floors of closed shops in the trading malls attest to the difficulties many vendors are facing. At the same time, one local newspaper article noted that with the perceived improvement in security, white-collar workers who were afraid to rent in the area are now moving to Xiaobei, causing rents to rise (Liao, 2016).

## Conclusion

In order to understand the trajectory of Xiaobei, it is necessary, as Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009, 2013) have argued, to situate Guangzhou within an analysis of neoliberal scaling processes. The key rationale driving Xiaobei’s urban renewal project is the establishment of public order as part of the city elite’s vision of making Guangzhou into a world-class city that attracts “high-quality” global talent. The “low-end globalization” occurring in Xiaobei does not accord with that vision. At the same time, neoliberal urbanism—as a development-oriented governance strategy—is insufficient for explaining the changes in Xiaobei. Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2013) note that migrants can be agents of development and regeneration in the city, and this seems to be borne out by the case of Xiaobei’s improved economic prospects with the arrival of African traders in the early 2000s. But urban policy-makers have not overtly acknowledged this contribution, nor have they attempted to use Xiaobei to market the “multicultural diversity” of Guangzhou in a global tourism landscape. In asking why this did *not* occur, we need to supplement theories of neoliberal restructuring with a critical understanding of race and space.

As I have outlined here, although perceptions of blackness in China are far from uniform, Black bodies have generally been racialized in official and popular discourses as “low quality.” This has contributed to the racialization and exoticization of space in Xiaobei, and has played a powerful role in policy-makers’ (in)ability to imagine a place for African traders in a “high-end” global city. The case of Xiaobei highlights the ways that global city discourses are tied to the valorization of certain bodies and the marginalization of others. But there are several points that complicate any characterization of Xiaobei’s urban renewal project as being (simply) racially motivated. First, Xiaobei’s

physical transformation is not unique: *chengzhongcun* across Guangzhou are undergoing similar renovation projects as part of the municipal government's vision of building a "clean, safe and orderly" city. Second, black Africans are not the only target of Guangzhou's urban renewal project in Xiaobei. The management of African visitors in Guangzhou has been merged with broader efforts to control the "floating population" of domestic (Han and non-Han) migrants. In fact, a great deal of the increased investment in security and service provision focuses specifically on Muslim minorities in the area. While it is thus difficult to offer a straightforward assessment of the *motives* behind Xiaobei's urban renewal project, it is obvious that the *effects* are falling disproportionately on marginalized populations, including not only transnational sojourners but domestic migrants as well. These findings suggest that further research on the migration–urban restructuring nexus attend to particular national (and local) understandings of race, as well as the ways that the precarities of transnational migrants may be intertwined with those of other marginalized groups.

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