

---

AFRICANS IN MACAU AND GUANGZHOU:  
A STUDY OF EXODUS TENDENCIES AND  
THE IMPLICATIONS FOR  
CULTURAL DIALOGUE WITH CHINA

在澳门和广州的非洲人：  
对大批迁移倾向的研究  
以及对与中国文化对话的影响

---

KAIAN LAM 林嘉欣

ABSTRACT

Historically, both Macau and Guangzhou were ports of encounter where some of the first Africans landed in China, but not necessarily as free individuals. Arab traders and Portuguese seafarers of centuries past were responsible for the earliest transfer of black manpower to China's southern regions. Because of this peculiar situation, we cannot talk of a proper cultural dialogue between Chinese and Africans. Since the early 2000's, we have witnessed the formation of the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation and, with special implications for Macau, the creation of the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. For over thirty years (1991–2023), Africa has been the destination of China's first overseas visit at the beginning of every year. China and African countries met ever-more frequently at ever-higher levels and registered record-breaking trade deals. Fast-forwarding to the present, we notice some worrying signs. Is the golden period of China-Africa engagement already behind us? We are interested in the cultural dialogue between China and Africa – in Macau and in Guangzhou – considering Covid and the difficult accommodations made to fight it.

Africans in Macau and Guangzhou:  
A Study of Exodus Tendencies and their  
Implications for Cultural Dialogue with China

Historically, both Macau and Guangzhou were ports of encounter where some of the first Africans landed in China, but not necessarily as free individuals. Arab traders and Portuguese seafarers of centuries past were responsible for the earliest transfer of black manpower to China's southern regions. Because of this peculiar situation, we cannot talk of a proper cultural dialogue between Chinese and Africans. The way we understand it, cultural dialogue is a voluntary, conscious act; a desire for proximity and understanding. Essentially, cultural dialogue builds on knowledge.

continent and refers to places, states, cities, leaders, and ethnic groups in Africa. A major contributor to the *Gazetteer* was Lin Zexu, the official who led the opium burning in Canton that triggered the Opium War between China and Great Britain in 1840. In the process of collecting information about the West, Lin also amassed knowledge on other regions of the world, including Africa.

Today, in Chinese social discourse, there are remnants of past contacts, e.g., "African Kunlun Servants" and other derogatory names for people of African origins and for places associated with them, often reporting little or loose connection with real historical events. In Macau, Mong Ha Fort is also known as *Heigui Shan* (literally, the mountain of the black demons), because soldiers of African origins served in the

Historically, both Macau and Guangzhou were ports of encounter where some of the first Africans landed in China, but not necessarily as free individuals. Arab traders and Portuguese seafarers of centuries past were responsible for the earliest transfer of black manpower to China's southern regions. Because of this peculiar situation, we cannot talk of a proper cultural dialogue between Chinese and Africans. The way we understand it, cultural dialogue is a voluntary, conscious act; a desire for proximity and understanding.

Although China-Africa contact began long ago, China did not start studying Africa until modern times (Li, 2005: 60–61). Chinese intellectuals and court officials began to hear more about the outside world from missionaries and other Europeans who brought their knowledge of world geographies to China. Li agrees with other scholars in saying that most early Chinese writings on Africa were: (1) translated or edited volumes of world geographies; (2) travel notes; and (3) books about Egypt. An example is *Si Zhou Zhi* (The Gazetteer of the Four Continents), which contains precious information on the black

Portuguese army in Macau and were stationed in the barracks of Mong Ha, when the city was still under Portuguese administration. From then on, a rather poorly understood historical past has inspired a series of ghost fantasies.

Nonetheless, China has come to see itself as an open, tolerant, and culturally sophisticated nation overall. Beijing encourages public initiatives to celebrate China's early contacts with Africa (especially East Africa) and the exchanges that took place between the earliest Chinese and African diplomats. For over thirty years (1991–2023), Africa has been the destination

of China's first overseas visit at the beginning of every year. Representatives of China and African countries met ever-more frequently at ever-higher levels, registered record-breaking trade deals, funded university studies of a burgeoning number of African students, and sponsored a formidable joint international presence in major institutions. For many observers, the opening-up of the Chinese economy, China's joining the World Trade Organization, the hosting of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and other major initiatives have propelled a different dialogue between China and the world.

Since the early 2000's, we have witnessed the formation of the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation and, with special implications for Macau, the creation of the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Regarding such development, Alden and Alves write that "China's relationships with regional forums provides a window on a – for lack of a better phrase – 'Sino-centric' form of multilateralism in the making" (2017: 164–165).

Here, we are interested in the cultural dialogue between China and Africa, as it manifests itself in Macau and in Guangzhou, considering Covid and the difficult accommodations made to fight it. We draw on the more controversial aspects, taking a (necessarily eschewed) glance at cultural dialogue in action.

In 2020, at the height of the Covid crisis, China stood up to accusations of racism and xenophobia made by the African Union and the United States over alleged mistreatment of African and African-American citizens in Guangzhou. Examples of complaints included: not being able to enter McDonald's, or to leave a quarantine hotel even with negative Covid test results, and other potentially discriminatory actions based on people's darker skin colour (Vincent, 2020).

How should we understand the "coronavirus discrimination" reported by English-language media concerning the frustrations of Africans residing in Guangzhou? What is the cultural cost of health-related exigencies? To what extent has Covid reconfigured the cultural dialogue between China and Africa? What are the effects of (temporary) limited mobility? Statistically, only a few thousand Africans were residing in Guangzhou during the year 2020, falling sharply from the 2005–2012 peak, when Guangzhou hosted the largest African expatriate community in Asia. Covid has highlighted problematic host conditions (access to public and private services) and the perils of incomplete integration (distrust, social exclusion, dis/misinformation). For Africans in Guangzhou, Chinese law and order encircle their work, living and leisure spaces.

Three years since Covid was first detected, we have noticed some worrying signs. According to Helena Brandão, president of the Association of Friends of Mozambique in Macau, from 2006 up to three or four years ago, there were around 115 members, but at the time of the interview, only 39 remained, and Ms. Brandão herself was preparing to leave the enclave (Carvalho, 2022). She did not foresee an expansion of the association, and its few remaining members, having lived in Macau for a long time, were somewhat detached from Mozambique, and so the association depended on in-coming Mozambican students to renew itself. During the National Day holidays, we had the chance to talk to a group of Lusophone African Students in Macau (Personal communication, October 2022). Our conversations revealed the following:

(1) *Scholarship availability and arrangements largely determine the mix and the quality of in-coming students.* This means that students compare the attractiveness of scholarships in different Chinese cities. They

also scrutinize the courses and evaluate how confident they are to pass the exams and to graduate successfully. Another important factor is the strenuousness of the Chinese language requirement.

(2) *Online classes (in their respective home countries) for a significant number of African students.* By collective arrangement, some African students stayed in their own countries and did not come to Macau. Professors in Macau interacted with the African students online. To better cater to the students' learning needs, certain exams and assessments were conducted per nationality.

and of these, over 350,000 were from Myanmar (Luo, 2022). Yunnan province, on the border with Myanmar, hosted the largest number of non-citizens (376,689) and that almost half (48.55%) of all non-citizens had only primary school education or less. The Census confirms that most of the foreigners residing in China come from within Asia, that they are spread around China, and that they fill a broad spectrum of labour profiles. The Census does not reflect the dramatic effects of prolonged border closures, but newspaper interviews suggest some common reasons why foreigners leave China and do not (yet) return: separation from family, job loss,

While many have acknowledged the bridge roles played by experienced Africans for the benefit of Africans, or to mediate African and Chinese interests, in cities such as Guangzhou and Yiwu, we have yet to see the emergence of strong African networks resembling those in Europe or North America. Africans have transformed the West so profoundly that it is quite impossible to imagine the U.S., U.K., France or Portugal without Africans, their presence, contributions, histories, and cultures.

(3) *Limited travel opportunities and visa problems.* Some learning programmes included an important Beijing exchange component. For various reasons, the African students were not able to leave Macau and travel to Beijing. The professors in Beijing gave online classes and the students stayed in Macau for attendance.

(4) *Transitory African communities.* Student populations are transitory. Once the educational goal is achieved, most Africans leave. Unlike in Guangzhou, there have not been many public reports of Africans clandestinely over-staying on student visas in Macau.

According to China's 7th Census, there were 845,700 non-citizens living in China, in 2020, the year when the census was conducted,

social and cultural isolation, specific policy requirements, and completion of goals (Qian, 2022).

Both China and Africa are part of the Global South. For a long time, people understood one or the other through knowledge produced by the West. A cultural dialogue between China and Africa is, contemporarily, a South-South dialogue, an other-other encounter (Zheng, Cheng, & Coetzee, 2021). What Covid does is that it complexifies the situational, temporal, and socio-historical context of China-Africa engagement.

To take a practical example, conversing in the Chinese language continues to be a problem for African immigrants in Guangzhou. It has

been pointed out that the interactions between Africans and Chinese in this city are limited to business and commerce. The parties involved communicate through the calculator, i.e., they engage in “calculator communication” (Lofton, 2015). We may interpret this as communicative inertia. People avoid meaningful dialogue, not wanting to work towards building non-commercial connections. If we agree that proper cultural dialogue is bottom-up, then it is logical that we invest in people-to-people contacts. Zhang (2021) believes in the power of “ordinary people’s stories” in shaping an alternative international narrative. His approach is consistent with the ever-increasing demand for *in situ* research and for a more culturally informed understanding of China-Africa relations that ordinary people outside the academic/elite circles can relate to.

While many have acknowledged the bridge roles played by experienced Africans for the benefit of Africans, or to mediate African and Chinese interests, in cities such as Guangzhou and Yiwu, we have yet to see the emergence of strong African networks resembling those in Europe or North America. Africans have transformed the West so profoundly that it is quite impossible to imagine the U.S., U.K., France or Portugal without Africans, their presence, contributions, histories, and cultures. African clusters in Guangzhou will probably not develop into the type of ethnic enclaves that are described in the U.K. literature, even if the African clusters in Guangzhou are able to fulfil some functions that are associated with an ethnic enclave (Jin, Bolt, & Hooimeijer, 2021). This also means that we are not yet creating conditions for Africans to contribute to Chinese society in meaningful ways.

In Macau, Africans are more likely to mingle with already existing Portuguese-speaking communities and identify with a greater Lusophone culture (Bodomo, & Teixeira e Silva,

2012). This is understandable, especially when they share a language and similar reference points. Moreover, projects promoted by the Macau government also seem to encourage Lusophone cohesion. Representatives of Lusophone countries are often called on by the Macau government to collaborate as a Lusophone community. Based on ethnographic observations, we can further ascertain that African communities in Macau tend to interact within pre-determined structures of formal engagement and to entrust discourse and decisions to official delegates. This makes African communities in Macau more organized but also more distant from the local population.

There are many unanswered questions still. Will foreigners return? What will be the profiles of the returning foreigners and the newcomers? Will the African demographic in Macau ever grow to be as diverse as that in Guangzhou? Will Macau continue the government-led approach, or will Macau replicate the entrepreneur-led dynamics in Guangzhou? How will the respective experiences of Macau and Guangzhou be integrated in the bigger picture of China-Africa relations? What is the significance of city-level engagement within the Belt and Road Initiative and the greater national conjuncture?

We are convinced that, to really nurture a relationship of reciprocity, the stakeholders will need to invest in popular education, knowledge-sharing, and on-the-ground cultural diplomacy.



KAIAN LAM, Centre for International Studies,  
ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon

## REFERENCES 参考资料

- Alden, C., & Alves, A. C. (2017). China's regional forum diplomacy in the developing world: Socialisation and the "Sinosphere". *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(103), 151–165.
- Bodomo, A., & Teixeira e Silva, R. (2012). Language matters: The role of linguistic identity in the establishment of the Lusophone African community in Macau. *African Studies* 71(1), 71–90.
- Carvalho, M. (2022, March). Macau e Moçambique há 30 anos na mesma página. *Revista Macau*. Retrieved from <https://www.revistamacau.com.mo/2022/03/01/macau-e-mocambique-ha-30-anos-na-mesma-pagina/>
- Jin, X., Bolt, G., & Hooimeijer, P. (2021). Africans in Guangzhou: Is the ethnic enclave model applicable in the Chinese context? *Cities* 117, 103320.
- Li, A. (2005). African studies in China in the twentieth century: A historiographical survey. *African Studies Review* 48(01), 59–87.
- Lofton, R. (2015, March 9). Africans and African Americans in China: A long history, a troubled present, and a promising future? *Black Past*. Retrieved from <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/africans-and-african-americans-china-long-history-troubled-present-and-promising-future/>
- Luo, Y. (2022, June 17). 20 things we learned from China's 7th census. *Sixth Tone*. Retrieved from <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1010585/20-things-we-learned-from-chinas-7th-census>
- Qian, J. (2022, May 7). Eventually, China's borders will reopen. Will foreigners return? *Sixth Tone*. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1010282/eventually%2C-chinas-borders-will-reopen.-will-foreigners-return%3F>
- Vincent, D. (2020, April 17). Africans in China: We face coronavirus discrimination. *BBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52309414>
- Zhang, Y. (2021, November 16). 新形势下如何讲好中非故事 [Telling China-Africa stories in the new era]. *Zhejiang Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Retrieved from [https://www.zjskw.gov.cn/art/2021/11/16/art\\_1229516289\\_42865.html](https://www.zjskw.gov.cn/art/2021/11/16/art_1229516289_42865.html)
- Zheng, W., Cheng, Y., & Coetzee, C. (2021). Thinking China from Africa: Encounter with the other other. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 33(2), 119–129.