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“China gives and China takes” African traders and the nondocumenting states

Shanshan Lan

Abstract: Based on ethnographic research in South China’s megacity Guangzhou, this article examines the gaps and contradictions in the central and local Chinese states’ efforts to regulate migrant traders from Africa. I identify economic interests, everyday racism, and ideological concerns as three major factors in shaping the nonrecording tactics of the Chinese states. The article argues that nonrecording is a practical tactic pursued by both the central and local states in order to balance multiple and conflicting interests at the regional, national, and international scales. Due to tensions between different levels of state authorities, China’s policies toward migrants from Africa are marked by sporadic shifts between recording, nonrecording, and derecording, which contribute to the illegibility of issues of immigration in state bureaucracy.

Keywords: Africans, China, immigration, nondocumenting, racism, states

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the presence of foreigners in the country has been strictly controlled by the state. The increase of foreign population in China since the late 1970s has been the result of “a deliberate state policy to utilize foreign technology and foreign investment to modernize China and to help the country establish a prominent position on the world stage” (Brady 2000: 946). In the early reform era, the majority of foreigners in China were white Euro-American professionals who came as investors or top administrative personnel in multinational corporations. They were generally considered the embodiment of wealth and prestige in popular Chinese eyes, and their business activities in

China were often supported by favorable government policies. After China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the volume and diversity of foreign population in China have significantly increased. According to the national census in 2010, which included foreign residents for the first time, there were 593,832 foreigners living in mainland China (Wang 2011).¹ While Beijing and Shanghai are noted for the concentration of Western professionals and elites (Wang and Lau 2008; Wu and Webber 2004), Guangzhou stands out as hosting the largest African diaspora communities in the country.

African migration to South China has been boosted by the enormous growth of Sino-African



trade relations and the increasing presence of mainland Chinese enterprises and small entrepreneurs in Africa (Alden et al. 2008). Unlike previous generation of Africans in China, who were mainly students from elite backgrounds, this recent wave represents what scholars call “globalization from below” (Mathews and Vega 2012). The majority of them are individual traders and small entrepreneurs who purchase cheap consumer goods in China and ship them back to Africa for sale. Since their transborder mobilities are not sponsored by states or transnational corporations, most Africans traders are subjected to intensified immigration control by the Chinese authorities. Only a limited number of them manage to obtain long-term visas to conduct business in China. The African population in Guangzhou is extremely diverse, and almost every country in Africa is represented in the diaspora. According to Adams Bodomo (2012), the top five groups are Nigerians, Senegalese, Malians, Guineans, and Ghanaians. About 80 percent of the migrants surveyed by Bodomo were between 24 and 40 years old, and close to 82 percent of them were men. There are no available government statistics on the exact number of Africans in Guangzhou. According to some scholarly estimates, the number of documented Africans in the city is probably around 20,000, while the number of the undocumented remains unknown (Haugen 2012; Li, Ma, et al. 2009; Yang 2012).

Compared to other foreigners, the African experiences in South China are marked by a paradox of visibility and invisibility. On the one hand, Africans in Guangzhou are internationally visible due to sensational media reports of several protest events. In July 2009, an undocumented African was severely injured after jumping from the second floor of a trade mall in order to evade a passport check by the Chinese police. After that, around a hundred Africans protested in front of a local police station (Tang and Gong 2009). On 19 June 2012, the African community was under the spotlight again, when open clashes broke out between African traders and the Chinese police over the death of a Ni-

gerian man in police custody (Beech 2012; Branigan 2012). On the other hand, Africans remain largely invisible as immigrants and contributors to the Chinese economy in official media. This article attempts to tackle the paradox by examining the gaps and contradictions in the Chinese states’ efforts to regulate migrants from Africa. It departs from existing literature, which focuses on the repressive side of state immigration control by highlighting the various non-documenting strategies practiced by different levels of state agents (Haugen 2012; Li et al. 2012). I identify economic interests, everyday racism, and ideological concerns as three major factors in shaping the nonrecording tactics of the Chinese states. Despite its resilience from the Mao era to the present, the Sino-African friendship discourse has largely been limited to state-level interactions and exchanges, and it can no longer reflect the new realities of migration between China and Africa at the nonstate and grassroots levels (Strauss 2009). In its efforts to promote a benevolent image of China in Africa, the Chinese state propaganda runs the risk of perpetuating the asymmetrical nature of Sino-African economic relations. To a certain extent, the nonrecording strategies practiced by different levels of Chinese government reflect the tensions between political ideology, economic interests, and increasing antiblack racism at the individual and personal levels.

Unpacking the Chinese state

It is a well-known fact that the perfect state is a myth, and many states are in reality plagued with “implementation deficiency,” that is, “an inability to put their policies into practice” (Kalir et al. 2012: 12). As noted by Kalir and Willem van Schendel in this issue, state recording practices are oftentimes “strategic and selective rather than systemic and pervasive, episodic rather than continuous.” The temporary and selective nature of recording practices may leave ample room for nonrecording practices by state agents based on their shifting priorities, political affiliations, and

personal interests. Meanwhile, nonrecording practices also serve important purposes for the states, be it economic, political, or ideological. Following Kalir and Van Schendel's call to treat nonrecording as a deliberate strategy and an important modality of state making, I want to suggest that nonrecording and recording strategies are not contradictory to each other. Rather, they complement each other in sustaining the Janus-faced operations of modern states.

Nonrecording may take many different forms. Gordon Mathews and colleagues (2014) note the "informal ignoring of formal laws" by state agents in mainland China and Hong Kong, who deliberately neglect some semilegal or illegal cross-border trade activities because they are not worth being prosecuted. Kalir and colleagues (2012) pinpoint the active involvement of state agents in the production of illegal (in the eyes of the state) but licit (in the eyes of the migrants) activities, for example, by their embeddedness in informal transnational brokerage networks (see also Abraham and Van Schendel 2005). Ananya Roy rejects the binary between formal and informal state practices by arguing that "informality exists at the very heart of the state and is an integral part of the territorial practices of state power" (2009: 84). This article questions a strict division of recording and nonrecording by identifying the intricate connections and interactions between the two modes of state governance. Due to tensions between different levels of state authorities, China's policies toward migrants from Africa are marked by sporadic shifts between recording, nonrecording, and derecording, which contribute to the illegibility of issues of immigration in state bureaucracy.

Scholars have noted the nature of the modern state as a multilayered, contradictory, and translocal ensemble of institutions, practices, and people (Sharma and Gupta 2006). The Chinese state is no exception. In fact, it consists of multiple levels of authorities whose interests may be in conflict with each other (Xiang 2013). This article distinguishes between the central and the local states in terms of their attitudes

toward migrants from Africa. I argue that tensions between different levels of state authorities constitute one of the key reasons for their various nonrecording strategies in regard to immigration control. In other words, nonrecording is a practical tactic pursued by both the central and local states in order to balance multiple and conflicting interests at the regional, national, and international scales. As one of the first provinces benefiting from China's open door reform and market economy, the Guangdong government has been granted special privilege by the central state to try first as an experiment region. However, as an important window for China's reform and development, Guangdong is also considered a role model for other provinces to follow. As a result of such intricate power relations, the Guangdong state has to tread a fine line between submitting to the central state's leadership and improvising its own solutions to local problems.

Like Japan and South Korea, China is reluctant to admit its status as an emerging new destination for immigrants (Seol and Skrentny 2004; Tsuda and Cornelius 2004). The Chinese state still treats foreign migrants as a temporary issue, and there is no official effort to integrate them into Chinese society. Following this logic, some of the states' nonrecording practices, such as neglect of the welfare of undocumented Africans and refusal to officially recognize their existence, can be interpreted as China's deliberate tactics to avoid responsibilities toward international migrants. In addition, antiblack racism plays a critical role in influencing different state attitudes toward Africans in Guangzhou. Since the central state officially denies the existence of antiblack racism in China, there is a conscious effort in state media to avoid discussions of undocumented Africans in order to safeguard the benevolent image of China toward Africa. This race-mute ideology not only fails to contain everyday racism against black Africans among the general Chinese public, but tacitly endorses the discretionary power of police officers, who practice *de facto* racial profiling in immigration control and law enforcement. Consequently, the local state's strategic neglect of undocumented

Africans reflects both its concern with the politically and economically sensitive nature of Sino-African friendship and its lack of interest/care for a foreign population who are racialized as undesirable by public media.

The data for this research was gathered between April 2012 and June 2014 through archival research (government legal documents, Chinese-language newspapers and journals), participant observation, and open-ended interviews with fifty African traders from various backgrounds. The author also interviewed forty Chinese who had various levels of interaction with Africans. Their backgrounds include real estate agents, small business owners, government officials, migrant workers, and wives of African men. From July to August 2013 the author made a research trip to Lagos, Nigeria, and conducted informal interviews with Nigerian traders who had traveled to China for business.

A brief overview of China’s immigration laws and regulations

Until 2011, immigration to China was mainly governed by several key laws and regulations: the Law on Control of the Entry and Exit of Aliens (1985), Detailed Rules on the Implementation of the Law on the Entry and Exit of Aliens (1994), Regulations on the Employment of Foreigners in China (1996), and Regulations on the Examination and Approval of Permanent Residence of Aliens in China (2004). According to one Chinese legal scholar, there is no official notion of “Chinese migration law,” and the administration of international migrants in China is mainly regulated by statutes governing exit and entry (Liu 2009: 312). Due to the lack of a clear legal framework for immigration control, international migrants are not officially recognized as “immigrants” or “migrants” by the Chinese state. While rural to urban Chinese migrants are often labeled as “the floating population,” international migrants are mainly referred to as “foreigners” or “aliens” in state laws and regulations. Since China still denies its status as an

immigrant country, there is no immigration department at the central state level. Guofu Liu (2011: 12) counts at least 17 ministerial-level authorities in charge of immigration-related issues in China. The lack of division between immigration and public security has significantly increased the power of the police, who are responsible for law enforcement in both fields.

With the diversification of the foreign population in China, the images of whites as privileged foreigners are gradually being eroded in popular media. On 8 May 2012, a British man was arrested for sexually assaulting a young Chinese woman near a subway station. On 14 May, a Russian cellist refused to withdraw his bare feet placed on the seat of a female Chinese passenger on a train from Shenyang to Beijing, and later even swore at her. Both incidents were videotaped and posted online and aroused great anger among Chinese civilians (Zhuang et al. 2012). On 15 May 2012, Beijing announced the 100-day campaign to crack down on *sanfei* foreigners in the city. *Sanfei* is a Chinese term that literally means “triple illegal.” It includes three types of illegal immigrants: those who enter illegally, stay illegally, and work illegally in China. On 30 June 2012, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed the new Exit and Entry Administrative Law, which took effect in July 2013. The implementation of the new law represents China’s efforts to distinguish between desirable and undesirable foreigners. For example, while the new law contains tougher provisions for *sanfei* foreigners, it also introduces a new visa category to facilitate the inflow of foreign talent (Bork-Huffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014; Haugen 2015).

Although *sanfei* foreigners originate from a variety of countries, in the Guangzhou context they are primarily associated with Africans due to the racialization of blacks as undesirable foreigners in local media.² Zhigang Li, Desheng Xue, and colleagues (2009) note the key role of the local media in constructing a negative image of Africans as guilty of illegal immigration, drug dealing, sex offenses, and the spread of AIDS. The media production of the “African threat”

was achieved in several ways. First is the exaggeration of the number of Africans in the city. In 2007, a report in *Guangzhou Daily* claimed that there were 200,000 Africans in the city (Ke and Du 2007). Since then, that number has been frequently quoted by news reporters and individual Chinese as the most popular estimate of the African population in Guangzhou. The “African threat” discourse was also highlighted by the demonization of black masculinity over the Internet. The *Guangzhou Daily* report ended up being reposted in different websites, but with a more sensational title, “There Are 200,000 Blacks in Guangzhou and Rape Cases Committed by Blacks Have Been Rapidly Rising.”³ Racist comments invoking such things as the black invasion, the fifty-seventh ethnic group in China, and the AIDS threat can be found among Chinese netizens from different parts of China (Cheng 2011).⁴ The criminalization of Africans as drug dealers in popular media also played an important role in the racialization of black identity. Although several groups of foreigners are involved in drug-related crimes—Southeast Asians, Middle Easterners, and overseas Chinese—Africans are often singled out as the most visible group (Liao and Du 2011; Qiu 2011).

On 1 May 2011 the Interim Provisions of Guangdong Province on Administration of and Services to Aliens took effect. It is the first piece of local legislation in China concerning the administration of foreigners. Designed to specifically target *sanfei* foreigners in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) area, the Guangdong Act promotes a reward and punishment scheme by encouraging ordinary Chinese civilians to report *sanfei* foreigners to local authorities. It has also expanded the power of the local police to stop foreigners for passport and visa verification. The Guangdong Act highlights the PRD region as a field of experiment for China’s immigration reform. In fact, some of its provisions concerning *sanfei* foreigners have been successfully incorporated into the 2013 national law (Lan 2015a). The legally vulnerable status of some African traders has severely limited their physical and social mobilities in Guangzhou. It has also led to

difficulties in business and personal life. Undocumented Africans who date or marry Chinese women encounter many difficulties in registering their marriage in China. Marriage to a Chinese citizen cannot provide a path to permanent residence. Children born out of common law marriages remain technically undocumented and are not entitled to benefits reserved for Chinese citizens. The difficulties in interracial marriage are coupled with growing antiblack racism at the personal level, which discourages Africans from settling down permanently in China (Lan 2015b).

Selective (non)recording practices by the local state

Interviews with Africans from various backgrounds show that China’s restrictive and arbitrary visa policy has been the major cause for the illegal stay problem. The temporal nature of state recording practices is best illustrated by China’s tightening of visa policy before major national events, such as the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the celebrations for China’s 60-year anniversary in 2009, and the Asian Games in Guangzhou in 2010. In the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, visa extensions in mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macau were no longer possible for citizens from 33 countries (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014). This has negatively affected the business plans and activities of many African traders. Suma, a 28-year-old Gambian, told me, “Nobody decided to overstay. It’s China’s visa policy that forced people to overstay. It’s easy to get China visa, but China visa only allows you to stay for a very short time, for example, one month, two months, or three months.” Restrictive visa policies have given rise to various types of semilegal or illegal brokerage services. In Guangzhou, Chinese agents with official connections offer visa renewal services to African migrants as well as invitation letters to business visa applicants in Africa. Some take their African clients to smaller cities in inland China, where visa renewals are less regulated. The inflation of visa fees on the black market

has become a huge financial burden for some African traders who wish to maintain their legal status in China.

At the local state level, the temporal and spatial nature of recording practices are manifested by selective and uneven enforcement of immigrant control in different neighborhoods in Guangzhou and in different cities in the PRD area. According to my African informants, early morning and noon are generally safe times to travel because the police are either in bed or having lunch. In Sanyuanli Market police surveillance is usually more relaxed on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Guangzhou neighborhoods where Africans are concentrated, such as Xiaobei and Sanyuanli, are subjected to stricter police inspection than the rest of the city. After the 2009 protest event, local landlords in Sanyuanli refused to rent to undocumented Africans under pressure from the police. Many Nigerians relocated to the nearby city of Foshan. Others moved to smaller cities such as Dongguan, Shenzhen, and Zhongshan, where fewer Africans are concentrated and police surveillance is less rigorous. Echoing the central state's anti-*sanfei* campaign, overstayers are more visible targets for police inspection than illegal workers or traders of counterfeit goods (cf. Mathews et al. 2014). This selective policing strategy has enticed some Africans to enroll in Chinese universities or to marry Chinese in order to continue their business activities in China.

An interview with a city official who used to work in the Xiaobei area shows that the local government has been plagued with a lack of resources and various kinds of corruption. As a result, the government policy toward Africans is apparently stringent but actually relaxed. He said, “The police only make arrests before some major events. Most of the time, they turn a blind eye to the many *sanfei* Africans on the street. For those who got arrested, they were locked up for several days and then released. Repatriation costs money, so the only solution is to turn them loose again.” This official's comment is partly confirmed by a few cases I heard about in Guangzhou regarding Africans being

released by the police after being detained for several months. The contradiction between rigorous policing from time to time and the lack of a deportation scheme shows the sporadic cycle of recording, nonrecording, and sometimes derecording (in cases when the police officer crosses out one's visa to make it invalid) in the local state's regulation of migrants from Africa.

To a large extent, the local state's selective (non)recording strategies have been motivated by economic interests. The presence of African traders in Guangzhou has revitalized the local economy and created business and job opportunities for petty Chinese entrepreneurs and migrant workers. According to both Chinese and African informants, the local state's tolerance of the informal economy is manifested not only by its inactivity in enforcing copyright infringement laws, but also by some state agents' active involvement in informal social networks of corruption. One middle-aged Chinese trader told me that the underground banks in the Xiaobei area are controlled by some powerful Chinese who have connections in the police department. They regularly bribe the police so that they can get warnings before major police raids. Similar corruptions exist in the Sanyuanli area as well. If officials from the Industrial and Commercial Bureau come to check counterfeit goods, the management in the Tangqi Market would first welcome them into the office on the sixth floor and send messages to African traders downstairs to close their shops and leave. Both sides knew it was a game, yet they had to play it in order to keep up appearances.

Corruption in the local state is not the only reason for the existence of regimes of permissiveness in Guangzhou (Kalir et al. 2012). The intersection of internal and international migration constitutes another reason for the local state's ambivalent attitudes toward immigration control. Despite language barriers and cultural differences, the African and Chinese migrant populations in the Xiaobei and Sanyuanli areas have formed an economically interdependent relationship. Collaboration with Chinese migrants enables African traders to bypass some of the

constraints imposed on their mobility in the city by state immigration control. For example, some undocumented migrants often rely on their Chinese friends, spouses, or business partners to rent shop spaces in trade malls, collect market information, travel to other cities to make orders or collect goods, and provide other trade-related services. During a national crackdown on drug trafficking in 2013, most of the African shops in the Sanyuanli area were forced to close due to frequent police raids. One important mobility strategy for some African traders was to hire a Chinese employee to take care of business in the shop, with the African giving instructions behind the scenes. To a certain extent, interethnic collaborations contest the local state's regulatory power by creating a liminal space between the legal and the illegal for the daily survival of undocumented Africans.

Discretionary power of police officers

It was 10 April 2012. When I walked out of the Overseas Market in Xiaobei around 8:30 p.m., I saw a police van with flashing blue lights parked nearby. Several police officers stood at a corner chatting. One of the female street vendors whispered to me, "They are here to arrest visa overstayers." For over ten minutes, the police chatted and laughed among themselves and paid no attention to people passing by. Then they started checking passports. Several Arab traders walked by and the police ignored them. Whenever a black person passed by, the police would stop him or her for a passport check. A black woman was stopped. After examining her passport, one officer said to her loudly, "You have violated Chinese law and you must go to the police station for punishment!" One black man was stopped. He did not speak English. He passed his phone to the police, who shouted into it, "Tell your friend he needs to go to the police station for punishment!" As the scene got more chaotic, a small crowd of Chinese and Africans started to gather and watch. The woman dug into her handbag and produced a piece of

paper. She pleaded with the police, "I am leaving on the seventeenth. This is my ticket. I don't want to stay here." One black man passed the check and walked away. Two police emerged from the Overseas Market, holding the arms of a black man. They handcuffed him from behind and pushed him into the police van. Two more black men were ordered to climb into the back of the van. It was very dark inside, with two tiny windows on each side. It looked like a van for transporting prisoners. The woman was about to cry. She kept pleading with the police for almost fifteen minutes. I could not hear the conversation because of all the noise. Finally, the police relented and let her go. The police then locked the van and slowly drove away.

The whole arresting business lasted for about twenty minutes, yet it struck me rather like a performance. Several messages were conveyed through the dramatic event. First of all, the police only targeted black Africans. Besides ignoring traders from other countries, the police also ignored Uyghurs and Han migrants, who were peddling fruits, food, and small gadgets without a license. However, the police waited for over ten minutes before starting to check passports. I suspect that they did it on purpose in order to allow the news to spread. In this vein, Africans who have well-connected personal networks may easily escape. The main goal of the police seemed to be stirring fear among Africans rather than arresting more of them. Although the black woman was finally allowed to leave, she had to endure the harsh treatment of the police and make a lot of effort to plead her case. It remains unclear to me why one black was handcuffed and pushed into the police van, while the other two were ordered to get into the van by themselves. It was also unclear why the police chose to release the woman in the end. Later, a Chinese Muslim trader in the Overseas Market explained to me, "The Canton Fair is just a few days away. That's why they are arresting blacks. The police have to do their job. They need to make some arrests in order to report back to their boss."⁵ This trader's testimony helps explain why the police arrest black Africans ran-

domly and sometimes according to their personal preference.

The discretionary power of the police, which is endorsed by the 2011 Guangdong Act, also led to various forms of corruption. Stanley, a 28-year-old Nigerian, explained to me how the police extort bribes from undocumented Africans. He said, “The overstaying money, they have turned it into a business. For example, if I am arrested by the police, I’ll call my brother here and he will pay the money to get me out. Sometimes you pay the police’s agent. They will give you a number. You call the number and you bring the money to some place. They take the money and pass it to the police.”⁶ Stanley’s testimony shows that the Chinese police sometimes have a vested interest in nonrecording Africans. By deliberately looking away or neglecting their duty, some police officers have turned African overstayers into a convenient source of illegal income. The arbitrary power of the police is further illustrated by the fear of some documented Africans. Steve, a 33-year-old Ugandan migrant, explained to me, “Visa is not 100 percent guarantee here. When the police stop you to check passport and you do not look like a pleasant person to them, they may draw a line on your visa and cancel it. They would say: China gives and China takes. You can’t ask why.” Like Mathews and colleagues (2014), I only heard of visa canceling cases, but never met anyone who had such an experience. Nevertheless, stories about negative encounters with the police get so widespread within the African diaspora community that they discourage some Africans from renewing their visa.

Willful illegibility and political correctness

Due to the prominence of the Sino-African friendship discourse in official propaganda, the Beijing government has been very cautious in handling African-related issues. Differing from the local media’s negative portrayals of Africans, central state media tend to carry more positive reports that reaffirm state political ideology.

For example, a three-part report in *Guangming Daily*, an influential newspaper operated by the Communist Party of China Central Committee, is entitled, “Friends from Africa, How Are You Doing in Guangzhou?” (Ma et al. 2012). The report presents a sanitized depiction of African life in Guangzhou with some success stories, but there is no discussion of undocumented migrants. Besides highlighting the long history of Sino-African friendship, the report also insists that there is no racial discrimination in China. The politically sensitive nature of African migration in Guangzhou also compelled local media to change the terms they used to describe Africans: from racially coded language such as “blacks” to more neutral or euphemistic references such as “Africans” and “foreigners.” Personal communication with a staff member from the Guangzhou Academy of Social Science revealed that one of the researchers had been warned by Beijing not to make public comments that may jeopardize Sino-African relations.

At the international level, Beijing’s strategic downplay of African “illegality” was closely related to two Sino-African events. On 22 May 2012, soon after the Beijing crackdown on *san-fei* aliens, the Nigerian immigration department arrested forty-five Chinese traders in the northern city Kano (Yin 2012). The event was widely interpreted as Nigeria’s retaliation for the Beijing campaign. Meanwhile, the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-African Cooperation (FOCAC) was scheduled to open in Beijing in July 2012. With Sino-African relations at stake, the Beijing campaign started with much fanfare but ended rather quietly. The invisibility of undocumented Africans in central state media not only reflects Beijing’s conscious move to suppress discussions on antiblack racism, but also its efforts to render issues of immigration illegible. While statements supporting the official rhetoric of Sino-African friendship can be openly released, instructions for more stringent immigration control are usually recorded in confidential government files and distributed to different levels of authority via the party-state’s hierarchical power structure.⁷

These complications have obliged the Guangdong government to tread a fine line between tightening immigration control and protecting Sino-African friendship.

Due to the various challenges in the implementation of the Guangdong Act, the local state has developed its own strategies to meet the convoluted expectations of the central state, that is, to highlight its achievements in the regulation of documented Africans and to downplay the many problems and difficulties in its regulation of undocumented Africans. For example, Jinlu Villa, a residential area in Xiaobei where many documented Africans are concentrated, has been chosen by the Guangzhou police as a model community for foreign tenant management. The neighborhood has been visited by high-ranking officials from Beijing such as Mr. Zhou Yongkang, head of the Central Political and Legislative Committee, in September 2009, and Mr. Meng Jianzhu, Minister of Public Security, in June 2010 (Qiu 2011; Wang 2010; Xu 2009). By drawing the central state's attention to this documented African community, the local state collaborates with the central state in rendering issues of illegal migrants illegible in official discourse.

Another aspect of the local state's nonrecording strategy is its outsourcing of state control to nonstate actors such as migrant organizations and underground churches. Among the approximately 30 unofficial ethnic organizations in Guangzhou (Castillo 2015), the Nigerian Union is the most influential. Besides its basic function as an arbitrator of business disputes between Chinese and Africans, the Nigerian Union is an important yet informal channel of communication between the Chinese government and the African diaspora community. After the 2009 African protest, the Nigerian Union reached an informal agreement with the Guangzhou government that no Chinese police would be allowed to go inside the Tangqi Market to make arrests. In return, the union promised to discipline the behaviors of undocumented Africans. In December 2009, the Guangzhou police initiated a voluntary repatriation scheme: for two months, undocumented migrants could apply

for exit visas without the risk of imprisonment, and they could also get a discount for the overstay penalty. Instead of conveying the message via official channels, the local police depended on the Nigerian Union and underground Pentecostal churches to pass the information to undocumented migrants (Haugen 2012). By maintaining informal communication channels with undocumented Africans, the local state showed its unwillingness to officially recognize illegal migrants and its strategy of shifting the responsibility of care to the ethnic community.

It is worth noting that the local state's transferring of responsibilities for control and care to migrant organizations is not based on formal recognition of and financial support for the latter. Since there are no nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China specifically targeting foreign migrants, these ethnic organizations function as a self-supporting system outside the domain of the local state. Their interactions with the local state are mainly based on informal personal networks cultivated by charismatic leaders, who usually are well-established businessmen with legally registered businesses. By informally recognizing ethnic leaders' influence and authority within the migrant community, the local state may, to a limited extent, delegate to them part of its responsibilities for immigration control. This informalization of state control (Mathews et al. 2014) is based on compromises between several potentially conflicting interests: the central state's concern with China's benevolent image toward Africa, the local state's desire to revitalize its economy, the central state's lack of guidelines for the legal incorporation of foreign migrants into Chinese society, and the local state's lack of interest and concern for the welfare of undocumented Africans, who are racialized as undesirable foreigners by public media.

What color is the Chinese dream?

Despite the rapid diversification of its international population, China still denies its status as an immigrant country. There is no clear path to

citizenship for foreigners in China. The existing green card system is reserved mainly for a small number of professional foreign migrants with exceptional qualifications. Instead of treating immigration as a separate issue, the 2013 law combines two previous laws, which deal with the regulation of entry and exit of aliens and citizens, respectively. While the new law contains tougher provisions for *sanfei* aliens, it provides little guidance for the integration of foreign migrants. Due to this willful illegibility of immigration issues by the central state, there is no public discussion of immigrant rights and no immigrant advocacy groups. As noted by Matthew Hull, “state control can be extended not only through specification, but through ambiguity, by leaving matters undocumented” (2012: 248). To a certain extent, the Chinese states’ nonrecording strategies toward Africans in Guangzhou echo similar tactics practiced in Romania and Holland, as depicted by Ioana Vrăbiescu and Barak Kalir in this issue. By deliberately keeping one specific group off the record, the states not only ignore their legal rights and welfare, but tacitly endorse antiminority sentiments from the mainstream society.

After President Xi came into power in 2013, different levels of the Chinese state have launched numerous campaigns to promote his vision of the “Chinese dream.” While the exact meaning of the “Chinese dream” remains evasive, Western media has noted a heavy dose of nationalism in Xi’s emphasis on the “Chinese spirit” and the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Kuhn 2013; Patience 2013). As noted by Barry Sautman (1997), the idea of the Chinese nation is an ethnoracial construction that draws heavily from cultural myths of descent such as the dragon, the Yellow Emperor, and the Peking man. To a certain extent, Xi’s vision of the Chinese dream contains a seed of racial nationalism, which functions to reinforce Han chauvinism while excluding ethnic minorities such as Tibetans, Uyghurs, and foreign migrants from the national imaginary (Leibold 2010). It also resonates with the anticolonial and anti-imperialistic connotations of Chinese nationalism in the late nineteenth century, when

the West was constructed as the dominant Other against which the Chinese Self is formulated (Zhao 2004). In terms of Sino-African relations, scholars have noted that China’s emphasis on its continuous aid to Africa not only helps boost the image of a benevolent China to the world, but also promotes feelings of national pride among some of its citizens (Shen 2009). It is important to note that the “Chinese nation” becomes an imaginary not only in the Andersonian (1983) sense but also through the deliberate nonrecording practices of an exclusionary state. While African migrants can be welcomed as friends and guests, there seems to be little opportunity for them to be considered part of the Chinese nation. The various gaps and contradictions in the implementation of the Guangdong Act reveal the tensions between central and local states in terms of immigration control, economic development, anticrime campaigns, antiblack racism, and relations with Muslim minorities. To protect the official rhetoric of Sino-African friendship, the local Guangzhou state has adopted a selectively nonrecording strategy and kept undocumented Africans in a liminal space between legality and illegality. However, there is no clear indication that Africans (and other foreign populations) will be incorporated into the imagined community of the Chinese nation. Instead of promoting the vision of a multicultural society, the Chinese dream remains a powerful political propaganda to uphold the idea of an exclusive Chinese nation.

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Notes

Translations of reference titles are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

1. This figure does not include those on short-term business or sightseeing trips.
2. There is a general conflation of African and black identities in Guangzhou. The Chinese term *heiren* is used by local media and Chinese netizens as a generic term to refer to Africans from a variety of nationalities and backgrounds.
3. Examples of some websites include: http://www.kaixin001.com/repaste/3732666_863144406.html?stat=orrecn_out; <http://club.kdnet.net/dispbb.asp?boardid=33&id=3481225>; <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2721825547>; <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-1072745-1.shtml>; and http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2_2451510_1.html (all accessed 22 June 2016).
4. China currently has 56 ethnic groups.
5. The Canton Fair was inaugurated in 1957 and renamed the Annual China Import and Export Fair in 2007.
6. The overstaying money refers to the fine an alien has to pay for overstaying in China.
7. Personal communication with a city official in Guangzhou.

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