

12-1-2018

Gordon Mathews with Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang. *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Jiangnan Li
Durham University, Jiangnan.li@durham.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Li, Jiangnan (2018) "Gordon Mathews with Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang. *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Gordon Mathews with Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang. *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

The past decades have seen the rapid development of China's economy. Guangzhou—a capital of business and trade in China for a thousand years, the historical gate to south China, and a center of China's manufacturing industry—has, for several decades, attracted hundreds of foreign traders. Among them, Africans have been a large group. Because of the good diplomatic relations between China and African countries, the inclusiveness of the city of Guangzhou, and the considerably high supply of goods produced in Guangzhou, most African traders went to Guangzhou to chase their moneymaking dreams. In recent years, however, with the upgrading of industries throughout China, Guangzhou is no longer as unique as it once was; while it was once referred to as “South China's global marketplace,” it is no longer regarded as the “capital of the third world.” As such, there are fewer African and other foreign traders in Guangzhou than there were only five short years ago.

This book—*The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace*—is an ethnographic work about the life and trade of African entrepreneurs in Guangzhou from about 2006 to about 2014, the time when Guangzhou was accepted as the capital of the third world. In addition, in the text, the author develops his concept of “low-end globalization,” in which individual traders (not corporations or multinational entities), personally piece together trading relationships and pathways, buying a relatively small amounts of goods, often under the radar of the law, sometimes bribing customs agents on different continents, ultimately getting Chinese goods back home to stalls and local street vendors.

How can low-end globalization effectively work in Guangzhou? What will happen to the African traders in the future and in the long term? Following these questions, the author structures his writing in eight chapters, covering eight themes. Chapter One is a general introduction of Guangzhou, foreigners, and foreign places in Guangzhou, as well as an explanation of how the research was done and what the book is about. Chapter Two gives a picture of foreigners in Guangzhou with stories of eight foreigners represented, combing themes such as rich and poor, race, and money, etc. together. Chapter Three reviews the African-Chinese relations of businessmen in Guangzhou. Chapter Four develops the concept of and discusses low-end globalization. Mathews first raised this concept in his ethnographic work in Hong Kong, where southeast Asian traders live in “Chungking Mansions.” Low-end globalization is a concept meant to contrast that of “high-end globalization”—the globalization of multinational corporations and entities, to which ‘globalization’ itself often exclusively refers. Mathews see both the southeastern Asian traders in Hong Kong and African traders in Guangzhou as typifying “low-end globalization,” in which individuals or small trading organizations trade relatively small quantities of goods, normally outside formal trading channels.¹

Chapter Five pays attention to the intersection of legal-illegal in Guangzhou, including issues pertaining to visa and passport management, jailtime and deportation worries, as well as games of cat and mouse played between police and visa- overstayers. Chapter Six continues the discussion of trade, giving attention to logistics agents, middlemen, and cultural

brokers. Chapters Seven and Eight focus on the life of Africans in Guangzhou, describing their beliefs and religion in a foreign city, their romance and love, marriage, and families.

The ethnography was conducted mainly in Xiaobei and Guanguanxi, in Guangzhou, where most of the African traders work and meet, through interviews done by author Gordon Mathews, along with two other researchers, Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang. The three first began interviewing in 2006 and continued until around the end of 2014. Says Mathews, “We have stayed very close to the ground in our interviews, speaking with the people who are unknown.” The aim of the book, according to Mathews, is to shape an accurate portrayal of both low-end globalization in Guangzhou and of African-Chinese and foreign-Chinese relations in China’s most multicultural city. In addition to these aims, the author also hope the book will succeed in reaching a public audience, to help, at least in a small way, to democratize anthropology, to make it comprehensible and interesting to anyone who may want to read it.

To this reader’s understanding, the objective of the author is not to try to make any argument or interpretation based on the story he is telling; rather, he wishes to tell the full truth as he struggled to interpret it, wherever that may lead. It is for this reason that the book is full of ethnographic data throughout the eight chapters but almost entirely lacking any argument or interpretation from the author. The author is trying to provide the reader with ethnographic stories as original as possible while leaving space for the interpretation of the reader—and the wider public—so that conclusions may be drawn from the ethnographic content itself. Given that one of the aims of the author is to democratize anthropology, to attract a larger reader group of the book, in my opinion, the author achieves his objective. This ethnographic work is indeed easy and interesting in reading; readers will easily be able to get the whole picture of life and trade of foreigners in Guangzhou with little background knowledge.

What will happen to African traders in Guangzhou in the future and in the long term? This is a question Mathews raises at the start of the work but ultimately does not answer. It seems to remain unknown what will become of them. In light of China’s upgrading of manufacturing industry across the country, Guangzhou is no longer attracting foreign traders in as great number as it was doing only a decade ago, and most of the African traders are now turning to southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Vietnam for profit. I am looking forward to Mathewa’ future work continuing this topic.

Jiangnan Li
Durham University
Jiangnan.li@durham.ac.uk

Notes

¹ The author did clearly say as much, but it appears that Mathews regards low-end globalization as a means of providing high quality goods—including imitation designer goods—to the poorest continent. The concept appears to accurately describe what is happening in Guangzhou and the third world.