

# I

## A FETCHING DESTINATION

The three of us were gathered around a counter, eyeing pornographic imagery. A Chinese vendor, a veiled-up Muslim lady from Niger, and me. We were standing in a low-lit corridor in the Tianxiu Building in the city of Guangzhou, among a series of mildly shabby market-style stalls piled high with bottles and boxes that bore photos of oiled flesh and lustful eyes promising pleasure and endurance. I and the Chinese man looked on as his Nigerienne customer inspected a box of aphrodisiac pills, its packaging displaying a photo of a man (with what I pray was a prosthetic penis) in session with a naked woman. Seized by embarrassment, my ears grew hot and I developed a phantom itch on my nose. The lady from Niger, however, didn't give a toss. She was here on a shopping mission and had little time to waste on coyness or prudery.

'Many, many,' she told the Chinese seller, using the international phrase for wholesale purchasing. The lady ordered a thousand packets of 'Brother Long Legs', secured a delivery date for the merchandise, then walked off with her friend, chatting away in French.

The Tianxiu Building is a magnet for African wholesale

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buyers. Dotted around me were glass counters stacked with all manner of ‘sexuality enhancing’ products, sold by Chinese people who stood by nonchalantly while I checked out their merchandise. I saw vagina-tightening gels, ‘extra strong delay sprays for long-lasting excitement’ and – most intriguing of all – a ‘high-grade professional female oestrus induction toner’ called Spanish Gold Fly. The packaging of another aphrodisiac had Arabic script printed on it and a photo of a Black man being ‘entertained’ below the waist by two white ladies. I scarcely knew where to put my eyes. The vendors slouched behind their counters and fiddled with their phones.

Very few things surprise Chinese manufacturers and wholesalers. They are the eyes and ears of the consumer universe. They know all our secrets and desires, and produce for them accordingly. They have the low-down on the condom sizes favoured by various nations; they know which toys our children prefer. One third of all Christmas trees are manufactured here in Guangdong Province in southern China.

There is nothing Chinese vendors haven’t seen before. Motivated by an all-consuming desire to make money (this non-Christian nation runs the world’s biggest Bible printing press, after all), they were unoffended by my camera and time-wasting inquiries. So long as they made sales at some point in the day I was allowed to snoop, prod and ogle to my heart’s content.

And so I checked out ‘hip lift’ massage creams and hair wigs and Malaysian hair weaves. Some of the Chinese vendors had adopted the African method of hissing to get my attention – ‘Hello, my sista,’ they said, while showing

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me buttock-enhancing yansh pads ('yansh' means buttocks in Nigerian slang) and packets of ginseng tea, formulated to strengthen the kidneys, supposedly.

The second floor was the place to buy underwear. Some of the packaging displayed faces of famous footballers that had been photoshopped onto Y-front-clad torsos: an improbably buff Zinedine Zidane showed off his bulge. Buck-toothed Ronaldinho looked especially pleased to be wearing his 100 per cent combed cotton singlet. David Beckham, meanwhile, sizzled in a white vest and briefs, his left hand cupping his crotch. But by far my favourite was the 'Black Power Obama Collection' – a pack of men's underpants decorated with a photo of America's finest president, fingers on chin, eyes gazing eruditely into the distance. In the free-for-all that is the China–Africa small commodity trade, matters of trademark protection and image rights do not enter the equation. Just shift the product.

In 2012 China sold billions of dollars' worth of products to Africa, from bridges and hospitals to flat-screen TVs, wheelchairs, crutches, toilets, sofas, clothes and medical equipment. The country is Africa's largest trading partner, in a relationship that has blossomed since the 1950s when China tried to create ideological solidarity with African countries in order to promote Chinese-style communism and counter Taiwanese, American and Russian influence during the Cold War. China supported independent movements in Africa, provided weapons and military training, and invited African students to study at Chinese universities.

In the 1970s China's then premier, Deng Xiaoping, opened up the country's communist economy to the world. Deng turned the southern province of Guangdong into a

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free enterprise and manufacturing zone, with Guangzhou as its wholesale and retail centre. Such reforms went against communist ideals, Deng acknowledged, but after the poverty of the Cultural Revolution, the country had to make compromises in order to progress. ‘When you open the window,’ he proclaimed, ‘flies come in.’

By the 2000s, China provided huge loans to Africa when the IMF wouldn’t. It built infrastructure projects to replace the haggard modernist monoliths that sprouted in Africa during oil booms and colonial times, plus new bridges, highways, airports, stadiums and presidential palaces. The poorest countries were granted zero tariffs on a sizeable chunk of their exports to China, and in turn, Africans were allowed to go to China and buy the small commodities that our low-manufacturing economies didn’t make or had stopped making. Africans began travelling to China, some of them traders on temporary visits, others settling there permanently in what is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of global migration. For some, this relationship between China and Africa signified the start of a post-colonial epoch, free of Western mediation. No more finger-wagging ‘wypipo’ on their civilising missions. The Middle Kingdom’s refusal to criticise or moralise was music to the ears of the sensitive kleptocrats in Africa. Approving African commentators overlooked the fact that Western governments were under pressure from ethics-minded voters to withhold financial support to foreign governments perceived in those countries as having poor human rights’ records. China has no voters to answer to, no human rights standard to maintain; when it offered money without the usual strings, some commentators saw a refreshing simplicity in this deal, this New Amorality.

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What China also offered was a chance for Africans to live within its borders or visit on short-term visas in order to buy small commodities and do other business. While Europe closed its doors (the UK even refused entry to a Nigerian woman wanting to donate a kidney to her dying sister), China became a place Africans could visit easily and legitimately. I remember my amazement when I first heard about Africans living over there in the mid-2000s. It seemed such an incongruous concept. Though I was well-travelled, many of the countries I had visited were on the 'Atlantic Rim', where connections between Africa and Europe and the Americas were woven by history and colonialism, which brought cross-pollination and syncretism of religion and language and music: the gods of Brazil's Candomble religion still retain the original names of the Yoruba gods in Nigeria; pidgin English, the creole tongue of Africa, contains words like *pikin* for 'child', which derives from the Portuguese *pequeno* ('small'). It's in our music, those African-American soul melodies with their hints of African call and response, performed in a relatable diatonic music scale. China, by contrast, was a separate and nebulous universe, with its traditional pentatonic music scale and impossible pictographic writing system. The closest I came to China was through school, an all-girls boarding school on England's south coast, which was a magnet for pupils from Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, many of them ethnic Chinese. They taught me words and concepts like *feng shui* and gave exciting accounts of their end-of-term flights to Hong Kong and the aircrafts' precarious landings at Kai Tak airport through a forest of skyscrapers, flying so close to the buildings that one could see people

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doing the dishes. The following term the girls would bring back delicious packet noodles, which I would beg to buy off them. They taught me how to use chopsticks, though everyone seemed to have a different technique. Tired of watching me struggle, Pia from Hong Kong snatched the sticks out of my hand and fed me herself, thrusting the chopsticks so far into my mouth I gagged and noodles came tumbling out in giggling fits. After her holidays back home in Singapore, Christabelle would celebrate her suntan, stroking her bronzed skin with pride. Some girls had English accents and liked hip-hop as much as I did, and humped the floor like the rest of us when Vanilla Ice's 'Ice Ice Baby' came on the radio. They studied European languages and sang Handel's *Messiah* in choir, and went on to attend British universities. They told me things about Causeway Bay and Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. But mainland China rarely came up in any conversations that I can remember.

The country held a certain mystery. It lacked the accessibility and familiarity of Thailand or Vietnam. People could travel to Southeast Asia without stepping out of their comfort zone, but venturing behind China's Bamboo Curtain required a certain boldness and concentration of mind, especially in the pre-smartphone era. I wanted to experience the country and detangle my mental collage of Burberry raincoats, army tanks, Tiger Moms, modern skyscrapers, government restrictions, economic liberalism, harsh factory conditions and even harsher hair fringes.

My first encounter with a mainlander had done nothing to change the air of mystery. I was at Columbia University in New York in 2000. During an orientation session at my

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halls of residence everybody was asked to get into pairs and listen to one another's biographies, before relaying their partner's to everyone else in the room. It was supposed to be an ice-breaking conversational exercise, but while the other pairs chatted away genially my Chinese partner whipped out her notepad and took down my age, name and provenance as if she were a cop placing me under arrest.

From what I could see, mainland China had a disdain for certain foreign cultures and was a stranger to political correctness. Traditionally it believed itself to be the 'Middle Kingdom', lying at the centre of the known universe; its old-school palaeontologists theorised that Chinese people evolved separately from the rest of humanity. Its citizens dislike dark skin so much they virtually mummify themselves to avoid getting suntans. Their social media app, WeChat, translates the term *hei gui/hak gwei* ('black ghost', or 'devil') to 'nigger', even though *bai gui/gweilo* is simply translated to 'white ghost'. What was life like for Africans living in a society like this? How did Africans navigate it? I wanted to meet these immigrants. I also wanted to learn more about mainland China itself and see if the frequently mentioned 'developmental parallels' between Africa and China were valid. Could there ever be a fusion of African and Chinese culture? If so, I couldn't picture it.

In my lifetime, I had encountered infinite permutations of the immigrant experience, from Lebanese people in Guinea, to Nigerians who live in Alaska or speak with Scottish brogues. In our economically liberalised and interwoven world, the exotic 'ethnic enclave' has lost its novelty to an extent. But Africans living in China still held a certain intrigue, this Sino-African fault line a relatively new and

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unlikely bumping of cultural tectonic plates. I wanted to observe that fault line up close and get first-hand experience of their lives as *hei gui*. Without knowing anybody in Guangzhou, I boarded a plane to Hong Kong and took off into the unknown.

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Having arrived in Hong Kong, I took a train from Hung Hom station in the Kowloon area to Guangzhou in mainland China. My neighbouring passenger, probably a seasoned traveller on this route, closed the window blinds against the lowering sun and blocked my views of the landscape. I wasn't happy about making such a blind entry into China, but in hindsight the lack of a visual preview made the arrival more impactful.

At Guangzhou East railway station, I emerged onto a dimly lit concrete platform and was hit by an indefinable aroma – something spicy clogging the air, smelling unlike anything I was familiar with. At immigration, a uniformed guard who was significantly younger than me grabbed my attention with a loud clap of his hands and pointed sharply to the correct queue. Smarting at his youth and authoritarian manner, I moved to the line on the far side of the room. Minutes later, I emerged from the station and was dazzled by what I saw. Tall glass buildings, shiny cars, clean, wide roads regulated by traffic lights; a McDonald's gleamed across the intersection opposite me; the iconic Canton Tower, a sensual hourglass structure, loomed futuristically in the distance, all 604 metres of it, against a purple and orange sunset that lent a foreign-planet hue to this cityscape.

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Guangzhou's newness was uniform and impressive, and it spoke of a concerted master plan; of a sleeping dragon that had woken up and wiped the crust from its eyes. Frankly, it made a mockery of the notion of any 'developmental parallels' between China and Africa (which, of course, is not a country but matches China in terms of population size).

I settled into a hotel near Ximenkou metro station in the Yuexiu district. When dinnertime came, I stepped out onto the street and inhaled that same aroma. Here the buildings were older-looking, with hardware shops and small restaurants beneath porticos. The foreignness of it all made me want to return to bed and curl up, but hunger has a way of making you adventurous.

I picked out the only restaurant on my street that was still open at 10.30 p.m. Its menu was a million Chinese characters floating in front of my eyes. The only word I knew was 'umgoi', Cantonese for 'thank you'. Pride set in, and I stared at that sea of characters with an affected air of familiarity.

My random selection turned out to be balls of indeterminate meat in a salty soup. A two-year-old girl sitting nearby took one look at my African features and immediately burst into tears (my silver puffer jacket probably added to the extraterrestrial look). I waved at her. When her mother encouraged her to wave back, the toddler paused to observe me properly and her grimace softened into befuddlement as she recognised the humanness of my smile.

Thirty years ago, the kid's mother might also have been horrified by the sight of me. When Africans settled here in the early 2000s, the Chinese thought they 'smelled bad'. Not ones for subtlety, they lurched sideways when an African passed them on the street and plunged their noses in their

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shirt collars. Some would touch the immigrants and ask, with genuine innocence, 'Why are you black?'

One of the earliest official reports of Africans (diplomats and students aside) coming to China was a group of Kenyan acrobats who had been sent there for training at the request of the Kenyan president, Daniel arap Moi. And, in 1973, China played the US basketball team in an exhibition match in Beijing. In his memoirs the first US Consul General in China, Richard L. Williams, described the moment the Chinese crowd saw a Black person for the first time. The American team's two white players entered the court first, to regular applause. But when the first of the Black players emerged, with his gangly brown limbs and big Afro hair, eighteen thousand Chinese spectators gasped in what Williams dubbed 'the largest mass inhalation ever recorded'.

The current immigration wave (aside from foreign students) began in the 1990s when Malian Muslims arrived in Guangzhou. Some of them had studied in China and decided to stay in the country after graduation. They settled in the Xiaobei neighbourhood, partly because they could buy halal meat from butchers' run by the Uighurs, ethnic Muslims from Xinjiang Province in the northwest.

By 2008, up to twenty thousand Africans were thought to be living in Guangzhou, though nobody knows the exact figures. The biggest concentration of sub-Saharanans is still in Xiaobei and the neighbouring Sanyuanli district, in an area known collectively (by the media, at least) as 'Chocolate City'.

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I wanted to meet some Africans and speak to them, to find out more about their lives in China. So next morning I headed to Xiaobei, where the Tianxiu Building stands. Located by the inner ring road, the building is the ultimate symbol of African China, the Eiffel of the African Orient. Next to it, on the pedestrian bridge, a Chinese photographer was taking photos of Africans posing in front of the building and then selling them the images. She displayed some photographs on easels, male faces grinning at proud angles. The Tianxiu's metallic façade – blue and pink and shimmering with '80s-style brashness – was, to be frank, an ugly thing, but celebrating such a backdrop was fitting for those on the margins of the global economy. When your passport is disdained by consulates the world over, entering China via the front door is the attainment of an otherwise impossible mobility.

The photographer was a short and sprightly woman with a ponytail and parka. The briefest of eye contact was all the prompting she needed to rope me in to posing in front of the building. I didn't resist. Smiling and enthusiastic, she scurried between various staircases and motioned for me to stand this way and that, hands in my pockets, sideways to the camera, etc. My dignity was plummeting with every shot. Still, if I was to look cheesy anywhere on earth then let it be here where nobody knew me. Jaws clenched, I grinned at her lens.

The woman hurried to an ancient-looking printer sitting on a small stand. While it cranked out the prints, a newspaper reporter wandered over, hoping to interview me for a story about Africans in Guangzhou. Born in Nigeria, I told her. British citizen. And a tourist . . . sort of. I didn't fit her desired profile, so she turned to the photographer for a chat

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instead. Translation: business was down significantly from the previous year. Fewer Africans were coming to Guangzhou.

Minutes later, the photographer handed over the finished low-res prints, which I bought. My face grinned from beneath the hood of my puffer jacket. I looked like any other African immigrant, excited to have reached this destination, ready for this new world, this new experience.

Searching for Africans to talk to, I walked deeper into Xiaobei. The neighbourhood lies next to a large concrete flyover, a spaghetti knot of elevated walkways surrounded by brutalist seventies architecture. On the pedestrian bridge, two dozen Han Chinese moneychangers wielded bricks of cash (said to be scattered with counterfeit notes) and calculated sums on their phones while offering me their services. A few feet away, a Muslim man in a white kufi hat, his limbs splayed grotesquely at all angles beneath him, begged for money. His Muslim brethren, a *mélange* of kaftaned Turks, Arabs, Pakistanis, Africans and Uighurs fresh from Friday prayers, sauntered past his empty collection bucket.

Friday prayers had just finished, and I was met by the sight of a dozen Uighur men walking slowly along the streets. They were a handsome group, with their Chinese epicanthic eyes and hybrid faces of Central Asia and Persia, looking beautiful in their white thawbs and doppas.

Somewhere in this concrete jungle was the Donfranc Hotel, which is popular with Africans. I was considering moving there and wanted to inspect its rooms, but first I needed to find it. Since Google and its maps are banned in China, the natural thing to do was to ask Africans for directions. But there was something different about the sub-Saharanans here. Overwhelmingly male, they didn't stop

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to offer me unsolicited help as normally happens on the home continent. There was none of the friendly idleness, the sitting on street chairs watching the world go by; no snapping of fingers summoning me to deliver a chat-up line. Such irritating attention would have come in handy now, but people were busy. They were on their phones, counting cash, eyeing merchandise, not wanting to be inconvenienced. Their eyes told me to fuck off. Some even shook their heads pre-emptively as I approached them. Those who did stop to talk turned out to be mostly Francophone, Muslim, somewhat aloof with women and impatient with my rusty French. A nice Ivoirian man finally pointed me in the right direction.

I walked beneath an elevated walkway and emerged on Zhijie Baohan Xiatangxi. Numerous Black people were walking the street. The government's immigration anxiety expressed itself in the form of a police station with sentry post and a swing arm barrier for cars. It didn't take me too long to find the Donfranc Hotel. All the guests in the lobby were Black. Such a melanin-rich environment is clearly too much to handle for some Chinese folks, who articulate their discontent with a frankness bordering on the comical. One online review of the Donfranc, Google-translated, is bluntly titled 'Here are blacks'. Another reviewer doesn't mince words either: 'The hotel facilities are obsolete . . . the rooms are dirty, dimly lit, with no windows inside . . . Guests predominantly black . . .'

I entered the lobby. To my right was a line of Caucasian mannequins dressed in African garb and headscarves. A neon exchange-rate screen hung on the wall and beneath it sat two Chinese receptionists, looking moodier than the

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moodiest of Nollywood actresses and speaking transactional English and French. The long-haired one dangled a key from her limp wrist. I took it and inspected the room upstairs. Though the accommodation didn't deserve reviews as harsh as some of those found online, the overall vibe still did not impress; I would not be moving here. In the elevator back down, I tried striking up conversation with a tall West African man dressed in shiny robes, but he just frowned at me with disgusted eyes and flared nostrils.

Xiaobei was proving a tough nut to crack, for reasons I came to understand through an email from a Chinese academic contact:

Xiao Bei Lu and Xia Tang are the places where the African immigrants live and work. I suggest that you rent a place in that area and live for a while, then you can slowly go into the communities. They are very cautious people.

Christians and Muslims are living separately, so are the drug dealers.

Next door to the Donfranc Hotel was the Overseas Trading Mall, another small commodities market frequented by Africans. I bought a beautiful fake Gucci watch and a small rucksack, then floated around the neighbourhood for an hour, not knowing what to do with myself. Guangzhou is an industrial city, and this district was wholesale-oriented, where interactions were more financial than anything else. Unless you had a job or an export business there was little to see and do here. Everything was on sale.

I could think of no pretext to talk to people, and my aimlessness exposed the lie that I was a tourist. Deflated, I

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headed to the neighbouring district of Sanyuanli a couple of miles to the west of Xiaobei, where the English-speaking Africans were concentrated.

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I entered the subway station. It was new and metallic and shiny, bilingual signs everywhere. The loudspeaker played muzak, a strangely mournful xylophone-sounding instrument that repeated the same two-bar arpeggio all day. Somehow the uniformed staff tolerated it.

Among the passengers I could pick out Chinese migrants from the countryside, based on certain hairstyles and clothes. One could gauge their freshness by the way in which they navigated the station. The most recent newcomers hesitated at the top of the escalators, mincing gingerly onto the moving steps in what was a kind of visual metaphor for China's conveyor belt of economic progress. And when the escalator paused momentarily, they stood at the top, unsure whether to follow my lead and walk down the stationary steps instead.

Although Guangzhou's underground train system was expanded to accommodate the 2010 Asian Games, it is already bursting at the seams. At the platform level I joined the thick rush-hour crowd. As the train doors opened, people rushed towards the carriage before the passengers had a chance to disembark, one tide of humanity pushing back the opposing tide. In London, such a scrum would spark outrage, but people here weren't angry – they simply pushed one another aside as if they were parting tree branches on a forest excursion. Competition in most of life is a given here. You must fight for what you want.

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Inside the carriage, when seats became available, passengers were shockingly quick on the draw to bag them. I, the undisputed champion of London Underground train seat-grabbing, met my match in the citizens of Guangzhou. Even the older passengers were competitive. What they lacked in speed they made up for in outright shamelessness, lunging with a haste that would be considered indecent anywhere else in the world. Even middle-aged men raced against teenage girls, chivalry be damned.

Tempting as it was to do the same, I couldn't bring myself to 'go native'. When a lady beat me to yet another seat she sat back and looked me straight in the eye without a flicker of guilt. And why not? She was a worthy winner. I resolved to raise my game.

The train's looped handholds dangled by my temples. For the first time in my life I could see above many of the standing passengers' heads, even though I'm only five foot five tall. At the next stop, two six-foot-plus Senegalese-looking men stooped to board the train and made Lilliputians out of all of us.

Passengers texted on their phones, drawing squiggly lines that were converted into Chinese characters via the predictive function. This sea of black-haired heads bowed in concentration was the quintessential twenty-first century resting pose – and the enemy of candid photography.

Back on street level, I walked through the Sanyuanli district where almost every square foot of street was dedicated to commerce. Men demoed toy drones and flashing objects I couldn't identify, and at the international watch market, I ogled a glittering sea of Bulgari, Diesel, Versace and Michael Kors knock-off pieces. 'For lady or man?' sellers asked me, their mouths full of food. They lifted their noodle

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bowls from the top of the glass display cabinets to show huge watch faces encrusted with diamante.

I finally reached the busy Guangyuanxi Road, the hub of African activity. This was the more Anglophone half of Chocolate City. Almost immediately there was more eye contact, more people saying hello to me and doing so in Nigerian accents. Most of them were of the Igbo ethnic group and therefore of Christian background.

I was among my compatriots.

The smell of Chinese-brand cigarettes and egg waffles thickened the air. Local African residents leaned languidly against the railings while their fellow sub-Saharanans – the visiting traders – loaded boxes into taxis with contrasting verve. Two Black men sat on roadside stools getting their shoes shined by Chinese women. Chinese vendors and local policemen shared these streets with Africans, a familiarity that bred a mix of affection and contempt. I would catch one police officer glaring at people, while another cop exchanged smiled greetings and gently stroked the cheek of a Black man as he passed him.

Rickshaws and motorcycle taxis weaved past cheap shop hoardings and people selling corn-on-the-cob from wheelbarrows. Two Chinese men unloaded African yams from a van. One Chinese-run restaurant was unimaginatively named Africa Restaurant, a half-arsed simulacrum containing not much actual African cuisine. The seventies buildings, the Anglophone shop hoardings, the concrete flyover colonised by creeping vines, resembled many a city in Africa. A railway line bisected the street from below.

Nearby stood Canaan Market, where Africans come to buy clothes, shoes and sports apparel. The market was in a

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large, knackered building; its damp, cavernous air was filled with the screech of adhesive tape being wrapped around cardboard boxes. It was a bazaar of garishness: manning the corridors were white mannequins – fibreglass Vikings modelling kaftans and kufi hats; blue-eyed plastic children wearing faux-gold Africa-shaped pendants and Gucci knock-off T-shirts festooned with the kind of glitter that exfoliates your flesh on contact.

Canaan Market, and Chocolate City as a whole, was a real estate cast-off in itself. The market was built in 1990 as a leather-trading centre, which never took off. Derelict and forlorn, the area became a haven for Chinese drug dealers and was earmarked for demolition, but in 2003 the local authorities decided to designate it as a jeans market for African buyers and sellers. By 2007 the trade by sub-Saharanans was worth US\$10 million a year and breathed life into the local economy.

Guangzhou's factories clothed a substantial portion of Africa. This was the source of the sub-Saharan textile market collapse. Nigeria banned foreign importation of textiles in 2002, but still they come from China thanks to bribery at customs, undercutting local textile production.

I could see the stalls diagonally opposite Canaan Market, run by friendly Cantonese ladies. The sight of them handling piles of African waxed prints was, to my eyes, as culturally transgressive as those male shop assistants who handle ladies' underwear in Saudi lingerie shops.

Shoes and clothes were spread out on mats on the pavements, going for prices so low they permanently redefined the term 'bargain'. I bought a pair of sliders for US\$1.50.

A London-based Nigerian lady told me she was looking

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for high-tops for her teenage son but she was worried about buying the wrong trainers. 'He will say I have embarrassed him,' she smiled as she examined the midsole and trimmings. Certain trainers had 'Nkie', not 'Nike', printed on their sides. Some Chinese manufacturers don't care about spelling – they simply like the Roman alphabet because its variety of fonts allows for more artistic expression, unlike Chinese characters.

African buyers haggled with the Chinese for this stuff in a process that could be fraught at times. I witnessed heated face-offs, arms flung skywards in anger, due mainly to cultural differences. In Africa, bartering is an art form, performed with banter and perhaps a smile.

'Nigerian market woman will pet you,' one Nigerian man told me. 'She will tell you why it is costing this much – the trouble with her business . . . The Chinese? They just charge you.'

It was a cross-cultural misunderstanding. Africans assume that a Chinese person's initial asking price is far above the real price, when in actual fact the Chinese don't start particularly high. They cannot understand why Africans ask for prices below the bottom line. The slightest hint of a negotiation sent certain Guangzhou vendors into a rage. '*Mafan!*' they cried. 'Troublesome!'

I got a first-hand taste of this at a shop that sold rucksacks. When I requested a discount for one item, the shopkeeper reacted as if I had just pinched her arse. She was scary looking too: her fringe and pollution mask combined to cover her entire face save for two disgusted eyes. She waved me away with shocking ferocity, her calculator falling from her hand and clattering on the counter. End of discussion. I wasn't even allowed to improve my offer.

I walked on.

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There was nothing the Chinese didn't produce and sell, it seemed. Even Nigerian election materials were being manufactured and sold here. Shop windows were plastered with election bunting for Nigeria's two biggest political parties; bracelets proclaiming 'So-and-so 4 Governor'; stickers of election hopefuls like Charles Kenechi Ugwu, whose face tilted righteously above the words: 'The Lord's Chosen . . . Divine gift to Nsukka people'. Rumour has it that the ballot papers for one of Kenya's general elections were delivered to Nairobi from the Chinese printers with Xs already marked in the box for the ruling party.

Next to the election paraphernalia were Nigerian police uniforms and badges on display. To my surprise, the vendor gave me prices on request. At that moment I realised I could clothe my own fake police force if I wanted to (police imposters are a real problem in Nigeria, to the extent that every policeman's name tag now has to be woven into his or her shirt to counter such fraud). One wholesale order – no questions asked – was all I needed to 'establish my authority' on the streets of Lagos or Port Harcourt. Which was as amusing as it was alarming. That the apparel of such a crucial branch of Nigerian governance could be sold so casually in Guangzhou spoke volumes about the power imbalance between China and my mother continent. Across Africa, the Chinese have bought up huge tracts of farmland and mining concessions with the consent of the national leaders, but in China foreigners aren't allowed majority ownership of even the smallest hole-in-the-wall food outlet.

I stepped out onto the street again. A trio of Nigerian 'market women' walked past, wearing boubous and carrying bags of merchandise on their heads. They had curly-mop

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hair weaves, eyebrows like painted caterpillars, dark lips contrasting ghoulishly against bleached skin. These ladies negotiated the streets of Guangzhou with the blinkered nonchalance of the business traveller. The vision of them sauntering along the road could easily be transposed to their ancestral villages where, like their forebears, they might have trekked several miles to fetch water – a time-consuming task that drains productivity. Instead, they had ‘trekked’ halfway round the world to Guangzhou. It seemed a long way to go to fetch life’s everyday items.

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‘I jealous these people.’ Leo shook his head. We were standing further down that same Guangyuanxi Road, surveying the buses, the swept streets and proper sidewalks, free of open drainage. Neon was everywhere, supported by a reliable electricity supply. And yet another McDonald’s.

Leo was a tall, middle-aged retailer from Lagos, Nigeria, and was in town to stock up on clothes. I had bumped into him and we proceeded to do what Nigerians always do when in other countries – grumble about Nigeria.

‘What this country has and we do not have in our country is quite enormous,’ Leo said. ‘Anywhere you want to travel in this country you can do that with this train. About five years ago it was not like this here,’ he pointed to the built-up shops nearby. ‘Even three years ago, it was not like this here. This country has a reserve of, I think, thirty trillion US dollars. Enormous wealth. The US don’t even have it.’

We observed our surroundings with a clenched admiration. In the 1950s, Mao Zedong plunged the country into

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famine with communist agricultural policies under a Cultural Revolution that killed millions and damaged thousands of years of civilisation through state-sponsored destruction of antiquities. Around that time, countries like Nigeria had hopes for a bright future, and Africans studying in China in the 1960s sniffed at the drop in living standards. How the tables have turned.

Leo stayed in Guangzhou for a month at a time, communicating with wholesalers in ‘commercial Chinese’ (‘how much’, ‘what colour’, ‘which size’). He shared twenty- or forty-foot shipping containers with other established Nigerian business owners. This was not a game for novices. Buying products that are so subject to personal taste and faddism did not pose a personal risk for Leo. He had his ear on the ground, a close relationship with his customer base. Unlike large-scale Western buyers, African buyers don’t dictate fashions – they satisfy their customers’ expressed wishes, meaning that Leo rarely suffered dead inventory, which is the scourge of big buyers. Everything gets shifted eventually.

It costs at least £5,000 to fly to Guangzhou, fill a container with goods and ship it back to the UK or Nigeria. Providing the exporter sold all their merchandise and their currency behaved itself against the dollar, they would make a profit. It seemed a pity that Leo should come this far for cheap clothes when Nigeria once had its own textile industry.

‘Why can the Chinese do this and Nigerians won’t?’ I asked.

‘This country, they love their country,’ he said. ‘They are very resilient, very hardworking. They want to improve

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their country. They want to do everything to make sure that their country moves forward. Our country, we don't love our country. People at the head, they loot the fund of you and me and put it in their pocket. Somebody who is doing that . . . is that person patriotic? Never. He never loves his country. He only loves himself. Wants to feed himself only. But here, if they ever find you in corruption at whatever level, you're going to be jailed. Even your relations who enjoyed that money. So they don't ever, ever encourage corruption. It is not common here the way it is in Nigeria.' Leo kissed his teeth. 'It's a very big shame.'

Leo was being too kind to China. Corruption *is* a problem here, but it doesn't cannibalise the national infrastructure to the extent that it does in Nigeria. Chinese-American China specialist Minxin Pei reckons Chinese kickbacks, bribery, theft and waste of public funds account for 3 per cent of GDP. President Xi Jinping dishes out punishment for corruption, though it tends to be to provincial and local-level minions rather than those in the top tier. Between 2013 and 2016, about one million officials were punished for bribery, abuse of power or incompetence. A few of those were top ministers, although some critics claim these punishments were the premier's way of eliminating his rivals, a purge masquerading as virtue. In 2022, China punished more than 600,000 officials for 'violating Communist Party discipline and laws,' the majority of them being lower-level officials in farming communities. Only thirty-six higher-level provincial party cadres and cabinet-level officials were involved in misconduct cases.

Then there is the concept of *guanxi*, a fundamental feature of Chinese culture. It's a system that emphasises obligations

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and reciprocity between people, and is built over time through social exchanges and mutual favours. By establishing this type of relationship with someone, the other party is implicitly agreeing to reciprocate when the need arises. It goes without saying that, in a political or corporate context, the line between *guanxi* and corruption becomes blurred.

I parted ways with Leo and continued down the street, past a sex shop and the nail salons. Sanyuanli's pavements were lightly littered with calling cards of cargo handlers and companies that teach 'business Chinese' to African clients. These displayed stock Chinese phrases that clothing manufacturers would use on their African clients:

'This price is only for the old friend'

'We have a factory there is no middle man'

'Quality is as good as the original goods'

Missing from this list are phrases such as 'You are cheating me', or 'I want my money back', or 'This is not the merchandise I requested', or 'You said you would deliver it in one week, not two!' Such phrases would have come in handy for the Ghanaian lady I saw in the lobby of the Tongtong hotel further along the Guangyuanxi Road. Standing in front of a mountain of Ghana Must Go bags, she wore an elegant African print dress and looked supremely pissed off.

'They told me the things will be ready,' she grumbled in a gravelly voice. 'Now they are saying two more weeks!'

It was a common story, wholesalers misleading customers about availability. Akua now had to spend an extra fortnight's hotel accommodation in Guangzhou. This was one of the reasons people overstayed their visas. One month is not

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enough to check merchandise, visit factories, deal with shipping agents and complete one's business transaction.

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I moved to a hotel in the Haizhu district towards the southern end of the city centre. The receptionist took down my passport details and searched for my visa as if he were an airport immigration official. To his left was a bank of screens, monitoring activities around the hotel. From where I was standing some of the images looked like bedrooms. Perhaps wholesale surveillance of citizens was so normalised it extended to hotels? Would there be hidden cameras in my room too? I decided to throw caution to the wind; at the price offered the room was too good to turn down, hidden cameras or not. In the bathroom, my toilet had an Apple logo for a flush, which was either a mindless piece of decoration, or a big fuck you to US intellectual property laws. Either way it brightened up my day.

The next morning I decided to explore other parts of Guangzhou, beyond Sanyuanli. I walked through the Ximenkou and Haizhu districts, along streets that were covered by overhanging buildings, designed to protect the pavements from monsoon rains. From the main roads' advertising billboards, male models stared down at me. They were big-eyed and square-jawed, and their female counterparts wore white foundation and European-pink blusher which clashed with their jet-black hair. Even in the twenty-first century, the parasol skin tones of housebound aristocrats are still considered more attractive than the paddy peasant suntan.