

# **We Are what We Eat: Food in the Process of Community Formation and Identity Shaping among African Traders in Guangzhou and Yiwu**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we analyze two African communities in Guangzhou and Yiwu, China, arguing that among Guangzhou Africans on the one hand, Black Africans, particularly West Africans, have a tighter community and interact more with each other than Black Africans in Yiwu. On the other hand, Maghrebian Africans in Yiwu have a tighter community and maintain a more cohesive interaction than their counterparts in Guangzhou. Evidence for this characterization of the communities comes from food and communal food-eating habits. There are hardly any West African restaurants in Yiwu while there is an abundance of West African and other Black African restaurants in Guangzhou where there is more community patronage. In contrast, there are more concentrations of North African restaurants in Yiwu than in Guangzhou. We discuss the crucial role food and food-making and eating places play in providing structures and avenues for community bonding to promote community formation and community identity shaping.

## **Keywords**

community formation, identity shaping among Africans in China, African food, Guangzhou, Yiwu

## **Résumé**

Dans cet article, nous analysons 2 communautés africaines: à Guangzhou et à Yiwu, en Chine. Nous soutenons que parmi les Africains de Guangzhou, ceux provenant d'Afrique noire, et particulièrement d'Afrique de l'Ouest, ont une plus grande cohérence communautaire et interagissent plus entre eux que ceux de Yiwu. Par contre, les Africains maghrébins de Yiwu ont une communauté plus hermétique et maintiennent une interaction plus cohésive que leurs homologues de Guangzhou. Le signe de cette caractérisation des communautés s'observe via l'alimentation et des usages communautaires en matière d'alimentation. Il n'y a presque pas de restaurants ouest-africains à Yiwu, tandis qu'il y en a beaucoup à Guangzhou, ainsi que d'autres restaurants d'Afrique noire. Il y a donc plus de patronage communautaire dans cette ville. Par contre, il y a

une plus grande concentration de restaurants nord-africains à Yiwu qu'à Guangzhou. Nous évoquons le rôle crucial que jouent la nourriture, la cuisine et les lieux d'alimentation dans les structures et les possibilités à disposition pour le tissage d'un lien communautaire qui permet la formation d'une communauté et le façonnement d'une identité communautaire.

#### **Mots-clés**

formation communauté, formation identité parmi les Africains de Chine, nourriture africaine, Guangzhou, Yiwu

### **Introduction**

Since the turn of the millennium, the African presence in China has been a growing phenomenon. From around 1997, we have witnessed substantial numbers of Africans visiting and settling, mostly in southern Chinese cities such as Hong Kong (Bodomo 2007), Macau (Bodomo and Silva 2012), Guangzhou (Bodomo 2010; Li et al. 2009; Bertocello and Bredeloup 2007) and Yiwu (Bodomo 2012; Bodomo and Ma 2010). Of course, historically, Africans have been found in China (Rashidi and van Sertima 1995; Wyatt 2009), but the numbers have never been as substantial as we witnessed from 1997 onwards for three main reasons. First, in 1997, following the Asian Financial Crisis (Mitton 2002), African migrant traders in neighboring countries such as Thailand and Indonesia (which were most heavily affected) began to move into southern Chinese cities such as Hong Kong and Guangzhou which were the least affected in the region in order to continue with their trading activities of buying goods from Asia and sending them back to Africa to sell them for a profit. Second, this process was more intensified and more facilitated by China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Third, the turn of the millennium brought in new dynamics in terms of China's engagement with Africa. As the Chinese economy began to grow at a fast pace it needed new sources of energy to fuel this rapidly growing economy, and it looked to Africa which has vast reserves of natural resources such as oil, gold, minerals, and diamonds. As these government-to-government relations increased at the political and economic levels, so did people-to-people relations, resulting in an increased migration to Africa by ordinary Chinese and an increased migration to China by ordinary Africans. Chinese in Africa are now estimated to number about two million while Africans in China are estimated to number about half a million. Africans can now be found in most major Chinese cities. Indeed, African Diaspora communities are beginning to evolve in most parts of China, particularly in

the urban centers, and this phenomenon is also being documented by various scholars (e.g. Bertonecello and Bredeloup 2007; Bredeloup, this volume; Li Zhigang et al. 2009; Li, this volume; Le Bail 2009; Bodomo 2007; 2009A; 2009B; 2010; Bodomo and Ma 2010; Bodomo and Silva 2012, among others). These works already show that West Africans, especially Nigerians, are mostly found in Guangzhou, even though a rising number of Africans from East and Central Africa are also found there. The estimates of Africans in Guangzhou, which boasts the largest African community in China, vary between 20,000 and 150,000. Africans in China as a whole are estimated to number about half a million. An important issue at stake is to research the nature of these communities, focusing on some of the factors that help Africans form communities and shape their identities (Bodomo and Ma 2010; Bodomo and Silva 2012). There may be many factors that help shape community formation, but in this paper we focus on the role of food and food-making places in this process of community formation in the context of the African Diaspora in China. We focus on two settlements, Guangzhou in Guangdong province and Yiwu in Zhejiang province, two contrasting African settlements in various respects, in order to show the distinguishing roles of food and food-making places in this intricate process of community formation and identity shaping. The central problem that this paper sets out to investigate is how the role of restaurants/places for eating food as important nodes for the communal life of Africans in Chinese society can be understood. What are the factors that make these food-places play an important role for Africans to maintain or even shape an identity as Africans living in China? These questions are encapsulated in a theory of cross-cultural communication and identity shaping we outline in section 3.

To clearly delineate the situational context of these Africans, we describe, compare, and contrast the two major locations where we interviewed these Africans. As we show in section 2 and at various places in the paper, the Guangzhou and Yiwu African communities differ and contrast in terms of size, cosmopolitanism, racialism, and religious composition, but at the same time they are also similar in many respects since they are both migrant African communities involved in trade, and undergo the same or similar kinds of host reactions to their presence in China. We will outline all these differences and then concentrate on the differences in degrees of community formation and cohesiveness, towards answering the question: is there a correlation between the size and vibrancy of an ethnic migrant community with the number and quality of its ethnic restaurants in a particular location? Far from being an egg and chicken question, it is the community that comes first: without a vibrant

community one would not have a vibrant ethnic restaurant scene. So a vibrant ethnic restaurant scene is just one of many variables in determining the vibrant or clearly manifested presence of a migrant community.

In answer to this question, we will claim the following: on the one hand, among Guangzhou Africans, Black Africans, particularly West Africans, have a tighter community and interact more with each other than Black Africans in Yiwu. On the other hand, Maghrebian Africans or North Africans in Yiwu have a tighter community and maintain a more cohesive interaction than their counterparts in Guangzhou. Evidence for this characterization of the communities is based on a relatively large-scale survey of food and food-eating habits and places in section 3, after a rigorous literature survey in section 2. There are hardly any West African restaurants in Yiwu, while there is an abundance of West African restaurants in Guangzhou where there is more community patronage, and where many community activities, such as welcoming new members and meeting to celebrate events, revolve around these restaurants. In contrast, we have a much greater concentration of Maghrebian or North African restaurants in Yiwu than in Guangzhou. As part of this relatively large-scale survey we conduct a linguistic analysis of some of the talk around food in these restaurants, including the very names of the restaurants and the food that is made in these restaurants. Section 4 compares what we have found among these African communities to similar effects among other communities in the process of forming new identities. Section 5 briefly speculates on the future of African food as a major cultural influence in China. Finally, we conclude the paper by summarizing and discussing the implications of our theory about the crucial role food and food-making and eating places play in providing structures and avenues for community bonding to promote community formation and community identity shaping.

This comparative approach to the African communities in Guangzhou and Yiwu advances our knowledge of the African Diaspora, we believe, because until now there has been no study of the role of food and restaurants as loci for community bonding among Africans in China. We have indeed compared this aspect to what has happened in other African Diasporas, as reported for instance by Duru (2005) and Tuomainen (2009).

### **A Contrastive Study of Africans in Guangzhou and Yiwu**

In order to contextualize our study we describe at length Guangzhou and Yiwu, and compare and contrast them. The African community in Guangzhou and

the African community in Yiwu are similar in the sense that they are the two most vibrant African trading communities in China. While African trading and non-trading communities are found in many cities in China, it is these two that are most prominent and that have been most written about (e.g. Bodomo 2010; Li et al. 2008, Li, this volume; Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007 and Le Bail 2009 for Guangzhou, and Bodomo 2009A/B; Bodomo and Ma 2010; Bredeloup 2007; Bredeloup, this volume and Le Bail 2009 for Yiwu).

Yet it is their differences that are more striking than their similarities. We claim and demonstrate in this paper that the African trading community in Guangzhou and that in Yiwu differ in four major respects, as follows.

First, Africans in Guangzhou number about 100,000 while Africans in Yiwu number just a third of this, at about 30,000. These are not hard and fixed figures as there are no accurate official records of Africans living and visiting these places (often in Hong Kong and mainland China, immigration records list immigrants from various countries but then put Africans under an unspecified category called 'Others'), and we are only left as researchers to make educated estimates based on the experiences we gain by just being in these places over and over again, and interacting with community members, especially their leaders. So these educated estimates are far from being wild guesses but are informed estimates.

Second, on the one hand, the African community in Guangzhou is located in a cosmopolitan center; indeed Guangzhou is one of the largest cosmopolitan centers in China. On the other hand, the African community in Yiwu finds itself in a less cosmopolitan center, Yiwu being only a recently developed city (Bodomo and Ma 2010). This city has been developed since the 1980s by the Chinese government to serve as a market for sampling/sourcing commodities produced from all over China. As a result, cultural and recreational activities are very different. The night life and musical and other cultural scenes are more elaborate for Africans in Guangzhou than those in Yiwu. In terms of young Africans drinking in bars and dancing away at night clubs, very little occurred in Yiwu at the time of this research. However, as Yiwu grows into a major cultural and trade city this scene is likely to dramatically change for the better.

Third, though we are dealing with people from one continent, Africa, a major difference between Guangzhou and Yiwu is that Guangzhou has a preponderance of black Africans while Yiwu has a preponderance of Arab Africans. Africans from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola live mostly in Guangzhou while Africans from countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, along with Ethiopia and Somalia in the Horn of Africa, are mostly found in Yiwu. While

this difference is clear to most Africans, most ordinary Chinese are not even aware that people from the Maghreb and the Horn of Africa are from Africa: they often categorize them as West Asians, as evidenced by the linguistic term, 'alabo' (Arab) that they use to refer to them.

Fourth, and as a corollary to the third point, in terms of religion, more Africans of the Muslim religious faith are found among Africans in Yiwu while more Christian Africans are found among Guangzhou Africans. This is because the Maghreb region of Africa has a predominantly Muslim population. Of course, Muslims and Christians are found in each of these communities so the emphasis is on preponderance. While, for instance, Nigeria has a large Muslim population and one would expect many Muslims among Nigerians in Guangzhou, indeed, this is not the case. Rather we have more Christians among the Nigerian population in Guangzhou because the group of Nigerians who travel more outside their country as traders are from the southeast of the country, especially Igbo-speaking Nigerians. This group of Nigerians is predominantly Christian.

### **Restaurants and Food-making Places**

In this section, we first describe the culture of food. Then we outline the methodology used to research restaurants and food-making places. We next enumerate and describe the kinds of restaurants and foods cooked and eaten in each place, before describing in detail the community bonding activities in these places.

#### *The Culture of Food*

The literature on the culture of food and, in particular, the prominent role of food in shaping cultural identity and migrant community formation is an important topical focus of research (e.g. Sutton 2010; Tuomainen 2009; Karamba and Quinones 2011; Minh and Winters 2011; Raman 2011; Wang et al. 2011; Cason, Nieto-Montenegro and Chavez-Martinez 2006; Renzaho and Burns 2006; Pang 2003; Duru 2005; Leung 2003; Quandt et al. 2004; Solomons 2003; Desai et al. 1980).

Sutton talks about the centrality of food to the senses and the central role food plays in rituals, ending up with a suggestion of the theoretical notion of gustemology: '...Furthermore, in making food and the senses central to understanding wider social issues, this review argues for the productivity of

a concept of “gustemology” in opening up new realms of ethnographic and theoretical inquiry’ (Sutton 2010: 1). Tuomainen (2009) and Duru (2005, 2009) which are more directly related to Diaspora issues have carried out sustained studies of the role of food in shaping Nigerian and Ghanaian migrant communities in Belgium and England, respectively. In particular, the study on the role of kola by Duru (2005) as an important food item is very illuminating as to how a small food item such as kola can have an important role to play in community matters, in terms of its centrality to rituals (Sutton 2010), such as hospitality and protocol rituals, both in their country of origin (Nigeria) and in their country of residence (Belgium).

The present study builds on these in the sense that it studies the role of food within a group of migrant communities from parts of Africa, but with the difference that we are more focused on studying how food and food-making and eating places are factors in shaping new migrant communities, or communities in the process of establishment as is the case with African communities in China.

### *Methodology*

Research for this paper began as part of a larger project that sought to understand the socio-linguistic, socio-cultural, and socio-economic profiles of Africans in China, along with their cross-cultural communication experiences as they engage their Chinese hosts (Bodomo 2012). As mentioned earlier in the paper, African communities started to emerge at the turn of the millennium as African traders in Southeast Asian countries hard hit by the 1997 Asian Financial Crises moved to southern Chinese cities, particularly Guangzhou in Guangdong Province and Yiwu in Zhejiang Province, the two largest African trading communities in China. These traders set up shop and began to export Chinese manufactured goods such as fabrics, electronics, and farm equipment to Africa. African traders in Africa followed suit by coming to China to source out these products from their fellow Africans and later from Chinese suppliers. Some Africans have now even moved beyond buying and selling to teaming up with Chinese to start up factories that manufacture the commodities Africans need. This research began in earnest in 2005 and has continued till now, with results documented in Bodomo (2010, 2012), Bodomo and Silva (2012), and Bodomo and Ma (2010), among others.

In terms of methodology, the most important element and most distinctive aspect was to strive to give voice to the African migrants involved to speak for themselves, such as in our interaction with Africans eating in the African

restaurants and making comments about how important it is for them to get access to African food in China, and we did this using various techniques. Based on our experiences of researching African communities in China for many years, we noticed that to fully research community bonding and community building strategies, one has to go beyond talking to and interviewing Africans in their market stalls when they are busy buying or selling goods. The methodology we used in researching this article thus involved initial conversations with the traders at market stalls, and then arranging to follow them to lunches or dinners or even into bars as late as possible at night. In this way, we were able to systematically compile information about many of the African restaurants we visited. For others that we could not visit ourselves, research assistants were dispatched to collect information. A list of the restaurants we visited or researched through assistants is provided in the appendix as a resource for other research scholars (about 10 each for Guangzhou and Yiwu; indeed there are upwards of 100 restaurants in each of these communities but we are only able to present about 10 each in this paper).<sup>1</sup> Complete information for these restaurants is provided because these are publicly available pieces of information, either listed on business cards or in telephone or company catalogs and freely handed out in the form of business fliers. Five different types of information are given, including name of restaurant, address, phone number, and, more importantly, the kinds of African foods prepared there (which often indicates the nationality of the owner, though many of these restaurants are jointly owned with Chinese (especially situations involving Africans married to Chinese) to circumvent confusing immigrant employment and business establishment laws). A third step was to then talk to them over lunch in a relaxed atmosphere to watch them interact with their friends and business partners. African traders are more relaxed in these communal restaurants than in the market places. The fourth and final methodological step involved following them at their invitation, on our lucky days, to other places such as football matches, churches, or even to their homes, this last aspect being very rare.

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<sup>1</sup> On my recent field visit (December 2011), I noticed that the Nigerian community leader, one of the most active players in bringing Africans together as community members in Guangzhou has opened a new restaurant in a new market meant for Africans: Guangda African Restaurant at the Marche Africain de Guangda. Inside this restaurant his close friends and other Nigerians were celebrating the Christmas and New Year Holidays (December 26 to 27) over drinks and Nigerian-made food, including pepper soup, akara, and egusi.



*Types of Food and Kinds of Ethnic Restaurants*

The results of these surveys as seen in the list in the appendix show that there are predominantly more West African and other Black African restaurants in Guangzhou and more Maghrebian restaurants in Yiwu. The exact statistics are as follows.

In Guangzhou, of 11 restaurants listed, we have two solely owned Nigerian restaurants, two solely owned Ghanaian restaurants, one solely owned Malian restaurant, and one solely owned Ivorian restaurant. Then we have four jointly owned Nigerian and Chinese restaurants, and one jointly owned Kenyan and Chinese restaurant. Clearly, this demonstrates that we have a preponderance of West African restaurants and just one East African restaurant. All of these restaurants are places for cooking and serving predominantly popular West African dishes like jollof rice, fried rice and stew, egwusi soup with fufu, ogbono, waakye, banku, rice balls, eba, bitter leaf, pepper soup, fried plantain, groundnut soup, goat with light soup, tilapia, konkonte, and palm nut soup, among many others.

In Yiwu, of the nine restaurants we listed, there are four solely owned Egyptian restaurants, two solely owned Ghanaian restaurants and four restaurants whose ownership was unknown but from the names and menu listed we can deduce that they are Arab restaurants. All of these Arab restaurants cook typical Arab and Muslim dishes such as hanid, mandi, mulukha cooked with lamb, half kozi, red meat porridge, meat with soup and vegetables, spaghetti in chicken sauce, spicy salami pie, charam pie, vegetable trolli with lamb, barbecued beef, lamb khebab, Abu alabed sausages, aish al saraia, kastard, mohala, fried lamb with mushroom, and so many other Northern African, West Asian, and Mediterranean foods. The Ghanaian restaurants have exactly the kinds of food mentioned in regards to the West African restaurants in Guangzhou.

*The Theoretical Role of Food in Community-bonding and Identity Shaping*

We may now link the role of food in identity shaping based on a cross-cultural theory of identity as follows: in a cross-cultural environment comprising different migrant ethnic groups and languages, identity shaping and community building are induced and regulated by any of five factors including physical appearance, language, music, food, and costumes. The phrase 'identity shaping and community building' is used here to mean the construction of a set of features seen as common to all individuals within a group of people and then using this set of features as the basis to try to bring these people together to

form a community, that is, a cohesive network of people constantly interacting with each other to advance their common interests. Our cross-cultural theory of community formation (Bodomo 2012; Bodomo and Silva 2012) claims that *the number and quality of the values of a particular variable belonging to a particular ethnic group correlate with the size and vibrancy of that ethnic community*. To reiterate, the five major variables include the physical appearance of members of the ethnic group, the ethnic language they speak, their traditional food and eating places, their traditional clothes, and their traditional music. There may be a few other inwardly manifested cultural symbols, including belief systems and worldviews but which are not substantial enough to be determined as is the case with the five we have identified. According to Bodomo (2012) and Bodomo and Silva (2012), the issue of language was the variable tested with regard to the African community in Macau. In this paper we test the variable of food (along with talk around food at food eating places) with regard to how it enables us to understand the dynamism and vibrancy of the African community in Guangzhou and Yiwu. To illustrate, if we want to know how big and vibrant an African community is in Guangzhou and Yiwu we need to look at how many and of what quality African restaurants are in Guangzhou and Yiwu, and this is what we have shown so far in contrasting studies of Guangzhou and Yiwu. Let us now look more closely at restaurants and places for eating food in these two cities.

In Guangzhou and Yiwu, our field assistants told us that one of the first things an African does on landing at the airport or train station and checking into their hotel is to look for the nearest African restaurant or any space in which Africans can gather to cook food and eat. They could have also of course gone to Chinese restaurants and some do indeed go there to eat, especially those Chinese restaurants that try to incorporate African food. However, even though there are Chinese restaurants in Africa, they are often high-end restaurants as far as the majority of the African populations are concerned; they are thus mostly out of reach pocket-wise for these up and coming traders. So they arrive in China not knowing much about Chinese food, which is hence one of the reasons for their keen interest in locating African restaurants in the city.

African restaurants are of several types: there are the more publicly advertised restaurants with names and signboards announcing their existence (as we have in our appendix) but then there are also the family or network type 'restaurants' where a group of people all of whom literally know each other meet to cook for each other and bond, another strategy Africans (especially those in Guangzhou) use to circumvent draconian policing activities and harassment of them just for establishing ethnic restaurants. Then there are

mobile restaurants usually run by Chinese who previously worked in African restaurants and branched out because they can now cook African food all by themselves. These mobile restaurants serve both African and non-African clientele, including Chinese and even some Western tourists, journalists, and researchers descending upon the markets of Guangzhou like Canaan and Tianxiu Dasha to study the African community.

So what do the Africans do in these restaurants in terms of community bonding and social relations? It is in such food-making and eating places that the newly arrived members of the community will gradually get to know about other Africans and about the city in particular, especially what to do and what not to do, where to go and where not to go, etc. In the process they make business connections but also cultural connections, social relations such as friendships and various other relationships, such as teaming together to support the same football team, within the community. These are the first steps and first spaces through which identity formation as Africans in Guangzhou begins.

In Guangzhou, in restaurants and all kinds of eating places dotted and nested in high rises all along Guangyuan Xi Lu, Bao Han Street, Sanyuanli Ave, and in Tianxiu building on Huan shi Dong Lu one can find groups of Black Africans, mainly from West Africa but increasingly from Central and Southern African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Uganda, Kenya, and Angola. It is in these spaces that they meet, not only to eat, but to watch sports events, especially during international sports events like the Olympics, African Cup of Nations, and World Cup Soccer competition. It is in these places that they meet other people from their countries and from their ethno-linguistic groups to bond together in terms of supporting a common team, speaking the same language, and just simply living lives as Africans in a foreign land. It is in these spaces that they listen to pop music and consume other popular cultural products, like getting the latest musical charts from their home countries, and seeing and comparing the latest fashion styles with their own dresses and hair-dos. Some just simply meet to sit quietly and listen to their compatriots and in the process glean the latest news and gossip about their home countries and Africa in general. Finally, it is in these places that they meet when there are community problems to solve, including taking care of members' welfare in times of sickness, police raids, imprisonment, and in times of the death of a community member. It is here that leaders begin to emerge to lead sub-groups of Africans into forming community identities as Africans living in, and frequently visiting, Guangzhou.

In Yiwu, in restaurants dotted all along Chouzhou North Road, 4th Street in Bin Wang Business District, in Zhaozai, and in Chengxin First District, usually

on the ground floor for Arab restaurants contrary to what happens with Black African restaurants (in both Guangzhou and Yiwu), one can find many people from North African countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Western Sahara but also Horn of Africa countries such as Somalia and Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> It is usual in Yiwu to observe that the North Africans bond together with their fellow Muslim and Arab brothers from West Asia rather than with Black Africans, whether or not these Black Africans are Muslims. This may be an indication that we are seeing the effects of religion override the effect of being from the same continent or even of the same ethnicity. It is in these places that this group of Africans from North Africa meets to relax after a hard day shopping for the best deals in the international trade mart. It is here that they meet to listen to distinctly North African music and watch or perform other kinds distinctly Arab and West Asian cultural practices like belly-dancing.

In Guangzhou, we did not observe the vast majority of Black Africans mixing with Arab Africans; again this may be due, in large part, to the gulf of cultural and religious differences that exist between North Africans and Africans south of the Sahara. While Arab Africans exist in Guangzhou, patronizing their own restaurants, the most prominent of which is the Thousand Nights Restaurant near China Marriot Hotel in Downtown Guangzhou, the vast majority of Black Africans tend to bond and network more with each other. This non-interaction may be due largely to differences in cultural and religious practices among these two groups of Africans.

The reverse is the same in Yiwu where Arab Africans are the majority and tend to bond more with each other. Again, Black Africans and restaurants catering to them exist but they are rare.

### *We Are what We Eat:<sup>3</sup> Talk around Food – The Tools of Linguistic Structure*

In this section, we probe deeper into the thinking, philosophies, and cultural values of the participants in the food-eating communities that we visited and

<sup>2</sup> In response to an anonymous reviewer's query about why Ethiopians can be found in predominantly Muslim Yiwu, my take is that even though Ethiopia is not a predominantly Muslim country, there are some Ethiopians in Yiwu, just as there are people from other countries that are not necessarily Muslim countries. Yiwu, as a fast developing city, has an increasing mix of people of different ethnicities and religious persuasions.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase mimics the phrase, 'You are what you eat,' a common saying in English and European languages. There is controversy as outlined in this website <<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/you%20are%20what%20you%20eat.html>> (retrieved May 24, 2010) with regard to whether it has a dietary meaning (to be fit and healthy you need good food), or a religious

in most cases is by way of participant-observation. A sampling of the ways they talk around food and how important it is for them to continuously return to these spaces for food and other recreational activities shows how they see food and these spots in which the food is prepared (usually by Africans, but increasingly by Chinese migrant workers who are employed to work in these restaurants by the African owners)<sup>4</sup> as identity-shaping items and as places to nourish their African appetite, both gastronomically and culturally.

We do this by critically analyzing and discussing some of the structural linguistic items that are produced like lexical items, phrases, proverbs, and various kinds of sayings in African languages but also in English or even in Chinese or a mix of two or more languages.

Even the names of the restaurants are very revealing linguistic units that point to the thinking behind these people in terms of identifying themselves as a distinct migrant group: African Bar, Fatherland Restaurant and Bar, KC African Food Restaurant and Bar, Ghana Dish, Restaurant Abidjanaise, Man Must Wack Restaurant, and Papaye Restaurant. First, the most identifying word is 'African.' This Africanness may be made more specific by mentioning the country name such as 'Ghana Dish' or even the capital city of the country such as 'Restaurant Abidjanaise' (in French). More specifically, a common local expression in the country is used such as 'Papaye,' a common restaurant name in Ghana referring to the need to do good – Good Deeds Restaurant would be a good approximate translation of this term, which is from Twi, the most widely spoken Ghanaian language. Even philosophically, the name may point to the centrality of virtue when it comes to cooking and serving food to people. In the case of Man Must Wack, 'Wack' is a Nigerian and general West African pidgin English word meaning a lot of things, including 'eat,' 'hit,' or 'deal mercilessly with something or someone' (this name is a very creative one, obviously derived from the normal phrase in West Africa: 'Man Must Work,'

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meaning (Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are changed into the body and blood of Jesus). However, the way we use it in this paper has a more cultural interpretation (ethnic food represents oneself: when in a foreign land seeking to be in touch with your home culture, you need some good food from home to reconnect with your roots. This point is attested in most studies on immigrants and ethnic food-eating habits such as Tuomainen (2009), Duru (2005), and Pang (2003)).

<sup>4</sup> One Ghanaian restaurant owner (also the head of the Ghanaian community in Guangzhou at one point) did employ a migrant worker from a neighboring province in Guangdong. This migrant worker knows how to prepare most major types of Ghanaian food, particularly fufu, the main staple in Ghana. The owner has now passed away but the restaurant, located in Tianxiu building, and now managed by the migrant worker, was still operating during the first author's most recent fieldtrip to Guangzhou (December 2011).

itself showing how important the setting up of the restaurant is to the owner). Even seeing the names of the dishes listed on the menu creates a sense of identity and nostalgia about Africa for these African sojourners in China. In both Guangzhou and Yiwu, the Africans we met in the restaurants told us that just by seeing the names of the dishes on the menu alone makes them feel like they are 'back home in Africa,' given the familiarity of these food items. Food and food items seem to be seen as symbols of identity for these migrants. Moreover, whenever these migrants make new Chinese friends and want to introduce their culture to their new friends and to their Chinese business partners it is to these restaurants that they head. It was among some of these African-Chinese groups eating food in an African restaurant that we heard the phrase by a young African man to his young Chinese female companion: 'This is African food, this is part of my culture, this is how we eat this dish, this meal represents my cultural upbringing, and I am never myself if I don't eat fufu after one week . . .' He then made her wash her hands and he taught her how to eat fufu and soup with her right hand alone. There is a joke among some Guangzhou Africans that while Chinese people use two chopsticks, we Africans think it better to use five chopsticks – our five fingers on our right hand! All this goes to show that food is an important ingredient in identity shaping and community formation processes among Africans in China.

### **The Role of Food in Other Communities**

As we have seen throughout this paper, food occupies a central position in migrant communities. Therefore the African community as we described is not a particular exception, though it is unique. Many studies have looked at the role of food in migrant communities (e.g. Duru 2005, 2009; Pang 2003; Tuomainen 2009). Duru's work on the Nigerian community in Belgium and Tuomainen's work on the Ghanaian community in London are the most relevant to our paper. The difference here, however, is that these two works and other studies on Africans in the West describe already established communities, while our communities are in their very early stages of formation, and this difference plays out in terms of how integrated and well-connected these communities are with their host societies. Indeed, the phenomenon of the African presence in China is often dubbed Africa's newest Diaspora, testifying to the fact that we are really dealing with a new large Diaspora community just in the process of establishing itself in a very different cultural setting. Our study thus captures the crucial role that food and food-making places play in such stages

of community formation – something that has not been captured in the literature. It is in this sense that the situation described is unique. We thus need to see what the situation is with other newly forming communities.

### **The Future of Food as a Major African Cultural Influence in China**

From our review of the literature on the role of food in other societies (e.g. Duru 2005, 2009; Tuomainen 2009; Sutton 2010), it is clear that food will continue to play a major role in African communities even after they are long established. Food (and places for eating food insofar as they provide spaces for community bonding) would have been the glue that put together a new African community in China but its role will not end there because it will continue to play a number of functions as outlined below.

First, it will continue to be an identity shaper, as before, because as the community grows, more restaurants will be set up, either owned solely by Africans or jointly owned with Chinese or other nationalities; these restaurants could very well develop more hybrid or syncretic forms of food uniquely suited to the Chinese context.

Second, and more importantly, food, restaurants, and allied places like bars will continue to serve as ingredients of community enforcement as the community grows and matures because of the fact as has been shown throughout the paper that these restaurants, like markets, churches, mosques, and other prayer venues, serve as centrifugal points of African group engagements. This is most visible during important community events. For instance, during important sports events, like the Soccer World Cup, Africans who follow soccer religiously are seen glued to large-screen television sets while eating and drinking at these African community spots that the restaurants have become. These restaurants have not just become merely places to get together momentarily; they indeed serve as spots where Africans come together to meet people of the same cultural backgrounds and interests.

Third and finally, as Bodomo (2009) has shown, when it comes to soft power issues within Africa-China relations, China seems to be way ahead of Africa in making Africans understand Chinese culture in Africa. African governments seem to be doing virtually nothing, and this point about soft power can be connected to the topic of the current paper in the sense that one of the few hopes left for Africa to showcase African soft power, to make Chinese understand African culture is in what Africans resident in China can do. It is here that food and the food-eating venues we have described can have a further function

once African communities are fully formed in China. Food will play a major role in the community's attempt to influence its hosts. It would be one of the most important 'tools' available for African community members to attempt to impose their cultural influence on their host community. This is because, beyond close friends and spouses, more and more Chinese are beginning to patronize the African restaurants in Guangzhou and Yiwu. Africans are enthusiastically introducing African food to their trading partners and customers. More importantly, some Chinese who have worked with Africans in these restaurants and elsewhere are beginning to learn how to prepare their own African food, as mentioned earlier. While this may pose a threat to African restaurant owners in terms of potential competition, in the larger frame of things, these Chinese are getting to experience African culinary and gastronomic culture. In this sense then these African restaurant owners are serving as cultural ambassadors and cross-cultural bridge builders (Bodomo 2010, 2012) between Africans and Chinese, whether or not there are tensions between these migrants and their host communities.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

The central issue in the paper has been to find out how Africans maintain or even shape their identities as Africans in China, and we have addressed this issue by carefully examining African community bonding and cultural practices in restaurants and other places for eating food. Food defines individuals and communities in profound ways, not only gastronomically but culturally. This may be even more obvious among those immigrant societies who are far away from their cultures of origin and have the desire to define and distinguish themselves from their host community and its culture. Based on this impor-

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<sup>5</sup> Some research has suggested that tensions and inter-community misunderstandings may undermine the bridge theory I have proposed in several of my work. For instance, Lyons, Brown and Li (2012) write: 'Bodomo's notion of 'bridging' involved grassroots mutual learning and adaptation. [...] However, the more recent interviews quoted [in our paper] suggest that regulatory and economic pressures are driving a growing wedge at the grassroots between African and Chinese traders, undermining the bridge-building identified by Bodomo'. I would like to clarify however that tensions and wedges between migrant and indigenous communities do not necessarily undermine bridge building. On the contrary, it is at such times that leaders emerge from both migrant and indigenous communities involved to try to build even stronger sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural bridges between the communities involved.



tant role of food vis-à-vis community identification and community shaping, we have proposed in this paper a cross-cultural theoretical notion that food and places for eating food have played and are playing a major role in the processes of community formation among Africans in China. We have argued that food is one of the most important factors in the cross-cultural process of community formation and identity shaping particularly among Africans in Guangzhou and Yiwu.

In addition, we have argued that analysis of the communication complexities, with particular respect to the names and sayings surrounding food, found in restaurants and bars operated by Africans can be an important clue for understanding the differences between the two communities we have studied. From the analysis we can deduce that community bonding and cohesion is stronger among Black Africans in Guangzhou than among Black Africans in Yiwu. It was indeed very hard to locate a single well-advertised Black African restaurant in Yiwu at the time of our research but there are numerous Arab African restaurants in this city. On the other hand, Arab Africans in Yiwu bonded together more than Arab Africans in Guangzhou at the time of our research, though it is true that one can spot some West Asian restaurants in Guangzhou.

Finally, we may conclude that a yardstick to calibrate the future growth and development of African communities in China is to look more carefully at the quantity and quality of African restaurants in each Chinese city. A vibrant and thriving African restaurant scene in a city correlates with a vibrant and thriving African community in that city.

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## Appendix: List of some African Restaurants in Guangzhou and Yiwu

### *List of African Restaurants in Guangzhou*

NAME	ADDRESS	PHONE	KIND OF FOOD	OWNED BY
1. African Bar	No. 55 Bao Han Street Xia Tang YueXiu District, Guangzhou.	020-83584661	Fried rice & stew, fish chips, bake chicken, egwusi soup with fufu, chicken soup with rice	Kenyan and Chinese
2. Papaye Canteen	Rm 502 Comprehensive Building of Quangtie opposite McDonalds, HuanshiXi Rd.	020-81702742 / 13434249449	Banku, Fufu, rice and stew, jollof rice, Wakye (rice and beans), fried rice, rice balls eba	Ghanaian
3. K. C. African Food Restaurant and Bar	No. 89 Guang Yuan Xi Rd, Guangzhou.	6151178 / 6151179	Semo with Egusi, Ogbono, bitter leave, nsala, okro and rice with African stew	Nigerian and Chinese
4. AA African Restaurant	No. 455 Sanyuali Ave. Guangzhou.	020-61151789	Semo with Egusi, Ogbono, bitter leave, nsala, okro and rice with African stew	Nigerian and Chinese
5. Lisha African Restaurant and Bar	No. 235 Guang Yuan Rd, Guangzhou.	62832834 / 13660029685	Semo with Egusi, Ogbono, bitter leave, nsala, okro and rice with African stew	Nigerian and Chinese
6. Man must whack Restaurant	No. 71 Guang Yuan Xi Rd, After phone market.	13710615434 / 13710620856	Semo with Egusi, Ogbono, bitter leave, nsala, okro and rice with African stew	Nigerian and Chinese
7. FatherLand Exter Rest. And Bar	2/F Yuhang Building Tian En Dress Market No. 83 Guang Yuan Xi Rd, Guangzhou.	13710947933 / 13724899932	Oha, okro egusi and nsala with semo. Plantain, jollof rice, white rice, etc.	Nigerian

(cont.)

NAME	ADDRESS	PHONE	KIND OF FOOD	OWNED BY
8. Aka – Osili Africa Restaurant	2E01 And 2E02, 2/F Old Tianen Export Trade Wholesale Market, No. 83 Guangyuan Xi Rd, Guangzhou.	1310488346 / 13242331558	Semo with Egusi, Ogbono, bitter leave, nsala, okro and rice with African stew	Nigerian
9. Badiallo Kamissoko Restaurant	1804 Block C TianXiu Building 300 Huan Shi Zhong Rd.	13725294750 / 02083602497	Malian Food	Malian
10. Restaurant L' Abidjanaise	C2201 Tian Xiu Building.	13719421902 / 13760697654	African dishes	Ivorian
11. Ghana Dish	Rm 2405E, Block C TianXiu Building No. 300.		Banku and ground nut soup/okro or with Tilapia, rice and stew/soup. Fufu with light soup. Jollof rice. Konkonte with ground nut/palm	Ghanaian

*List of African Restaurants in Yiwu*

NAME	ADDRESS	PHONE	KIND OF FOOD	OWNED BY
12. Maedah Restaurant	No. 235, Chouzhou North Road.	0579-85625520 Saied Elnagdi	Meat with soup with vegetable; white chicken porridge with potato. (mix vegetable); red meat porridge; white fish porridge; salta; hanid; mand; macaroni with chicken; spaghetti in parwin sauce; spaghetti in chicken sauce; mulukhia cooked with lamb; chicken in tomato curry topping sauce; fish curry tomato topping sauce; prawns in tomato curry topping sauce; green peas cooked with lamb; white beans cooked with lamb; mixed vegetables cooked with lamb; potatoes cooked with lamb; half kozi	Egyptian
13. Tajmahal Restaurant	No. 237, Chouzhou North Road.			
14. Al-Arabi Restaurant	No. 239, Chouzhou North Road.	0579-85548143		
15. Hekaya Restaurant	No. 75, Fourth Street, Bin Wang Business District.	0579-85213380 (Zeng Junyu)		Egyptian
16. Saba Restaurant	No. 165, Chouzhou North Road.	0579-85120880 (Muhanmude)		Egyptian

(cont.)

NAME	ADDRESS	PHONE	KIND OF FOOD	OWNED BY
17. The PYRAMID Restaurant	No. 145, Chouzhou North Road.	0579-85548802 (Faheli)	Spicy salami pie; cheese pie; pyramid pie; sausage pie; tuna pie; vegetable pie; charam pie; cheese pie; mlokheia; pesla; okra cooked; spankh; kawsa; lamb in tomato rice; three kinds of grilled meat; BBQ beef; BBQ chicken; grilled prawns; pouteto degrm grills; grilled bass fish; mixed sauce; hot spicy flavor; beef steak; fish steak; liver steak; shrimps steak; chicken with rice; liver pie; egg plant; onion beef; fried liver; sea food hot pot; potatoes; mixed vegetables; fatta beef; fatta chicken; spaghetti; macaroni	Egyptian
18. A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS	No. 85, 4th Street, Bin Wang Dst.	0579-85554899 (Hakam Menzer)	vegetable trolli with lamb; green peas with lamb; green okra with lamb; green beans with lamb; sausages in lemon and garlic; BBQ sausages; Abu alabed sausages; aish al saraia;	

*(cont.)*

NAME	ADDRESS	PHONE	KIND OF FOOD	OWNED BY
			mohalabia; pudding rice; baloza; om ali; kastard; mohala; hommos with meat; fried lamb with tomatoes; fried lamb with mushroom; spaghetti Bolognese; spaghetti gretan	
19. African home kitchen	202, Building 7, Zhaozai.	15868929801		Ghanaian
20. Ghana food	202, 6-25, Chengxin First District	0579-85376495 (Kofi Boateng)		Ghanaian