

African Pentecostal Migrants in China: Marginalization and the Alternative Geography of a Mission Theology

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Abstract: The city of Guangzhou, China, hosts a diverse and growing population of foreign Christians. The religious needs of investors and professionals have been accommodated through government approval of a nondenominational church for foreigners. By contrast, African Pentecostal churches operate out of anonymous buildings under informal and fragile agreements with law-enforcement officers. The marginality of the churches is mirrored by the daily lives of the church-goers: Many are undocumented immigrants who restrain their movements to avoid police interception. In contrast to these experiences, the churches present alternative geographies where the migrants take center stage. First, Africans are given responsibility for evangelizing the Gospel, as Europeans are seen to have abandoned their mission. Second, China is presented as a pivotal battlefield for Christianity. And finally, Guangzhou is heralded for its potential to deliver divine promises of prosperity. This geographical imagery assigns meaning to the migration experience, but also reinforces ethnic isolation. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and video recordings of sermons in a Pentecostal church in Guangzhou with a predominately Nigerian congregation.

Résumé: La ville de Guangzhou, en Chine, est le site d'une population grandissante de chrétiens étrangers, dont beaucoup continuent de pratiquer leur religion en devenant membres d'une église non confessionnelle pour étrangers approuvée par

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le gouvernement. Les églises africaines pentecôtistes, en revanche, opèrent dans des bâtiments anonymes sous des accords informels et fragiles avec les représentants de la loi. Bien des membres de la congrégation sont eux-mêmes des immigrants sans papiers dont les vies sont contraintes par la nécessité d'échapper aux contrôles de police, et la marginalité sociale et institutionnelle de ces églises reflètent ainsi leurs expériences au quotidien. Au sein de ces églises, ces immigrants ont cependant une place centrale et font quasiment l'expérience d'une « géographie alternative ». Dans cet article, la Chine est présentée comme un champs de bataille crucial pour la chrétienté, les Africains y ayant remplacé les Européens au front de la mission d'évangélisation. Pour les Africains eux-mêmes, Guangzhou présente un potentiel pour délivrer ses promesses divines de prospérité. Cet article soutient que l'imagerie géographique pentecôtiste, tout en donnant un sens et une signification à l'expérience des immigrants, renforce cependant une isolation ethnique. L'analyse se base sur des entretiens approfondis, des observations sur le terrain, et des enregistrements vidéo de sermons dans une église pentecôtiste à Guangzhou avec une congrégation principalement nigérienne.

Introduction

Shut out all the nonbelievers, shut out all the negative voices that are telling you that this is not going to work out. Shut everyone out: All the spectators that will gather to mock you, to ridicule you, to make you lose faith. In the miracle that is about to happen, shut them out! And shut yourself in. (The Tower of Salvation World Mission, Guangzhou, November 2009)

Strong emotions were stirred up by this sermon, delivered by a Nigerian pastor in an underground Pentecostal church in the city of Guangzhou, China. As he continued to speak, the sound of his voice was drowned out by shouts of agreement, praise, and prayer. The pastor promised his congregants—mostly African migrants—that the aspirations for wealth that had inspired them go abroad were soon to be met. However, while demonstrating the important encouragement provided by the Pentecostal church for many Africans in China, the sermon also carried a message of reclusiveness, suggesting that religion, under certain circumstances, can erode the sociability of migrants.

The study of African Pentecostals in China contributes to the growing body of literature on the international spread of Pentecostalism facilitated by migrants from the global South.¹ The geographical pattern of Christian proselytization has shifted, and Nigeria, India, South Korea, and Brazil have become the new leading missionary-sending nations in the world (Anderson 2004:169). Pentecostal churches founded by African migrants in Western metropolises have transformed the physical and social landscape in these cities, as documented in a number of studies.² However, developing countries are at the recipient, as well as the sending, end in the international

flows of migrant missionaries. Although the astonishing growth in the number of Pentecostals worldwide largely takes place in the global South, churches established by non-Western migrants in cities in the developing world have so far received modest scholarly attention (exceptions include Jeannerat 2009; Sommers 2001).

African migrants who head for China arrive in a country where Christianity is on the rise. Estimates of the number of Christians in China vary widely (see Wielander 2009). A recent review of the available literature put the number at about 5 percent of the total population, or around 67 million people, of whom 29 million are registered with churches under the Protestant Three Self Patriotic Movement or the Patriotic Catholic Association (Pew Research Center 2011). Other Chinese Christians worship in independent, unregistered churches, often referred to as “house churches.” Some of the house churches have external links to foreign churches, including Pentecostal ones, but most are home grown. Intriguingly, Chinese Protestantism, especially as it developed during the repression of official religion under the Cultural Revolution, often exhibits Pentecostal features, such as faith healing, exorcism, and discourses of spiritual warfare (Kao 2009; Oblau 2005).

This article explores how African Pentecostal churches conceive of their mission in China, and how they experience and respond to processes of marginalization. It considers, in particular, how faith-based constructions of mobility and spatial hierarchies propagated by the churches erode prospects of conviviality between Pentecostal migrants and members of the host society. The main argument is that while the churches offer African migrants familiarity and moral support, they also reinforce the distrust created by everyday experiences of disempowerment among the migrants in Guangzhou. The article thus challenges dominant understandings of African migrant Pentecostal Christianity as an essentially progressive and integrative force³ and contributes toward a more global and contextualized mapping of African Pentecostalism outside the continent.

Research Site and Methodology

The two cities of Guangzhou and Hong Kong constitute the trading capitals in the booming industrial economy of the Pearl River Delta, southern China. The data for this article were collected mainly in the city of Guangzhou, which since 1979 has been a pioneer in exploiting the new opportunities offered by the economic reform era (Xu & Yeh 2005). Along with its fast economic and demographic growth, Guangzhou has a relative abundance of places of unscripted sociability, such as parks, promenades, and public squares. However, religious activities are explicitly prohibited in these public areas and are consigned to state-sanctioned religious institutions or private spaces.

Over the past decade, Guangzhou has experienced a sharp rise in African Pentecostal Christianity. Two interrelated trends form the foundation for this development. First, China’s trade volumes increased rapidly during this period, and exports to Africa are growing at a steeper rate than Chinese

exports overall (see Haugen 2011). Just as a large number of Chinese traders have found their way to Africa (Kuang 2008), Africans are traveling to China to take advantage of the new trading opportunities. Second, increasingly restrictive migration regimes in countries in the global North have enhanced the appeal of immigration opportunities in China, and Guangzhou has become a center for immigration from Africa. Most of the African migrants to China do not easily fit into the social polarization thesis associated with Saskia Sassen's (1991) concept of "the global city": They are neither poor migrants staffing low-paid service jobs, nor hypermobile and wealthy professionals. Rather, they are middle-ranking actors with various degrees of previous international migration experience and limited individual wealth. The aggregate effect of this migration on world trade flows has become profound, and African migrants are contributing to the consolidation of Guangzhou's status as a key global trading hub (Lyons, Brown, & Li 2008).

There are at least a dozen African Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou today. Some have existed for more than a decade, while others have been established recently. None is officially registered in China. Although run by Africans and catering to predominantly African congregations, the churches also welcome migrants and itinerant traders from other parts of the world. They preach in English, French, and Portuguese, as well as in a number of African languages, and some hold separate services for different linguistic communities. African immigrant groups with a limited and stable expatriate population in Guangzhou tend to cluster in a particular Pentecostal church. In one Francophone Pentecostal church with about forty members, for example, students from a small African country who are attending Chinese universities constitute a large share of the congregants. They all can speak Chinese, but while some attempt to convert local students, they do not invite Chinese people to join their church. Churches dominated by members from large immigrant populations, such as Nigerians, Cameroonians, and Congolese, tend to experience a high turnover as migrants move between churches that cater to their needs, occasionally breaking out of one church to start their own congregation, or leaving Pentecostal churches altogether when they no longer depend on the practical or emotional support the churches provide. Undocumented migrants who are repatriated also contribute to a high turnover of congregants.

Most of the fieldwork for this article was carried out in one of the many prosperity-oriented Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou headed by a Nigerian pastor. Details about the location, size, and organization of the church were intentionally omitted for confidentiality reasons. The church is given the fictive name of The Tower of Salvation World Mission, or The Tower for short. The name reflects the rhetorical emphasis placed on a transnational reach in this and many of the other churches headed by Africans in Guangzhou, even though they may have only one branch and serve an ethnically homogenous congregation. For several years, The Tower had a large congregation with a core membership of wealthy businessmen, some of whom had enough resources to settle in China with their families. Many of the key supporters left

the church after a financial dispute, and by the end of 2009 the congregation had become more heavily dominated by young Nigerian men in their twenties and thirties, the most numerous demographic group among Nigerians in China overall. The congregation kept shrinking as members repatriated, left for churches that had more resources, or stopped attending church altogether. Some of those who left were replaced by newly arrived migrants. By the end of 2011 The Tower managed to reverse the trend and attract more established migrants to the congregation again.

The research design combines four forms of data collection. First, participant observation was conducted during regular interactions with the members of The Tower and weekly church attendance from September to December 2009, with shorter return visits in 2010 and 2011. Building trust over an extended period of time was important due to the difficult politics of running an African Pentecostal church in Guangzhou and the evolving intricacies of the relationships among church members. Second, semistructured interviews were carried out with members and leaders in The Tower, two other African pastors in Guangzhou, as well as migrants from other churches and non-Christian Africans in China. Third, audiovisual recordings of the Sunday services over a one-year period in The Tower were obtained from the church management. Fourth, I went to Nigeria in February–March 2011 to reinterview migrants who had been forcibly repatriated from China and to observe how religious identities were expressed in Lagos and along the Lagos–Ibadan expressway.

With respect to certain topics, participant observation was more fruitful than interviews for obtaining information in my fieldwork setting. For example, congregants were extremely reluctant to openly criticize the church leadership, which is consistent with observations in prosperity-oriented charismatic churches elsewhere (Coleman 2006). Direct questions put to congregants about sources of discontent with the church therefore seldom yielded much information. An alternative way of exploring these issues was to note the incidents that caused congregants to stay away from church. Nigerian Pentecostal pastors depend on church attendance and participation both for authority and financial success, and absence from church is therefore a powerful means of conveying discontent. My informants said that they preferred to express dissatisfaction through abstention, rather than by confronting a church leader directly with a grievance. When I knew the circumstances under which particular informants chose to stay away, I could approach them to solicit further information through carefully worded questions. Equally important, gossip I heard when spending time with the congregants of The Tower outside of church services provided me with data about conflicts and differences of opinion. In my research, trust-building with potential informants represented a major challenge due to the tensions between the secular state and the faith-based immigrant communities in China.

Compared with mainstream Protestantism, Pentecostal religiosity is much more geared toward public expression of religious feelings (see Meyer 2008). Pentecostal churches are not only places for worshiping God; they

are also spaces in which the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifested in an immediate manner—for example, through glossolalia and miracles such as faith healing. Speech and various forms of physical expressions are required from the congregation as well as the pastor in order to establish a direct link with the power of God. Although accepted into the congregation as a researcher, I was expected to participate in all aspects of the sermons. The dramaturgy of the services and ways of partaking in them were remarkably easy to understand despite my lack of prior experience with Pentecostal churches. The spirit of equality expressed through the verbal exchanges in the sermons also presented a clear contrast to the highly hierarchical structure exhibited outside church services. However, the social expectations for specific interactions in church were less easily comprehensible. Rank-and-file members of The Tower, including me, were reprimanded in subtle but stern ways for speaking out of turn or breaking other social codes. My modest financial contributions to the ministry placed me at the lower end of the church hierarchy, although as the only Caucasian member I presumably enjoyed some respect for adding global character to the church.

Invisible Churches

In Lagos the messages of Pentecostal churches are literally shouted out in public places: Pastors walk around open-air markets preaching through portable loudspeakers, prayer gatherings are public and vociferous, competing churches post large billboards, buses carry bumper stickers with religious messages, conspicuous church buildings brighten up the urban environment, and smaller church branches announce their presence with gaudy placards hung on rundown buildings. Along the expressway out of the city, the largest Pentecostal missions have built their own self-contained cities, complete with schools, universities, hospitals, banks, shops, and, of course, megachurches. In short, signs of born-again Christianity are ubiquitous in Lagos, as in many other African cities.

In Guangzhou, by contrast, the African churches are invisible in the urban landscape. The large numbers of black people who can be seen entering nondescript hotels, restaurants, or office buildings on Sundays are the only indication that Pentecostal services are about to take place. A sermon at The Tower on a cold morning in December 2009 is a case in point. On most Sundays worshippers start trickling in to a tall office building around 10:00 a.m. As they make their way toward the elevator, they pass Chinese private security guards who are instructed not to ask Africans to identify themselves. People know where to go—they have either been there before or are brought along by church members. When entering the service, they are greeted by a large and colorful banner bearing the name of the church. However, the banner, a pulpit, flags, and some other props hardly conceal the fact that the room is mostly meant for other purposes. The rows of seats fill up little by little in the course of the first hour of the service. There is no central heating in the building on weekends, and most people keep their jackets on until they are

warmed by the physical effort of intense prayer and dance. After the service, offerings, and group meetings, people slowly exit from the building, individually or in small groups. Few have other business to attend to on a Sunday. Yet they do not linger to socialize but disappear quickly into buses and taxis. Limiting visibility in this way is a key strategy to avoid direct confrontation with Chinese law enforcement officers.

The main reason for the spatial marginalization of the African churches in Guangzhou is Chinese government restrictions against non-state churches. Like the Chinese citizens, Christian immigrants in China are allowed to worship only in government-sanctioned churches. Religious activities are monitored by the Religious Affairs Bureau, a department under the State Council, with branches in the provinces and major cities that are empowered to issue local regulations (Potter 2003). The Public Security Bureau, another government body under the State Council, is responsible for enforcing the laws that regulate religious activities, including taking actions against unregistered religious groups. However, local branches of the bureaus are subject to pressure from multiple sources concerning how they regulate religious activities. For example, foreign diplomatic bureaus in China's most internationalized cities may exert pressure on local authorities to allow their citizens greater freedom of religious assembly (Ying 2006), while local governments may compel the Public Security Bureau to crack down on nonsanctioned groups (Carlson 2005). The combination of local regulatory differences, decentralized mandates to enforce religious regulations, and diverse sources of political pressure have led to considerable regional variations in the concessions made for foreign religious groups within China.

In Guangzhou, the largest state-sanctioned church is the Sacred Heart Cathedral of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, whose English-language services attract large crowds of African immigrants, as well as some Chinese nationals. Photos of Africans in their Sunday best streaming out of the Cathedral appear in virtually all Chinese and foreign newspaper articles on the emergent migrant communities in Guangzhou and have become symbols of Guangzhou's increasing internationalization. But the sermons are short and austere, and African migrants who opt to attend Pentecostal churches instead typically criticize the services in the Sacred Heart Cathedral for "resembling meetings, not worship," going by "too fast," or being "only about doctrine." Due to such discontentment, African Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou cater to a wide range of African Christians, including migrants who belong to traditional Catholic and Presbyterian ministries in their home countries.

The religious needs of foreign professionals and investors in Guangzhou also are partially accommodated through government approval of a nondenominational church for foreigners: the Guangzhou International Christian Fellowship (GICF). Unlike Chinese Christians, foreigners can apply to have a nongovernmental religious society approved, and such societies can only accept foreign passport holders at their sermons. The GICF representative I interviewed regretted this directive, but maintained that they had no

choice but to comply. The congregation is mixed in terms of nationality, with a high number of Western expatriates and overseas Chinese. Their liaison with the local Religious Affairs Bureau spoke Chinese fluently. Several foreign church leaders in Guangzhou suggested that the official recognition of the GICF was not motivated by a genuine Chinese wish to accommodate the diverse religious needs of the city's immigrants, but rather by the desire for a showpiece to prove that the government is upholding the freedom of religious assembly for foreigners. They also believed that African churches would stand small chances of obtaining official licenses if they were to apply because they lack the linguistic, political, and cultural resources of the GICF. The approval of an additional foreign church would also strain the capacity of Guangzhou's Religious Affairs Bureau, which has to review licenses annually and continuously monitor any church it approves. This monitoring would be particularly challenging if English were not the language of preaching.

African church leaders themselves express reservations against applying for approval with the Religious Affairs Bureau for a number of reasons. First, some of the church leaders are undocumented immigrants who try to avoid any contact with government officials. Second, some of the African churches found smaller branches of Chinese house churches. Unsanctioned Chinese churches are even more vulnerable to government prosecution than African institutions, and must take greater care to hide from view—for example, by moving regularly and keeping the membership low. These house churches are run by Chinese pastors on a day-to-day basis, but with African pastors carrying out some key functions, such as the baptism of new members. Third, the exposure to greater government surveillance associated with being licensed would force the African pastors to adopt a softer rhetoric in their services and bar Chinese citizens completely from entering their churches. And finally, if the government denies the application for registration from a church, the group would have publically acknowledged its existence and identified its leaders, making it difficult to continue underground operation.

Local government authorities in Guangzhou are well aware of the existence of the African Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou despite the fact that they are invisible in the urban landscape and unregistered with the government. While the official policy toward unregistered foreign churches is uncompromising, pragmatic approaches are adopted on the ground and the churches are tolerated as long as their presence remains relatively inconspicuous. The pastor of The Tower communicated with government officials to find arrangements under which the church could operate. In the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, these officials asked the pastor to move his church farther away from the African marketplaces; he complied and relocated to a building in an upscale neighborhood where the rental fees were higher but the social tensions between Africans and Chinese residents were lower. All contact with the police took place outside the church, and the police never physically monitored any of The Tower's sermons. In 2011,

soaring rental fees forced the church to move again. The pastor rented a space in another part of the city from the same landlord—a Chinese restaurant owner who was willing to take the risk of subletting space for religious services. By that time, The Tower had also opened a branch in the neighboring city of Dongguan, which is home to an increasing population of undocumented migrants seeking to escape the comparatively strict enforcement of immigration laws in Guangzhou.

Some foreign churches have adopted a more confrontational line by advocating for their right to preach openly. The foremost among these is the Nigerian-founded Royal Victory Church, from which two pastors were expelled from China. Chinese police have entered and broken up their services on several occasions. The church allows foreign journalists to document their activities, accepts Chinese members, and has engaged in several open confrontations with the police. It is now partly run from Hong Kong by a pastor in exile (Bandurski 2010; Rennie 2009). For churches that opt for discreet negotiation rather than overt confrontation, the clamor stirred up by the clashes between the police and the Royal Victory congregants only accentuates the threat of being forced to relocate or shut down. Facing similar challenges, a number of foreign pastors in Guangzhou have formed an informal council to share experiences and coordinate their approaches vis-à-vis Chinese officials.

African church leaders regard their relationship with representatives of Chinese authorities as a sensitive issue. One pastor vigorously rejected the claim that he “cooperated” with the police, although he conceded that he had “police friends” with whom he could “communicate and can get information.” Openly acknowledging alliance with Guangzhou officials would undermine confidence in the pastors by calling into question their loyalty to their congregants, many of whom are undocumented migrants or have strained relationships with Chinese authorities for other reasons. Among Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou, in fact, the Chinese state is sometimes spoken of in ways that resemble talk about witchcraft. It is a malevolent and unseen force to which any number of social problems can be attributed, and any perceived alignment with the Chinese state can be as undermining and destructive as a witchcraft accusation. At the same time, pastoral authority in Pentecostal churches is understood as deriving largely from the pastors’ ability to invoke the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. Enemies are defeated through divine favor, and the pastors are expected to have the power to bring such favor and prosperity to the congregants. For example, the pastor in The Tower often declared that the churchgoers would be shielded from police apprehension in the week to come, and his words were expected to take immediate effect as they were uttered. Petty deals with Chinese civil servants to safeguard the existence of the church fit poorly with this idea of the divine protection offered by Pentecostal churches.

The burden of keeping a low profile is arguably greater for Pentecostal churches than for other forms of Christian communities. Prosperity-oriented Pentecostals view the church buildings and campuses not simply

as infrastructure to call upon God's presence through church services, but also as proof of God's favor. Church buildings are therefore not only important sites of interaction among congregants; they also provide Pentecostal migrants with an opportunity to display their identity to the host community. The rejection of tradition and lack of historical territorial roots allow for great flexibility with respect to the form of Pentecostal church buildings. Churches can choose a physical expression that suits the environment in which they operate and the messages they want to convey. Whichever form the church takes on, visibility is crucial. A number of studies of African Pentecostal churches in Europe and North America have documented the centrality of land and church buildings to Pentecostal migrants' self-presentation,⁴ and attractive churches have been strategically important in challenging stereotypes of black immigrants as marginal or disadvantaged people. Christian migrants in Guangzhou from a diverse range of African countries expressed frustration, therefore, with government restrictions against establishing visible churches that would improve the public perception of Africans, build self-assurance within the migrant communities by putting wealth and organizational capacity on display, and counter an allegedly common misconception among Chinese that Africans are inevitably poor. Nigerian informants were also concerned with the negative reputation Nigerians have acquired in Guangzhou due to drug crimes and regret the lack of opportunity for using churches to project a more positive image.

Invisible People

The spatial marginality of The Tower is mirrored by the daily lives of many of its members, whose immigration status varies. Some are itinerant traders who only come to Guangzhou for a few weeks at the time. Some are well-to-do Africans with Chinese residence permits. Some are migrants fresh off the plane with valid thirty-day entry visas, and some are students. However, the largest group in 2009 comprised undocumented immigrants who entered China on valid travel documents and stayed beyond their expiration.

African migrants in The Tower—whether or not they have valid visas and residence permits—describe life in China as hard. Few of the members have learned Chinese and they are therefore unable to communicate verbally with most local citizens. They have left kinship networks and community-based support systems behind in their home countries. Business relations, social interactions, and even intimate relationships are often marked by high levels of distrust. For many, frustrated ambitions to remit or save money represent an additional source of stress. These sorts of difficulties are shared by African migrants of different religions and denominations, but they are particularly prevalent among Nigerians because of the particular dynamics of the migration flow from Nigeria to China.⁵

The Tower is clearly identifiable as a migrant church by the issues addressed in the sermons. The pastor names the challenges of being a migrant and trader in China, upon which all the congregants stand and identify

specific problems they are struggling with, speaking and shouting and reinforcing their message with body language and sometimes glossolalia. The pastor then reaffirms that God sees their situation and will mend it. He is quite specific in his prophecies, declaring, for example, that members will receive e-mails from Nigeria with orders worth a million dollars, have immunity against harassment from the police the following week, or be granted visas for onward migration to Europe. Deliverance from illness is not a frequent topic of the prophetic pronouncements in *The Tower*, as the congregation is overwhelmingly young and able-bodied and health is a less pressing concern than wealth and visas. However, in 2009 an outbreak of avian influenza in China and the death of a young congregant from an unidentified illness served as reminders of the threat of disease. The pastor reassured the congregants of his power to protect them by referring to his past success in shielding migrants from the 2003 SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic:

I preached a special message against SARS that year, and declared that nobody—no foreigner in this land—would contract SARS. I declared it by the power of the prophetic voice. And at the end of it, there is not any record of any hospitalized foreigner in this land from SARS. Because I stood up and declared it. (*The Tower*, October 2009)

The quotation demonstrates how, in narrative terms, the pastor's declarations are accomplished at the moment they are uttered.

The foremost source of authority for prosperity-oriented Pentecostal churches is the evidence that congregants have indeed obtained wealth in China. Such success stories prove that the "seed money" these thriving businessmen and women give during the services yields a profit; the words of blessings from the pastor materialize; the wealth they offer in the church is, in turn, reinforced by God. However, the pastor in *The Tower* expressed frustration over his well-to-do congregants' reluctance to put their good fortune on display through public testimonies. For the successful business owner, such testimonies would almost inevitably lead to requests for loans and favors from less fortunate church members. Migration-related testimonies, by contrast, do not put those who testify in a tough spot and undocumented migrants who narrowly escape police controls, as well as established traders who succeed in obtaining residence permits, happily give thanks publicly during the service.

"It's hard to be invisible here when you're black," a Nigerian migrant in Guangzhou remarked tongue-in-cheek. Indeed, the Chinese authorities could have swiftly apprehended a large number of undocumented African immigrants. However, the capacity of the institutions charged with enforcing immigration legislation in Guangzhou is already overstretched. According to a BBC estimate, seven hundred immigrants from Nigeria alone were in Chinese prisons in 2009 (BBC News 2009). There are no designated migrant deportation centers in China, and Africans incarcerated for immigration

offenses share cells with foreign and Chinese inmates who have committed other crimes. Repatriated migrants I interviewed in Nigeria described communication problems both with the detention officers and among inmates during incarceration in China.

The increasing pressure from the Chinese public to deal with the “immigration problem” encourages local authorities to show that they are taking action (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference 2008). Chinese citizens and African migrants alike describe the time leading up to the Chinese New Year celebration as a politically sensitive period when the police are particularly vigilant and make more arrests than usual. A comprehensive and systematic apprehension of undocumented immigrants, however, is currently beyond the capacity of law enforcement institutions in greater Guangzhou. There are also deficiencies in the national legal framework that regulates immigration, which was not designed for a situation of high immigration pressure, although a new and comprehensive immigration law will take effect July 1, 2013 (see Xinhua 2012).

The likelihood of being apprehended is thus relatively small, but this presents little comfort to the hapless migrants who do end up in Chinese prisons due to expired visas. At the time of the fieldwork they faced a fine of CNY 5,000 (about US\$800) and deportation at their own expense (to be doubled under the reformed legislation). Those with insufficient money to pay for their release and repatriation may remain imprisoned for months or even years. In order not to end up in such a situation, undocumented migrants take care not to attract attention—for example, by living in places with few other Africans, limiting their travel, avoiding public places at certain times of the day, and keeping a distance from potential troublemakers (Haugen 2012).

The Chinese authorities have few means of controlling and transmitting information to the population of undocumented migrants. Therefore, the ongoing contact between the Public Security Bureau and leaders of unregistered African Pentecostal churches, though unofficial, offers a valuable channel of communication with the members of the migrant communities. This channel was used, for example, when the Public Security Bureau needed to disseminate information about a temporary exit visa scheme in November 2009. Several Nigerian pastors in underground churches received an anonymous computer-generated cell-phone text message with information about the measure and explicit requests to pass on this information. While individual Chinese officials are often accused of taking advantage of the Pentecostal churches for personal enrichment, this incident demonstrates that the relationship between the churches and Chinese authorities extends beyond such opportunistic behavior. In fact, African Pentecostal churches are used to reach immigrant communities by governments in many parts of the world (Knibbe 2009). The Chinese case is exceptional only insofar as official government policy unambiguously bans unregistered churches while at the same time using these churches actively in policy implementation at the local level.

An Alternative Geography with Migrants Center Stage

In contrast to the spatial marginalization of the church and its congregants, The Tower presents an alternative geography where the African Pentecostal migrants take center stage. Here, Africans in Guangzhou are placed at the controlling end in the global power geometry with respect to both material and ideological flows (see Massey 1991). “You are the head, not the tail,” the pastor often reminds his parishioners, upon which they stand up to loudly declare themselves and greet each other as winners, conquerors, and children of rich men.⁶ The sermons write the migrants’ journey to Guangzhou into a greater historical narrative in which Africans are the primary agents for proselytizing and China is a territory ripe to be won over for God. Individual quests for wealth are part of this narrative, as God is expected to bestow this-worldly rewards upon those who work for him.

Africans are the main vehicle for the global spread of Christianity for two main reasons according to the Pentecostal Christians I interviewed in Guangzhou: First, Africans, unlike Europeans, are willing to migrate anywhere in the world to spread the word of God, while seeking new economic opportunities. The zeal and strength of Africans was seen as far superior to that of “white men,” who according to some were simply not strong enough to face the persecution to be suffered by those who bring Christianity to China. Second, Europeans are seen to have abandoned their mission, both in their greed during the colonialization of Africa and in their rejection of the true forms of Christianity. Social liberalism in present-day Europe was highlighted as a gross departure from genuine Christian values, and the ceremonial nature of traditional European Catholic and Protestant sermons was perceived as an obstacle to direct contact with God. The Nigerian congregants, most of whom were ethnically Ibo, acknowledged a debt to Europeans for bringing Christianity to Africa, but they placed the responsibility for the global evangelization of the Gospel today with Africans. As one congregant said,

The Africans and the Africans in diaspora are going to become a people to be marveled at. ...Nigeria[ns], in spite of the amazing level of frustrations and challenges we have as a nation, we have not left the world without making our own contribution. We have released to the world more missionaries, more missions, and more ministers than any other nation in our own level and capacity. Most of the greatest and thriving churches that truly understand the council and purpose of God today come from that nation, and they are spread all over, from Ukraine, right up through Europe, right up through South and North America. (The Tower, October 2009)

The importance placed on *truly understanding* God’s purpose illustrates the purported supremacy of Pentecostal Christianity over other beliefs, including other Christian denominations. Africans are not only portrayed

as the main vehicles for the global spread of Christianity, they also represent superior insight and are assigned the responsibility to define what forms Christianity should take.

The members of The Tower are invited to join an imagined community of globally dispersed worshippers. The services display visual images of global connectivity, such as photos of racially mixed groups of followers and various national flags. Pastoral exchanges are also central to The Tower's international vision, and the church is both at the sending and the receiving end in such exchanges. The pastors invited to give services in Guangzhou were invariably Nigerian nationals, but they were introduced with a detailed listing of the countries in which they had previously preached. The proclaimed ambition of the head pastor at The Tower is to plant branch churches in Nigeria. If he succeeds, he will contribute to the trend toward a dispersion of churches established by migrants in exile into their founders' countries of origin (Adogame 2004). Another international trend in the spread of Pentecostal churches is that of "reverse mission"—the work of missionaries from developing countries to win converts in the traditional Christian heartlands of Europe and the United States. A spectacular example of this is the Nigerian-led megachurch Embassy of God in Ukraine (Freston 2010), which, as the above quotation illustrates, was well-known among African migrants in Guangzhou. Growth and reverse mission may remain central components of the identity discourse in African migrant churches across the world even when their actual practices are highly localized and target other African Christian migrants, rather than members of the host societies (see Asamoah-Gyadu 2010; Koning 2009).

The theology of The Tower not only places its African congregants at the center of God's mission, but also describes them as being in the right place at the right time. China is soon to be won over for God, the pastor proclaims. By conflating the existence of a nation with the life of a human being, he argues that the Chinese government will fall, and Chinese followers will be recruited to The Tower by the thousands. At the sermon held in conjunction with China's sixtieth anniversary, he reassured the congregation that things were about to change in China despite the apparent stability of the existing order:

There is a level of pride, is a level of patriotism that you will see in the average Chinese: The display, the pomp and pageantry. An amazing display. Look at the artistic display that they put forward. That shows what a nation can do in just sixty years of independence....God gives nations seventy years, and then he turns the event....So, when you look at China celebrating the sixtieth anniversary I give you a word to hold on. Hold it in trust from God, for it shall come to pass. Ten more years, and we will no longer remember this place because there will be such a mighty change and shaking that we will say: "We used to know how things used to be in 2009. Just 2019, and everything has changed." Praise the name of the Lord! (The Tower, October 2009)

Among the church members themselves, opinions regarding the potential for incorporating China into a global Christendom were divided. Some believed that the Chinese had the capacity to become Christians and worked to spread what they believed was the true form of the religion among girlfriends, friends, and strangers; others did not think that the Chinese would ever be capable of opening their hearts to God. An African from the Francophone Pentecostal church mentioned above argued that Christians ought not to stay for too long in an atheist country like China. He could proselytize among the Chinese, but marrying one of them was out of the question “because the Chinese are not Christians—even those who have converted do not understand Christianity too well.” Yet, he argued, “God must love China,” judging by the rapid economic development the country has undergone.

In the worldview presented in *The Tower* sermons, Guangzhou is heralded not only as a field for evangelization, but also for its potential to deliver divine promises of prosperity through its trading opportunities. The mission to spread the word of God is not perceived to be at odds with the quest to earn money, but rather the two activities are regarded as mutually supportive. The sermons place the congregants in the subject positions of successful businessmen, despite the fact that many of them arrived in Guangzhou with hopes of finding salaried work, bringing neither investment capital nor business connections. Congregants are encouraged to believe that they will become wealthy in China regardless of limited capital, business experience, and networks of buyers in Nigeria. On the one hand, the pastor promotes prudence and patience in business, and uses Biblical metaphors to describe the difference between seeking short-term gain and building a sustainable enterprise. On the other hand, the church makes promises of fantastic wealth to be bestowed upon the congregants, a “prosperity gospel” that is a common feature of Nigerian Pentecostal churches (Meyer 2004). As one sermon proclaimed,

Now the Lord gave me a covenant in this place. I keep on announcing it, and one day, the gospel will come to pass. Two hundred and fifty millionaires—multi-millionaires!—will emerge out of this Ministry and surprise this generation when it comes to doing the work of the Lord. [Congregants shout “Amen!”] Two hundred and fifty multimillionaires, and Father, I see fifty of them saying amen right now. (*The Tower*, November 2009)

The message is reinforced in the sermons by references to successful businessmen in Guangzhou who built their fortunes when they were members of *The Tower*. A lack of belief in good fortune and future wealth is equated with weak faith in God. Opinions among my informants differed with respect to how literally prophecies should be understood. Some believed the message quoted above to be a true head count of future millionaires, whereas others interpreted it more figuratively as an encouragement to keep struggling for economic success in Guangzhou. However, everybody

agreed that a successful Sunday service should bring about joy and instill in people a sense of confidence in their economic prospects.

A strong confidence in God's power to protect health and generate wealth affects both business and migration decisions. When some migrants took advantage of the exit visa scheme to return to Nigeria, others strongly condemned their choice: "It is wrong to leave China before you have made it," an economically successful Nigerian migrant declared. "Those people who have not yet made money but return now because of the amnesty should not have given up! You should believe it is possible for God to let you make money." This man's visa expired a long time ago, but his initial export of car parts to Nigeria had paid off. He had invested the profits in high-end fashion and had begun exploring opportunities for exporting Chinese solar panels to his home city. During our interview, he was browsing eBay for cars to buy through a straw-man in the U.S. and ship to Nigeria for resale. Networks, skills, some start-up capital, and—in his own words—unrelenting faith in God's power had placed him in the control of small but profitable international trade flows. He had indeed become "the head, not the tail." However, for migrants who can barely rustle up enough money to sustain themselves, the promise of fantastic wealth further widens the gap between expectations and reality in ways that may discourage them from making steps to incrementally improve their situation.

Reinforced Ethnic Isolation

The geographic imagery promoted by The Tower and other African Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou affects relations between the migrants and members of the host society. In the course of my study from 2009 to 2011, undocumented migrants of all faiths reported that their situation had become more difficult: Police controls of documents were more frequent, the prices of visas on the black markets were higher, laws against renting apartments to foreigners were more strictly enforced, social unrest and acts of crime committed by some immigrants projected a negative image of Africans in general, and the costs of renting spots in the trading malls had increased. The marginalization experienced by the migrants was reinforced, rather than alleviated, by the messages conveyed in the African Pentecostal churches.

A tendency toward seclusion among Pentecostal Africans can be explained in part by the Chinese policies toward nonregistered religious societies. Given that there is lower tolerance for organized religion practiced by Chinese than by foreign citizens in China, the African pastors have an incentive to restrict the number of Chinese members in their churches. Most of the churches therefore do not provide arenas for extensive interethnic exchanges. Despite the missionary ideals projected in the sermons, actual recruitment drives in The Tower were mainly directed at winning Africans over from competing churches, not converting nonbelievers. The discourse about Africans as vehicles for bringing God to China is kept very general and does not refer to ways of actually reaching out to potential Chinese

converts. To the extent that Chinese Christians are part of the expansionary plans in The Tower, they are kept at arm's length through house churches. Nigerian pastors may perform certain ceremonial functions there, but the African and the Chinese churches are kept apart organizationally. According to one pastor,

The Chinese church does not use our name. This would be a provocation—it would seem like the church was forced upon the Chinese people from the outside. It should be self-managed by the Chinese. Everything there is in Chinese. But we know it is [The Tower]. They have Chinese pastors who used to be paid for by us. (Interview, December 2009)

In fact, many churchgoers were unaware of the phenomenon of Chinese house churches altogether. And while the conversion of the Chinese to Pentecostal Christianity was a central tenet of The Tower leadership, it was not discussed among rank-and-file members, many of whom, as we have seen, were skeptical that the Chinese could ever truly embrace Christianity.

The prospects for conviviality are affected not only by Chinese policies, but also by the ways in which the churches and congregants react to the hostile Chinese legal environment. These reactions must be understood in light of a Pentecostal moral and spiritual universe where a perpetual warfare is being waged between good and evil. The rhetoric of conversion in Nigerian Pentecostal churches leaves little room for compromise. In the words of Ruth Marshall, “Underlying the bid to convert the other is the need to *convict* and *overcome* him, to identify him with the demonic that needs to be destroyed for salvation and redemption to occur” (2009:14, emphasis in original). As mentioned above, such a worldview poses problems in the day-to-day running of churches that rely on concessions to avoid harassment from Chinese authorities. The following incident at The Tower provides an example of the concrete expressions such contradictions take on. From the beginning of 2009, an increasing number of male congregants were bringing their Chinese girlfriends to The Tower. Nothing was said about the matter until one Sunday the pastor fervently condemned romantic relationships outside of marriage in his sermon. The episode was described to me as highly embarrassing for the couples present. Moreover, it took them by surprise, since sexual morality had rarely been mentioned in the church and they had expected the Chinese girls to be welcomed into the community of Pentecostal Christians. The sermon had the effect of discouraging all members from bringing Chinese guests, estranging some of the Africans who had brought their girlfriends, and sending out a negative message about inter-ethnic relationships more broadly.

The sources of interethnic distrust extend beyond the Chinese government restrictions and their immediate effects. The ways in which The Tower creates and sustains systems of meaning affect the potential for inter-ethnic conviviality very broadly. Claims about meaning entail the potential of its absence or negation, and attempts at defining what is meaningful thus

open up the possibility of exploring what has been referred to as “the limits of meaning” (Engelke & Tomlinson 2006). The existence of meaning is not taken for granted in *The Tower*; the congregants are asked to actively and continuously work to create it. “You should know *why* you came to church, why Jesus has labeled you, why *you* are born again, when there are billions who are not labeled by God,” the pastor stresses, passing severe criticism on those who come to church out of habit and think of themselves as Christians simply because they were born into a Christian family. The rituals of traditional Catholic and Protestant churches in general, and the Chinese state churches in particular, are dismissed as meaningless, as opposed to the meaningful spontaneous worship in *The Tower*. This kind of dualism of “meaningful” versus “meaningless” is applied on other binaries, such as “good” and “bad.” Good actions performed by Christians are acknowledged by God and thereby infused with meaning, as opposed to good deeds performed by non-Christians, which are empty of meaning. “There are different kinds of goodness,” the pastor explained. “Many people who are not religious can still be good. They are moralists. But you must have faith to which to add goodness [in order] for this goodness to be acknowledged by God” (*The Tower*, November 2010).

The strict delimitation of what is meaningful denies the possibility of a common moral community that spans religious divides. The Chinese are placed on the side of the meaningless since ethnic and religious boundaries in this case are nearly identical (according to African Pentecostals who do not recognize self-ascribed Christians in China as authentically Christian). Pentecostal theology is thus one of many sources of distrust between African migrants and Chinese in Guangzhou, and attitudes toward others that are focused on religious faith are especially difficult to challenge through lived experience and everyday interaction. For example, acts of kindness should be interpreted differently depending on whether they are performed by Christians or non-Christians according to the view expressed in the above quotation. Religion can thus be a source of particularly entrenched negative stereotypes.

The Pentecostal churches thus offer comfort, encouragement, and familiarity to migrants in difficult situations, but they fail to offer modes of orientation in the host society. Some of my informants claimed it was best to keep a distance from Chinese culture altogether because of its “un-Godly” nature. Ideological rather than practical reasons were given for the reluctance, for example, to learn the Chinese language despite the obvious instrumental advantage of language skills in promoting two key objectives trumpeted by the Pentecostal churches: prosperity and proselytizing.

Indeed, there is evidence that such withdrawal is counterproductive to the migrants’ aspirations for economic advancement. While research from Europe has suggested that limited integration of Pentecostal African migrants can be experienced as unproblematic (Hunt & Lightly 2001), the situation in China seems to be different. The economic success of African traders in China relies on a good understanding of the host society. The business

environment is treacherous and fiercely competitive, and traders who have a network of reliable Chinese suppliers of goods and services are at a distinct advantage. The Tower, however, encourages members to ground their businesses in church-based economic networks, where established businessmen and businesswomen serve as brokers for newcomers. The use of African brokers, as opposed to direct trade with Chinese suppliers, increases transaction costs. This can be an economically sound strategy if the broker helps minimize risk in a business environment based on trust rather than legal contracts, but there is little evidence suggesting that the church ultimately provides guarantees against fraud. Members of The Tower have even been deceived in business relationships with fellow congregants, and in the cases I observed, the church leadership refrained from intervening in such conflicts. The unfortunate newcomers who had lost their money lacked both the skills and inclination to deal directly with Chinese business actors, and had no choice but to search among other church members for new brokers. The Tower also held limited potential as a social security network. The leaders who had legal residence provided some practical assistance to migrant members without valid visas, but financial assistance in cases of police apprehension or illness was offered only occasionally. In 2009 undocumented migrants with limited means to donate to the church constituted a large share of the congregation, and the need for assistance clearly exceeded the capacity. Upon realizing this, some members left for Pentecostal churches with more prosperous congregations. However, gaps between the migrants' expectations and the churches' ability and willingness to deliver upon their promises represented an unresolved issue in all churches catering to less affluent immigrants.

Conclusion

Guangzhou has emerged as a global center for manufacturing and trade, and the demographic and cultural diversity of the city is increasing in the process. This situation presents Chinese authorities with new challenges. Africans have brought with them religious traditions and aspirations that prove hard to accommodate within the existing Chinese regulatory system. African Pentecostal churches are subjected to informal forms of regulation in Guangzhou, under which they experience increasing spatial marginalization. The religious adaptation to this situation negatively affects the sociability of migrants. The geographical imagery that *assigns* meaning to the migration experience also *delimits* meaning in ways that erode the prospects of conviviality. The divisive rhetoric employed in The Tower promotes the withdrawal, rather than the integration, of African migrants into Chinese society. This withdrawal is paradoxical given the missionary ideology of African Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal proselytizing is not impeded by strong popular adherence to secular ideals or the characteristics of Chinese Christianity, but by the tight state regulation of religious activities in China. Unsanctioned African Pentecostal churches deal with the challenging political

environment in different ways—by restricting proselytizing to spaces outside the church, by indirectly discouraging Chinese from joining the church, or by inviting Chinese members and accepting the serious consequences of this choice. However, all options entail some form of estrangement from the Chinese people and society in which these migrants live.

The changing patterns of migration, forms of commerce, and social alignments that currently reshape Guangzhou have begun to receive due attention by scholars and the media. This article has demonstrated the importance of also exploring how migrants make meaning for themselves under circumstances they do not control, and how these meaning-making processes affect their social affiliations and relationships with the host society and in transnational networks.

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Notes

1. The definition of "Pentecostalism" is debated, and the term has been used to denote highly diverse practices and doctrines that may be found in Catholic and Anglican as well as self-ascribed Pentecostal churches. For the purpose of this article, "Pentecostalism" is defined as forms of Christianity that emphasize the direct, personal experience of God and the working of the Holy Spirit in the church—for example, through prophesy, the speaking in tongues, and healing (see Anderson 2004:103).
2. As noted by Kristine Krause, a comprehensive review of the influence of the African Pentecostal church in Western cities has yet to be written. For a list of some of the studies, see Krause (2011:431).
3. For more information about this view, see Burgess et al. (2010); Miller and Yamamori (2007).
4. See Adogame (2004); Hunt and Lightly (2001); Knibbe (2009); Knibbe and van der Meulen (2009); van der Meulen (2009).
5. Chinese visas are commonly obtained through commercial migration brokers in Nigeria. Combined with a high emigration pressure and suspicions cast on returned migrants who talk badly about their emigration destinations, the commercialization of migration from Nigeria often leads to wide gaps between the migrants' expectations and the reality they face. See Haugen (2012) for more information about migration from Nigeria to China.
6. Deuteronomy 28:13: "The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom."