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Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

African Pentecostal migrants in China: Urban marginality and alternative geographies of a mission theology

Heidi Østbø Haugen

Paper presented at the International RC21 conference 2011
Session 9: "Invisible migrants in the cities of the South"

Department of Sociology and Human Geography
University of Oslo
P.O. Box 1096, 0317 Oslo, NORWAY
h.o.haugen@sosgeo.uio.no

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Heidi Østbø Haugen

Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo

h.o.haugen@sosgeo.uio.no

Abstract

This paper explores faith-based constructions of mobility and spatial hierarchies among African migrants in Guangzhou, China. The city hosts a diverse population of foreign Christians: investors and professionals are increasingly joined by migrants from the global periphery. The religious needs of the former group have been accommodated through government approval of a non-denominational church for foreigners. By contrast, Pentecostal churches catering mainly to Africans operate in anonymous hotels and office buildings under informal agreements with law-enforcement officers. These churches are forced to relocate or shut down when their presence becomes too conspicuous. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and video recordings of sermons in one such church, with a predominately Nigerian congregation. The marginality of the churches is mirrored by the daily lives of the church-goers: many are undocumented immigrants who restrain their movements within and between urban areas to avoid police interception. The Church leadership encourages members to exercise spatial discipline, which underscores their marginality in the urban environment. However, the Church also presents an alternative geography in which 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. Third, Guangzhou is heralded for its potential to deliver divine promises of prosperity. The geographical imagery of the mission theology assigns meaning to the migration experience, but simultaneously reinforces the distrust and ethnic isolation created by everyday experiences of spatial marginalization.

Introduction

Shut out all the non-believers, 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, November 2009*)

This statement, uttered by a Nigerian pastor in an underground Pentecostal church in the city of Guangzhou, China, stirs up strong emotions. As the pastor continues to speak, the sound of his voice is drowned by shouts of agreement and prayer. The sermon promises the congregants – mostly African migrants – that the aspirations for wealth that inspired them to travel to Guangzhou will soon be met. The quotation illustrates that Pentecostal churches represent an important source of encouragement for many Africans in China. However, it also carries a message of reclusion, suggesting that religion under certain circumstances erodes the sociability of migrants.

This paper explores faith-based constructions of mobility and spatial hierarchies among African Pentecostal migrants in Guangzhou, and how these affect prospects of conviviality. The analysis contributes to the growing body of literature on the international spread of Pentecostalism

facilitated by migrants from the global Southⁱ. 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 studiesⁱⁱ. However, the astonishing growth in the Pentecostal population worldwide largely takes place in the global South, and developing countries are at the recipient as well as the sending end in the international flows of migrant missionaries. The Pentecostal churches established by non-Western migrants in cities in the developing world have so far received modest scholarly attention (notable exceptions include Jeannerat, 2009; Sommers, 2001).

While Pentecostal churches set up by African migrants can be found in many parts of the world, the challenges they face in trying to make a place for themselves vary greatly. In China, the relations between the secular state and the faith-based immigrant communities in its midst are tense. Doing research among African Pentecostals in Guangzhou is therefore associated with particular methodological challenges, and this paper starts by describing the research setting and methodology employed in the current study. Secondly, it discusses the ways in which the churches negotiate the tight regulation of religious activities in China. Thirdly, the paper points out the parallels between the spatial marginalization of the churches and the confines experienced by the congregants, many of whom are undocumented migrants. The final two sections develop the central argument in this paper: That the geographical imageries of the Pentecostal mission theology assign meaning to the migration experience, but simultaneously reinforce the distrust and ethnic isolation created by everyday experiences of spatial marginalization among African migrants in Guangzhou.

Research site and methodology

The data for this paper is collected in the city of Guangzhou in Southern China. Together with Hong Kong, Guangzhou is the trading capital of the booming industrial economy in the Pearl River Delta. The city was a pioneer in exploiting the new opportunities offered by the economic reform era from 1979 onwards (Xu and Yeh, 2005). Despite 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 public areas, and are consigned to state-sanctioned religious institutions or private spaces.

Guangzhou has experienced a sharp rise in African Pentecostal Christianity over the past decade. Two interrelated trends form the foundation for this development. First, China's export volumes have increased rapidly during this period, and the volumes exported to Africa experience a steeper growth than Chinese exports overall (Haugen, forthcoming-a). Secondly, Guangzhou attracts a growing number of foreign entrepreneurial migrants, and is a centre for the immigration from Africa to China. Most of these migrants do not fit easily into the social polarization thesis associated with Saskia Sassen's concept of "the global city" (Sassen, 1991): They are neither poor migrants staffing

low-paid service jobs, nor hyper-mobile and wealthy professionals. Rather, they belong to the middle class and have various degrees of previous international experience. Despite their limited individual financial assets, their aggregate effect on world trade flows has become profound, and they contribute to the consolidation of Guangzhou's position as a global trading hub (Lyons, Brown and Li, 2008).

There are more than a dozen African Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou today. Some have existed for more than a decade; others have been established very recently. They hold services in English, French, and Portuguese, as well as African languages. Much of the fieldwork for this paper was carried out in one of the many prosperity-oriented churches in Guangzhou headed by Nigerian pastors. Details about the location, size, and organization of this church are intentionally left out of the analysis for confidentiality reasons. The church is given the fictive name *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 cater to an ethnically homogenous congregation.

The research design combines three forms data collection. Firstly, participant observation was undertaken through interaction with the members of The Tower and weekly church attendance from September to December 2009, and in May and November 2010. Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out with members and leaders in The Tower, as well as migrants from other churches and non-Christians in Guangzhou. Some of these informants were re-interviewed after they had repatriated to Nigeria during a fieldwork in Lagos during February and March 2011. Third, video recordings of the Sunday services over a one-year period in The Tower were obtained from the church management, and eleven hours of these tapes were transcribed in full. The data from all three sources was analyzed in the NVivo software for qualitative research.

Building trust over an extended period of time was important due to the convoluted politics of running an African Pentecostal church in Guangzhou, as well as the evolving intricacies of the relationships between the church members. Some issues were too sensitive to explore through interviews. For example, open criticism of preachers is rare in prosperity-oriented charismatic contexts (Coleman, 2006:40). Church attendance and informal interaction with church members provided opportunities for uncovering sources discontent among congregants without asking informants to explicitly criticize leaders in the church. Nigerian Pentecostal pastors depend on their followers for authority and financial success, and absence from church represents a powerful means of expressing discontentment. Participant observation gave information about the circumstances under which congregants stopped coming to church, and further details about these events were solicited through carefully worded questions in interviews.

Pentecostal religiosity, to a much greater extent than mainstream Protestantism, is geared towards publicly expressing religious feelings (Meyer, 2008). The churches are not only places for worshipping God; they are 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

other forms of physical expression are required on the part of the congregation as well as the pastor in order to establish a direct link with the power of God. Despite my lack of prior experience with Pentecostal churches, it was remarkably easy to participate in the sermons. The spirit of equality expressed through the effortless verbal exchanges in the sermons contrasted with the highly hierarchical structure exhibited outside the church services. My modest financial contributions to the ministry placed me at the lower end of this hierarchy, although I enjoyed some respect for adding global character to the church as a European. Rank-and-file members of The Tower, myself included, were occasionally reprimanded in subtle but stern ways for speaking out of turn or breaking other unspoken social rules.

Invisible churches

On a cold Sunday morning in December 2009, worshipers start trickling in around ten o'clock to attend the service at The Tower. They enter a large, non-descript building, and pass by Chinese private security guards who are instructed not to ask Africans to identify themselves. Nothing in the foyer indicates that a religious service is taking place, but people know where to go. When they go into the service, they are greeted by a large banner bearing the name of the church, but the banner, a pulpit, and some other props hardly conceal that the room is meant for other purposes. The hall fills up little by little in the course of the first hour of the service. It is not heated on weekends, and most people keep their jackets on until they are warmed up 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 Sundays. Yet, they do not stay around to socialize, but disappear quickly into buses and taxis.

The African churches in Guangzhou are spatially marginalized as a consequence of government restrictions, as illustrated by the above description. They operate in anonymous hotels, restaurants, and office buildings without any visual advertising, and strive to minimize their visibility in order to avoid direct confrontation with Chinese law enforcement officers. Religious activities in China are monitored by the Religious Affairs Bureau, a department under the State Council. The branches of the Religious Affairs Bureau in China's provinces and major cities 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, which involves taking actions against unregistered and thereby illegal religious groups. The local branches of the Public Security Bureaus are subject to pressure concerning how they regulate religious activities from multiple sources, including local governments and – in China's most internationalized cities – foreign embassies (Carlson, 2005; Ying, 2006). Decentralized control and local sources of political pressure have led to considerable regional variations in the concessions made for foreign religious groups in China.

The Christian immigrants in Guangzhou are referred to government-sanctioned places of worship. The largest of these is the Sacred Heart Cathedral, a church under the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Their English services attract large crowds of African immigrants as well as some Chinese nationals. Photos of Africans in their Sunday bests streaming of the Sacred Heart

Cathedral appear in virtually all Chinese and foreign newspaper articles on the emergent migrant communities in Guangzhou. The services are held in a short and simple manner, and some informants describe them as “resembling meetings, not worship”. Discontent with the services in the official Chinese churches has pushed Catholic and Presbyterian Africans, as well as the born-again, towards the underground Pentecostal African churches in Guangzhou.

Under Chinese laws, foreigners can establish religious communities by obtaining a license from the local authorities that is renewable on a yearly basis. In 2009, only one foreign church operated under official approval in Guangzhou: the non-denominational *Guangzhou International Christian Fellowship (GICF)*. The church is only allowed to accept foreign passport holders at their services, a directive that they regret, but comply with. The GICF congregation is mixed, with a high number of Western expats and overseas Chinese, and their liaison with the local Religious Affairs Bureau speaks Chinese fluently. Several church leaders in Guangzhou suggested that the official recognition of the GICF was not motivated by a genuine desire to accommodate the diverse religious needs of the city’s immigrants, but rather by the need for a showpiece to prove that the government is upholding the freedom of religious assemblies by foreigners. They also believed that African churches would stand small chances of obtaining official licenses if they were to apply (interviews 2009). Processing the new applications might be beyond the current capacity of Guangzhou’s Religious Affairs Bureau. Moreover, licensed churches are monitored by the Bureau, which requires substantial resources, especially if the churches preach in languages other than English.

Regardless of their chances of succeeding to officially register, African church leaders have reservations against applying. First, some of the church leaders are undocumented immigrants who try to avoid any contact with government officials. Secondly, African churches occasionally found smaller branches of Chinese house churches, which are much more vulnerable to government prosecution than churches for foreigners. The house churches are run by Chinese pastors on a day-to-day basis, but African pastors carry out some key functions, such as the baptism of new members. Thirdly, 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 form a church, the group has publically acknowledged that they exist and identified their leaders, making it difficult to continue to operate underground.

Although the African Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou are not registered with the government, many operate with the informal consent of government authorities. The churches are tolerated as long as their presence remains relatively inconspicuous, but are under constant threat of being shut down or forced to relocate. Some pastors have been deported as a result of conflicts with local authorities. Even within the African migrant communities, some people see the Pentecostal churches as an unwarranted source of conflict between migrants and Chinese nationals. Hence, the

churches, while contributing to a more diverse religious landscape in Guangzhou, do not represent a trend towards greater pluralism defined as diversity that is accorded legitimacy (Peletz, 2006:310).

The Public Security Bureau apparently approaches the African Pentecostal churches in a very organized manner. They have used the pastors as a channel of communication with undocumented immigrants. For example, several African pastors in underground churches received an anonymous, computer-generated SMS in November 2009 with information about a temporary exit visa scheme instituted by the Public Security Bureau. The message requested them to pass the information on to members of their congregation. The idea of employing Pentecostal churches to reach immigrant communities is not new: In Europe, for example, social policies have been implemented with the assistance of African Pentecostal churches (Knibbe, 2009). In the case of China, however, there is a striking contrast between the uncompromising official policy and pragmatic approach adopted on the ground. Facing similar challenges, the foreign churches have found it useful to share experiences and coordinate their responses, and foreign pastors in Guangzhou have formed an informal council to discuss these issues.

The informal agreements under which the churches are allowed to operate are sensitive to the African pastors as well as the Chinese government officials: The churches deny that they are governed, just as the authorities deny that the churches exist. One pastor vigorously rejected that he “cooperated” with the police, but conceded that he had “police friends” with whom he could “communicate and can get information” (interview 2009). Pastors may undermine their own authority by openly acknowledging that they have formed alliance with Guangzhou officials. Such agreements can raise questions about their loyalty to their congregations, where many members are undocumented migrants or have strained relationships with Chinese authorities for other reasons. Furthermore, pastoral authority in Pentecostal churches derives largely from their perceived ability to invoke the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit for prosperity. Enemies are defeated through divine favor, and the pastors bring such favor onto the congregants, for example by declaring that none of them will be apprehended by the police in the week to come. Petty deals with Chinese civil servants to safeguard the existence of the church fit poorly with the idea of divine protection.

Over time, the Pentecostal churches have been forced to move further away from the busy African trading areas to neighborhoods where their presence is less conspicuous. Some have left the city of Guangzhou altogether to settle in police districts that are known for being more lenient. There has been a parallel movement of undocumented migrants out of Guangzhou to places where the likelihood of police interception is smaller (Haugen, forthcoming-b). When The Tower was made to relocate, the congregation shrunk. Some may have been prompted to leave the church by the sense of insecurity generated by the eviction. Others resented the inconvenience of travelling to the new location. Internal conflict broke out in the wake of the move, in which key economic contributors in the congregation accused the pastor of embezzlement after he selling off inventory.

Discreet negotiation rather than overt confrontation is the norm when the churches are forced to move. The Tower's leaders were given enough notice to find an alternative space after being instructed to relocate. All contact with the police took place outside the church services. However, some churches have adopted a more confrontational line, and advocated for rights to preach openly. The best known among these is The Royal Victory Church, which has allowed foreign journalists to document their activities. The police have entered this during church services on several occasions, and two of its pastors have been expelled from China (Bandurski, 2010; Rennie, 2009).

The invisibility of the Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou's urban landscape represents a striking contrast to the ubiquitous signs of born-again Christianity in many African cities, where Pentecostals use urban space to position themselves not only vis-à-vis rival churches as well as other religions. Most members of The Tower started their journey to China at Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos, Nigeria. Outside the airport terminal, an equally large mosque and church are symbolically placed side by side. Closer to the city centre, eye-catching Christian signs and conspicuous Pentecostal church buildings are ubiquitous. In the large open-air markets, pastors use portable loudspeakers to preach and recruit new followers. Along the expressway out of the city, the largest Pentecostal missions have built their own self-contained communities, complete with schools, universities, hospitals, banks, shops, and, of course, mega-churches.

A number of studies of African Pentecostal churches in Europe and North America have documented how central the quest for land and church buildings is to self-presentation among Pentecostal migrants (Adogame, 2004; Hunt and Lightly, 2001; Knibbe, 2009; van der Meulen, 2009). On the one hand, the rejection of tradition and lack of historical territorial roots allow for great flexibility with respect to the physical form given to Pentecostal churches. On the other hand, prosperity-oriented Pentecostals do not simply view the church buildings and campuses as infrastructure to call upon God's presence through church services: They serve as proofs of God's favor. Church buildings are more than sites of interaction among congregants: they provide Pentecostal migrants with an opportunity to display their identity to the host community. Attractive churches are strategically important in challenging stereotypes of black immigrants as 'marginal' or 'disadvantaged' people (Hunt and Lightly, 2001). Among Africans in Guangzhou, there is widespread annoyance with the common misconception among Chinese that Africans by definition are poor. Moreover, Nigerian informants expressed frustration with the negative reputation Nigerians have acquired due to drug crimes. The Religious Affairs Bureau deprives African Pentecostals of the opportunity for building self-assurance and improving public perceptions by putting wealth, organizational capacity, and religious identity on display through establishing visible churches in Guangzhou.

Invisible people

The marginality of the African Pentecostal churches is mirrored by the daily lives of the congregants living as undocumented immigrants in China. The immigration status of members of The Tower varies: There are itinerant traders who only come to Guangzhou for a few weeks at the time. There are well-to-do Africans with Chinese residence permits. There are migrants fresh off the plane with their 30-day entry visas still valid. There are some students. But the largest group is made up of undocumented immigrants who entered China on valid travel documents and have stayed behind after these expired.

Congregants – whether or not they have legal residence – describe life in China as hard. Few of them 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 interaction, and even intimate relationships are often marked by high levels of distrust. Frustrated ambitions to remit or save money can be an additional source of stress. People who do well economically prefer to keep a low profile in order to avoid demands for money and favors from other migrants.

The sermons in The Tower address the problems commonly experienced by migrants and traders by naming them and assuring the congregants that God sees their situation and will mend it. The pastor declares the members to be immune against harassment from the immigration police, to be destined to receive e-mails from Nigeria with orders worth a million dollars, and to be granted visas for onward migration to Europe. In narrative terms, such statements are completed at the moment they are uttered (cf. Coleman, 2006:54). The testimonies presented by the congregants towards the end of the service are rarely about business achievements since display of economic success invites less fortunate members to ask for loans and favors. By contrast, people who narrowly escape police controls or manage to obtain residence permits happily give thanks in public.

The acknowledgement of a shared experience of hardship lends moral support to the migrants who find themselves in a difficult situation. However, the services also remind undocumented migrants of their precarious situation, not only because of what is being said, but also through the places that are left empty by church members who are imprisoned and await repatriation. Undocumented immigrants caught by the police without a valid visa face imprisonment, a fine of CNY 5000 (about 800 USD), and deportation at their own expense. Those with insufficient money for the fine and plane ticket may stay imprisoned for months and years. People are careful about not attracting attention, for example by limiting travel, avoiding public places at certain times of the day, and keeping a distance to potential trouble-makers. But as one informant remarked: “It’s hard to be invisible here when you’re black”. The care they must take when traveling back and forth from the church services is but one reminder of that.

An alternative geography with migrants center stage

Against the spatial marginalization of the church and its congregants, The Tower presents an alternative geography with Africans take center stage. “You are the head, not the tail”ⁱⁱⁱ, the pastor often reminds the parishioners, and declares them to be winners and conquerors. In the geography propagated by the church, Africans in Guangzhou are placed at the controlling rather than receiving end in the global power geometry, both with respect to material and ideological interconnections (cf. Massey, 1991).

Materially, Guangzhou is heralded for its potential to deliver divine promises of prosperity through its trading opportunities. 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. 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. However, the church also presents promises of fantastic wealth that can be bestowed upon the congregants at any time:

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 – multimillionaires! – 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 by references to successful businessmen in Guangzhou who have built the foundation for their current fortunes as members of The Tower.

Ideologically, Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou claim to be “doing the work of God” by incorporating China into a global Christendom. This mission is not perceived to be at odds with the quest to earn money; rather the two activities are regarded mutually as supportive. Jesus’ disciples were all business men, the pastor claims, and business men will be the ones who continue spreading Christianity further. More specifically, the group identified as pivotal to the global evangelization of the Gospel are Africans:

The Africans and the Africans in diaspora are going to become a people to be marveled at. [...] Nigeria, 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 put in this quotation on *truly understanding* God’s purpose illustrates the assumed 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. Europeans are seen to have abandoned their mission, both in their greed during the colonialization of Africa and in their rejection of true forms of Christianity. Moreover, some

informants believed that white men – unlike Africans – simply were not strong enough to face the persecution suffered by people who bring Christianity to China (interviews 2009).

There are some highly publicized examples of successful “reverse mission”, i.e. missionaries from developing countries who travel to Europe and the United States and win Christian converts. The most spectacular example of this may be the Nigerian-led megachurch *Embassy of God* in Ukraine (Freston, 2010). While reverse mission remains a central component of the identity discourse of many African migrant churches, their actual practices often target African Christians rather than the indigenous population (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010; Koning, 2009). The Tower is no exception: Individual members have adopted the discourse of being vehicles for bringing God to China, while the church activities almost exclusively directed at African migrants. Many congregants were unaware of the phenomenon of Chinese house churches altogether, since the issue was too sensitive to be discussed in plenary. Recruitment drives were mainly directed at winning Africans over from competing churches, not converting non-believers.

Although The Tower caters predominantly to African Christians, the members are invited to join an imagined community of globally dispersed worshippers. The services display visual images that allude to global connectivity, such as photos of racially mixed groups of followers and various national flags. Pastoral exchanges are central to The Tower’s international vision, and the church is both at the sending and the receiving end in such exchanges. The visiting pastors are invariably Nigerian nationals, but the countries in which they have preached are duly listed when they are introduced. The Tower operates in China only, but pastor’s proclaimed ambition is to plant branches of in Nigeria. If he succeeds, he will contribute to the trend towards a dispersion of churches established by migrants in exile back into their founders’ countries of origin (Adogame, 2004).

Reinforced ethnic isolation

Pentecostal churches are important sites of social and economic networking. The ethnic isolation many African migrants experience is reinforced when Chinese citizens are prohibited from their sites of worship as a result of the legal restrictions put religious activities in China. The Pentecostal churches’ responses to the government restrictions strain inter-ethnic relations further. The ways in which the churches and congregants react to a hostile legal environment must be understood in light of a Pentecostal moral universe where there is a perpetual spiritual warfare between good and evil. In the struggle for individual and collective “overcoming”, there is neither room for frailty, nor compromise. This poses problems in the day-to-day running of churches that rely on concessions to avoid harassment from Chinese authorities.

An incident at The Tower illustrates the difficulties associated with exercising caution while keeping up an uncompromising image within the congregation. The pastor had an interest in limiting the number of Chinese who attended the service in order not to provoke the police, but did not express this concern publicly in the church. An increasing number of African congregants brought their

Chinese girlfriends along. One Sunday, however, the pastor fervently condemned romantic relationships outside marriage in his sermon. Congregants who had brought their girlfriends later described the situation as surprising, both because sexual morals hardly ever were brought up during the services, and because they thought their Chinese friends would be welcome additions to the community of Christians. The sermon discouraged members from bringing Chinese guests and estranged some African congregants, in addition to sending out a negative message about inter-ethnic relations more broadly.

The sources of inter-ethnic 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. 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 the limits of meaning (Engelke and 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 are born into a Christian family. The rituals of traditional Catholic and Protestant churches in general, and the Chinese state churches in particular, are demised as meaningless, as opposed to the meaningful spontaneous worship in The Tower. The dualism of “meaningful” versus “meaningless” crosses rather than overlaps other binaries, for example between “good” and “bad”: Good done by Christians is acknowledged by God and thereby infused with meaning, as opposed to good deeds performed by non-Christians:

There are different kinds of goodness. 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 tight delimitation of meaning denies the possibility of a common moral community that spans across religious divides. Since ethnic and religious boundaries in this case are nearly identical, the Chinese are placed on the side of the meaningless. Pentecostal theology is far from the exclusive source of inter-ethnic distrust; negative stereotypes of the Chinese are found among Muslim as well as Pentecostal Christian Africans in Guangzhou. However, stereotypes that are focused around the lack of religious faith are difficult to challenge through lived experience. Based on the worldview expressed above, acts of kindness will be interpreted in radically different ways depending on whether they are performed by Christians or non-Christians. Some informants chose to keep a distance to Chinese culture altogether, for example by refusing to learn to speak Chinese. Language skills could have been instrumental for achieving prosperity and succeed in proselytization. Ideological rather than practical reasons were given for the reluctance against attempting to learn it. This relates to the Pentecostal rhetoric of conversion, which leaves little room for compromise: “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” (Marshall, 2009:14, emphasis in original). In The Tower, one of the things identified to be destroyed was the Chinese government, as the following example from a sermon held in conjunction with China’s sixtieth anniversary exemplifies:

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)

Research from Europe has suggested that Pentecostal migrants’ limited integration in the host country may be experienced as unproblematic (Hunt and Lightly, 2001:122). While this may be the case for students and professional migrants in Western countries, a good understanding of the host society is crucial to success for African traders in China. In a treacherous and fiercely competitive business environment, traders who manage to establish a network of reliable Chinese suppliers of goods and logistics services are at a distinct advantage. The Tower encourages members to ground their businesses in church-based economic networks, where congregants with established businesses serve as brokers in the Chinese market for newcomers. The use of brokers increases transaction costs, but is perceived to minimize risk in business agreements based on trust rather than legal contracts. However, adherence to the same church ultimately provides no guarantee against fraud: Members of The Tower were deceived in business relationships with fellow congregants, and there was often little they could do about it (interviews 2009-2010). In such situations, informants who lack the skills and inclination to deal directly with Chinese business actors may have no choice but to search among the church members for new brokers.

Conclusion

Guangzhou is emerging as a global center for manufacturing and trade, and becomes more demographically and culturally internationalized in the process. In the course of a decade, Africans have become a sizable immigrant group. They have brought with them religious traditions and aspirations that prove hard to accommodate within the existing Chinese regulatory system. Under the informal forms of regulation that have developed in Guangzhou, African Pentecostal churches are subject to increasing spatial marginalization. The religious adaptations to this situation affect the sociability of migrants. In the case discussed in the paper, the result has been an erosion of prospects of conviviality: Religion infuses the migration experience with meaning, but not in ways that offer modes of orientation in social life outside the church. For migrants whose lives are already marked by a mismatch between expectations and reality, the comfort of familiarity offered by the church simultaneously gives rise to ethnic isolation and distrust.

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ⁱ For the purpose of this paper, "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.

ⁱⁱ As noted by Kristine Krause, a comprehensive review of this exploding field of research is yet to be written. For a list of some of these studies, see (Krause 2011:431).

ⁱⁱⁱ 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".