

## Diaspora Times Two

“Don’t Matter” by Senegalese American R&B artist Akon is streamed and played illegally on YouTube in China through a host computer located in West Africa. The base is cranked to the max. Akon sings about love. Sometimes music is the only way to thwart the empty feeling brought by homesickness. Thousands of miles away from his country of origin, Soulemane Kaba, a native of West Africa in his early 20s, works from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. each day with his partner in their clothing boutique in Guangzhou, China. The mall, an intricate maze-like network composed of shops where Africans sell everything from clothing to bootleg DVDs, zigzags below a hotel in the Xiao Bei neighborhood—a community of Africans. Kaba speaks at least three languages—French, English, and most recently Cantonese. He hopes to eventually study computer science in the United States, however for now he must save money and continue to operate his small store in China.

The recent emigration of Africans to China was spurred by the 1997 East Asia financial crisis. Xiao Bei, located in Guangzhou, a city of about 13 million people, is a neighborhood where merchants, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers from Africa live and sell their products. The size of the African population is estimated to be about 100,000, coming mainly from the Western African countries of Mali, Togo, the Gambia, Guinea, Ghana, Senegal and Congo. Many people have small shops located in one of the malls while others are stationed in the alleyways that surround the main market. At night, between 9 and 11 p.m., Xiao Bei comes to life with thousands of people. Merchants getting out of work flock to the market to congregate and eat dinner.

Xiao Bei is an example of African enclaves forming throughout Asia. Concurrently, Chinese communities are emerging in Africa, spurred by heavy Chinese investments. Adams Bodomo, Associate Professor of Linguistics at Hong Kong University, notes that such communities function as bridges between the source community (the homeland of the immigrants) and the host community (in this case, the wealthiest Chinese province of Guangdong). My project will be a photographic essay of the two Diasporas—Africans in Xiao Bei and Chinese in Accra, Ghana. Focusing on a family in each neighborhood, I want to capture the essence of the community through images of the challenges and triumphs of the everyday lives of people in each community. This includes the challenges of immigrating to and starting a business in a new country. Professor Bodomo has expressed a willingness to work with me on the project. Evidence of the emerging global village suggests that such inter-group mixing previously believed unlikely, creates cross-group tolerance and cooperation, critical to meeting the expected and unexpected challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My project is likely to succeed, given my recent trips to Guangzhou and my growing list of contacts in Accra. During the summers of 2012 and 13, I traveled to China where I met and photographed groups of people frequently overlooked for the very ordinariness of their lives. The first time I went to China I travelled with my college roommate, trying to take pictures of people I didn't know without being impolite. Last summer, I returned by myself, reconnecting with friends from the first visit and making new ones. Professor Wang Gin, Associate Dean of the School of Anthropology and Sociology at Sun Yat-Sen University, introduced me to the little-studied, recent phenomenon of emerging African neighborhoods. Residents of Xiao Bei are very friendly. Even without a guide or personal connection, I wandered through the market where I met people and took photographs. Having bell hooks' *Class Matters* as my traveling companion,

I began to imagine the power of a photo essay making visible the everyday challenges faced by Africans living in Xiao Bei. In preparation for such a venture, I am continuing to read and take courses in African Studies, including introductory Sociology and African American Studies and an African American literature course.

Among the Sun Yat-Sen University professors and graduate students with whom I continue to correspond is Shan Shan, a Chinese graduate student who is conducting field research in a Ghanaian church in Xiao Bei. Ghanaians represent the fourth largest African group living in Xiao Bei, Shan Shan has offered to introduce me to the congregation when I return to Guangzhou. She has connected me with her Ghanaian colleague, Patrick Adonoo, a member of the congregation. Adonoo will take me to his church, which will serve as my point of entry.

Assisting me with developing connections in the Chinese community located in Accra, Ghana is SU graduate student Kwame Otu. A Ghanaian, he is working to connect me with Chinese entrepreneurs living in Accra. Otu has offered to help me photograph the mirror image of the story of Africans in Guangzhou—Chinese investing heavily in Africa. In Accra, I will undertake the collection of images illustrating the process by which Chinese immigrants have established a Chinese enclave in an African setting. By the time I arrive in Accra, I expect to have developed the connections necessary to make the best use of my time in Ghana.

The final project will bring together stories collected from both groups: Africans living in Asia and Asians living in Africa. A comparison of the two perspectives is expected to provide insights into the process of international relocation driven by economic challenges and opportunities. Both the Chinese and African Diasporas are voluntary. Documenting the lives of Africans in Guangzhou and Chinese in Accra holds the potential to make visible shared values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams. By capturing the humanity of both groups, I hope that my work will

contribute to the breakdown of race-based stereotypes that sustain fear and hatred when divergent cultures become next-door neighbors.

The primary expense of this project is research travel. I propose to fly from Syracuse to Guangzhou via Hong Kong, from Guangzhou to Accra via Hong Kong, and return from Accra to Syracuse. Travel expenses, including transportation, travel visas, meals and housing, are estimated to cost \$5,260. Research support, including camera memory cards, photo paper, and processing, is expected to total \$400. To cover travel and research expenses totaling \$5,660, I am requesting \$5,000 from Honors.

## **Timeline**

The project schedule follows:

Step I, May 8 to 18, 2014: Visit and photograph Xiao Bei, Guangzhou, China

Step II, May 18 to June 7, 2014: Visit and photograph Accra, Ghana

Step III, Summer 2014: Develop, analyze, and outline photo/essay project

Step IV, Fall 2014 to Spring 2015: prepare final presentation

Step V, Spring 2015 TBA: Present results