

# Counting Beans: Some Empirical and Methodological Problems for Calibrating the African Presence in Greater China

by

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## Abstract

In the last 10 years, much research has gone into finding answers to key questions about the African presence in Greater China (mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan). We now have fairly good answers to questions like why Africans go to China, the major cities Africans live in and visit, what they do there, and how they are received by the Chinese state and the Chinese people. What has, however, been elusive to date is calculating fairly exact or accurate numbers about Africans in China. Apart from issues about the usefulness of such an enterprise, there are a number of reasons that make this an arduous task, including the fact that accurate and realistic official records hardly exist on the numbers of foreigners in China, the preponderance of 'qualitative' research does not allow for accurate extrapolations of Africans in China based on extensive questionnaire surveys, and the very nature of the linguistic phrase 'Africans in China' may cause confusion - whether it means Africans permanently living in China or whether the term includes those on frequent visits as well.

In this paper we discuss these and other challenges for quantifying the African presence in China before proposing some methods and strategies that we have used to estimate the numbers of Africans in China in any one year at half a million people, and that we are using to constantly update quantitative measures to continue monitoring the African presence in Greater China. Beyond these issues of numbers the discussion here has implications for larger questions about the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methodologies in the humanities and social sciences.

## **Introduction**

With more than 50-odd journal articles published on the African presence in China, this area of study has now become an established sub-discipline within the larger discipline of Africa – China relations studies. Many questions are often asked about this migration and diasporization process and we now have fairly good answers to these questions, such as why Africans go to China, the major cities Africans live in and visit, what they do there, and how they are received by the Chinese state and the Chinese people. We know that most of these Africans come to China as traders though a sizeable number also comes to study. These Africans are found in major cities in the mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan (what we refer to as Greater China in this paper). Within mainland China, the main cities where Africans are found in are Guangzhou, which has the largest and most vibrant presence, Yiwu, Shanghai and, of course, Beijing, the capital of the country. We are also beginning to construct elaborate profiles of African lives and their interactions with ordinary Chinese and the Chinese state. Many works including Bodomo (2012) for most parts of Greater China, Li Zhigang et. al. for Guangzhou etc, Bodomo and Ma (2012) for Guangzhou and Yiwu, Bodomo and Silva (2012) for Macau, etc. have painstakingly looked at African presences in all these cities, documenting the opportunities that Africans are getting in their China sojourn, but also the problems they face, such as run-ins with the police for allegedly entering, staying, and working illegally in China.

The question a precise answer to which has however been elusive to date is: how many Africans are in China? Calculating fairly exact or accurate numbers about Africans in China has been an intractable problem and it is the subject matter of this paper to address this problem, not so much to provide accurate figures but to put issues in perspective and to suggest ways we can approach this research problem. Whether or not this enterprise of calculating exact numbers of a large diaspora is a useful undertaking is itself a question that can be raised, and which indeed has been raised. In effect one might ask whether we are indeed not into counting beans here<sup>1</sup>.

In subsequent sections of the paper we espouse the problem, provide ways in which we have approached it, and propose ways to move forward on this. We end the paper by going beyond issues of “counting beans” to larger issues about research methods in the humanities and social sciences.

### **The Problem: Why is it Difficult to Get Accurate Statistics in China?**

One of the biggest problems in doing research in China is the difficulty one faces in an attempt to get statistics about foreign residents in China and statistics about entry-exit numbers at border check points. First, there is no central unit for immigration, like the Immigration Departments of many countries, in China, whether at the central Government level or at the provincial Government level. In Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai, or Beijing one cannot just walk to a particular office and ask to be given official government figures about Africans in China or even in that city alone. The nearest source one gets to about the exact official number of foreign residents is a *China Daily* report of September 16, 2013, that claims that “[T]here were 633,000 foreigners living in China by the end of 2012, up from 525,000 in 2010”, with Beijing alone having 118000 of these residents. (*China Daily*, September 16, 2013)<sup>2</sup>

However, the same report is quick to clarify that “[o]f those who received the permits, more than half are family members who came for a reunion and the rest are mostly professionals, executives and professors, according to the ministry.

Most are from the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia and Germany, and mainly live in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.”

This statement would clearly exclude the vast numbers of small-scale African traders who ply their trade in Guangzhou; it would also exclude most African students on government scholarships in China. As of now, no government department or official has been able to pinpoint official numbers of Africans in China or those who enter and leave the country in any one year.

Indeed, if one considers the vast number of foreigners, not just only Africans, living in or frequently travelling to China with three to six months visa a year and constantly renewing them to stay in China, this figure of 633,000 professionals is only a tip of the iceberg in regards to foreign presence in China. Such a figure is ridiculously unrealistic and thus unreliable for any research scholar who sees hundreds of foreigners staying for longer periods of time in many urban centres in China.

Talking about research and observations by research scholars in China, the second biggest problem in accurately gauging the number of Africans in China is related to the research methods that many scholars have deployed to study the African presence in China. With the exception of works by Bodomu, Li et al (2009), Bork et al (2014), and Hall et al (2014) that have undertaken both qualitative and quantitative studies, many of the works, mainly sociological, anthropological, and journalistic in nature, have mostly pursued a so-called qualitative approach to the neglect and even disdain for quantitative approaches.

Many scholarly studies thus adopt more qualitative interview methods than quantitative methods of questionnaire surveys. This is especially so with the journalistic type, where someone just flies into Guangzhou and spends a few days, with a microphone in hand, asking people quick questions that require short answers and flies out to their station and the next day we read a sensational news headline: “Africans in China Face Racism”! Even the more sober academic, sociological and anthropological, participant-observation methods that should permit the author to stay longer and mingle with the research subjects shy away from interviewing large numbers of people. There are papers that have been written on Africans in China with the authors hardly ever interviewing more than 10 Africans, and some authors do not even go into Guangzhou at all<sup>3</sup>.

This kind of research with little empirical base can hardly address the issue of numbers or the quantity of Africans satisfactorily.

The third reason why the answer to the question, how many Africans are in China, is elusive, relates to the linguistic problem about the accurate semantic understanding of the phrase, *Africans in China*, itself. Bodomu (2012) painstakingly analyzes every element in this phrase *Africans \*in\* China*, including the exact definition of the term *African* (does it include only continental Africans or Africans in other diasporas?), the exact definition of the boundedness of *China* (does it include only the mainland or does it also include Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan?), and what it really means to be *\*in\* China* (are we talking of only legally resident Africans or does it also includes Africans who come and go regularly or who may even be undocumented?).

It is clear that depending on how one interprets this linguistic phrase, there would be varying estimates in an attempt to quantify the research subjects involved in any study of e African migration to China and the formation of diaspora communities there.

In the absence of reliable government statistics, one possible solution towards quantifying the African presence is for researchers to make informed generalizations and extrapolations based on quantitative, empirical studies. In the next section, we show how an attempt of this was made via five years of research on the Africans in China.

## **A Quantitative Survey (Bodomo 2012)**

In 2012, based on over five years of fieldwork in most of the major cities of China and in Hong Kong and Macau, doing qualitative, quantitative, and empirical surveys involving between 700 and 1000 Africans located in major cities, Bodomo (2012) and his research team painstakingly developed community profiles about age, gender, and nationality.

Hence, in this paper we discuss these and other challenges for quantifying the African presence in China before proposing some methods and strategies we used to estimate the numbers of Africans in China in any one year at half a million people, which we are using to constantly update quantitative measures to continue monitoring the African presence in Greater China. Beyond these issues of numbers, the discussion also has implications for the larger questions about the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methodologies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The results are summarized below.

### **General Statistical Profiles of Africans in China**

Collating the statistical profiles of the various cities in Greater China (mainland, Hong Kong and Macau) that we went to, we had 736 returned and valid responses, though our research team interacted with between 800 and 1000 people of African descent during this research project over five years.

In terms of gender distribution, as *Figure 1* shows, more than 80% of the Africans in China we surveyed were male. At the beginning of the African influx into China between 1997 and the turn of the millennium, African women were hardly seen among the trader populations. A salient socio-cultural feature of the African family system is that, in the average family business structure, it is usually the husband who travels to look for new sources of supply for the business, but with time the women began to travel out as well. As African men got to know China well, more and more women began to arrive and now, as shown, we have almost 20% of the survey population as women, including some rather young women who are yet to marry and establish a family business. This number is destined to rise as more and more females begin to do business, and study in China.

## Gender of Respondents

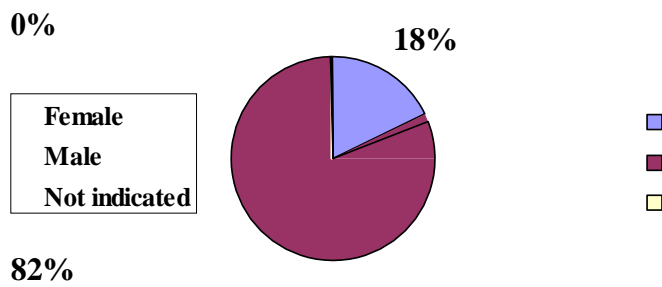


Figure 1: Gender of Respondents

With regard to levels of education, most of the respondents (683 out of 736, or 93%) have at least completed secondary education; among them, 288 have completed university/college, and 139 of them have completed postgraduate studies, as can be seen in *Figure 2*.

**Level of Schooling**

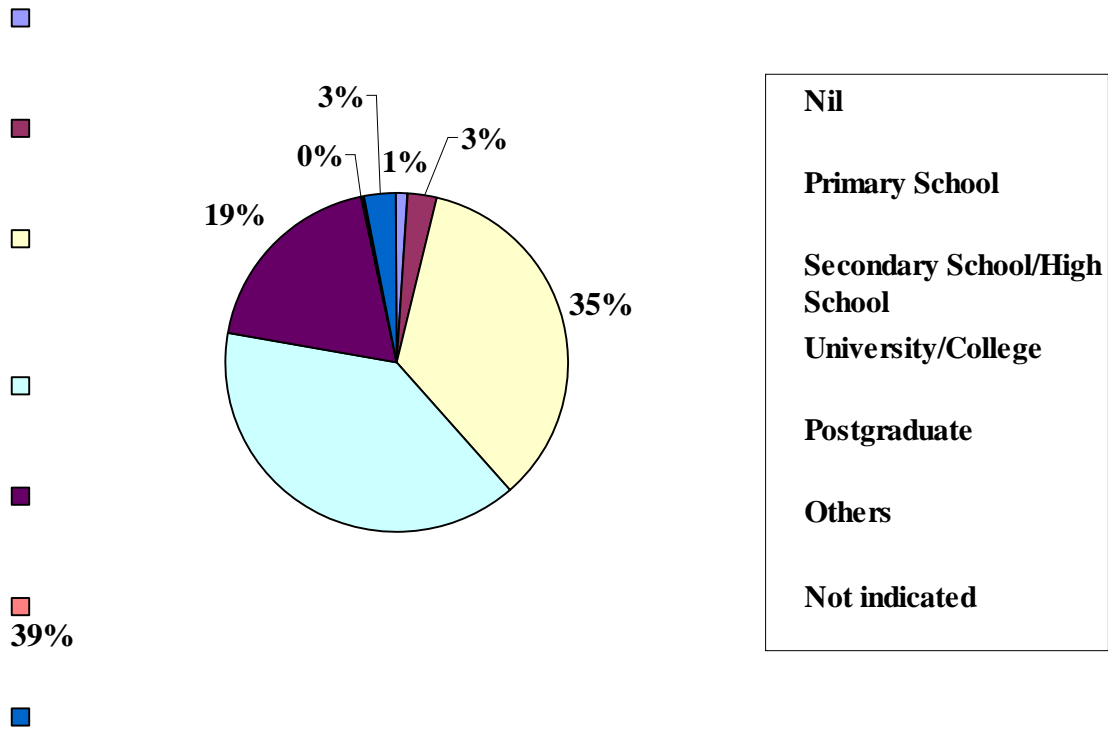


Figure 2: Level of Schooling

Most of the respondents (60%) choose to identify themselves as businessmen or traders.

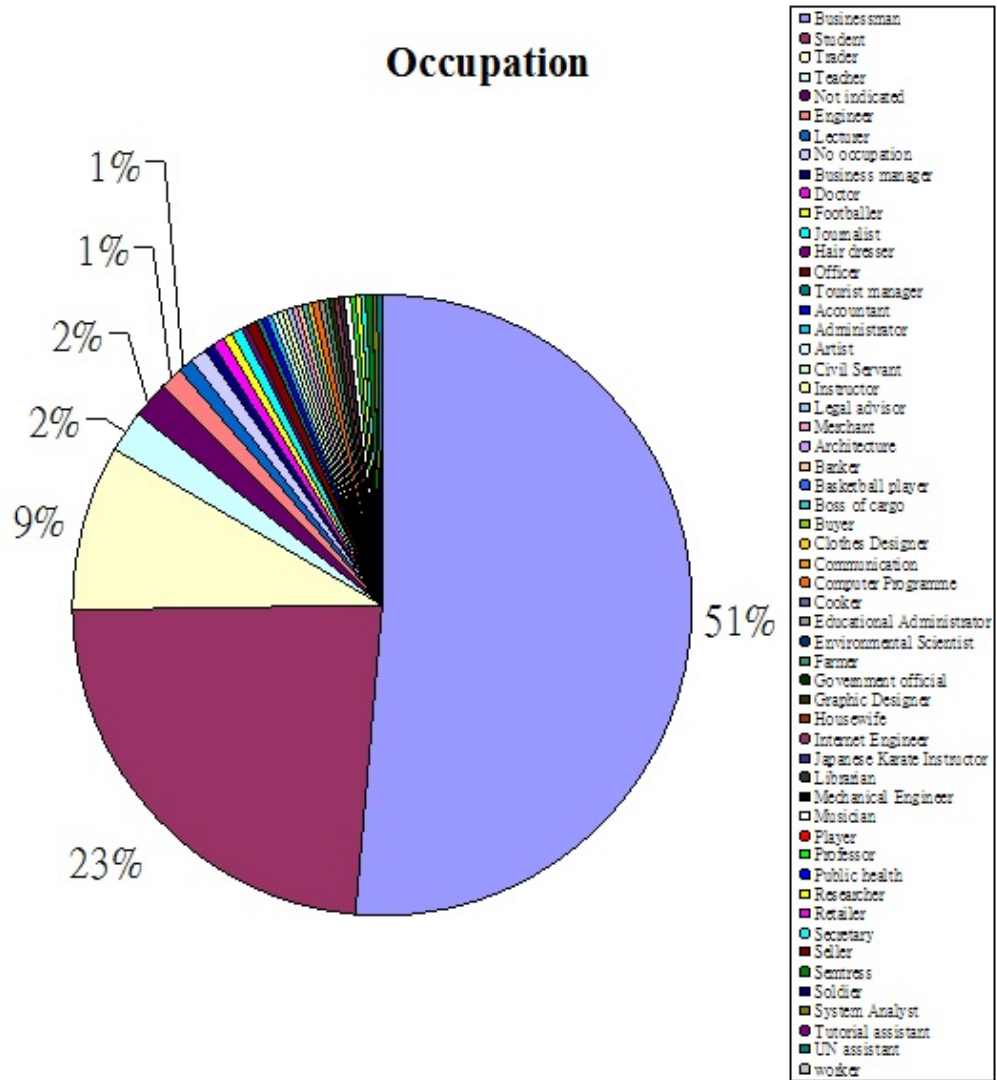


Figure 3: Occupation of the respondents



Figure 3 shows that, in terms of occupation, there are more traders or businessmen in China among the African migrants than any other profession, with more than 60% of them reporting their profession as such. The second largest group comprises of students (more than 20%).

Age-wise, most Africans in China are between the ages of 25 and 34, more than 60% of them, as shown in Figure 4. These figures indicate that this is a relatively young population that is in one of the most economically productive age brackets, which may vary from place to place but which can be said to be between the ages of 20 and 55, especially with regard to work involving physical strength.

#### Age Group of Respondents

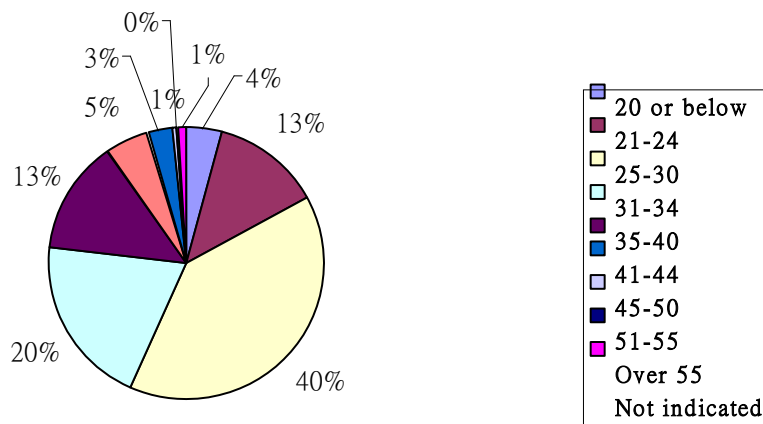


Figure 4: The Age group of the respondents.

One of the most crucial questions we had to frequently address early on in our research of the African presence in China was which countries these Africans come from. As can be seen in Figure 5, the top 10 countries of origins of the Africans in our survey group are Nigeria with 125, Ghana with 87, Mali with 51, Guinea with 43, Senegal with 42, Tanzania with 36, Congo with 34, Kenya with 33, Cameroon with 21, and Niger with 20 respondents, respectively. This list suggests that there are more West Africans in China overall, with Nigeria having the largest number by far.



This empirical, quantitative study reported above remains to date one of the most comprehensive that has been published on Africans in China.

Based on this five year research involving qualitative methods (sitting in diaspora community meetings, participant-observing at market scenes, going to Churches and Mosques with Africans), and quantitative methods (extrapolating statistics from our questionnaire surveys, asking community leaders about the number of the community members they believe live in China, and gathering statistics from the few sources that we could get such as the Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook which lists the number of Africans who stay overnight in hotels<sup>4</sup>), we came to the conclusion that there would be around 400, 000 to 500,000 Africans in China who are present in China in any twelve calendar months period, including at least 300,000 to 400, 000 traders, 30,000 to 40, 000 students, 4,000 to 5000 professionals, 10,000 to 100 000 tourists and 10,000 to 20 000 temporary business travelers.

We do not claim to be specialist statisticians but we are quite confident about our estimates, and some government sources have even started quoting our sources even after they first refused to attend to us. We have never said that these are Africans who live permanently in China, we say these are Africans who live in, and or frequently visit, China. The phraseology “Africans in China”, as mentioned above, is semantically a complex phraseology, it should not be interpreted simple-mindedly.

## **Reactions to Quantitative Estimations**

Whereas some government bodies have started using our statistics, even including the Guangzhou Municipal Academy of Social Sciences<sup>5</sup> and the Yiwu Municipality, some scholars have questioned these statistics, in rather surprisingly belligerent ways. For instance, Castillo (2014), which is a study of Africans in Guangzhou writes as follows:

“Over the last decade, Africans have been the most salient group of foreign residents and transient populations in the city. Interestingly, despite a lack of reliable data on the numbers, nationalities, and activities of these subjects, the hype about “Africans in Guangzhou” has led several researchers to either lay claim to non-rigorous calculations or accidentally reify rumours resulting in figures ranging from 1500 to 20,000 to over 100,000 (see Bodomo 2010; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Zhang 2008).

Unfortunately, these widely quoted figures are nothing more than speculation bolstered by media claims (ubiquitously reproduced) of an African population growing at a rate of 30 to 40% annually since 2003 (see Branigan 2010; Osnos 2009, amongst countless others).

Over the last five years, scholarship has attempted not only to determine numbers but also the nationalities of Africans assembling in Guangzhou. The latter has also proven difficult; the ease of obtaining Chinese entry visas is highly erratic and seemingly dependent on the particular relationship China is having with each African state at that time. Back in 2008–2009, Adams Bodom (2010) reported that the majority of people, in what he calls “the African community” of Guangzhou, were coming from Nigeria and Ghana and, to a lesser extent, from Mali and Guinea.” (page 5).

It is interesting that after this sweeping attack on not just only Bodom (2010) but other scholarly works that have tried to make sense of quantifying the African presence, Castillo (2014) offers no realistic new proposals about the numbers of Africans in China. This appears to be a rather dysfunctional approach to the study of a community that the world knows very little about. In fact, what Castillo (2014) and his related works rely on are dated estimates by some Chinese sources to state that because there are not more than 600 000 foreigners resident in China we cannot have up to 500 000 Africans in China. However, what eludes Castillo (2014) and related work is that another Chinese newsgroup, Xinhua News Agency as early as 2010 already estimates the number of foreigners in China as follows: “China has become a major destination for international migration with an estimated 2.85 million of the 26.11 million foreigners entering China for employment in 2007.”<sup>6</sup>

Extrapolations and “guesstimations” are not new in statistical studies of populations and their activities. It is not only quantitatively minded scholars of Africa- China relations studies, especially Africans in China, who guesstimate. Responsible social scientists and other scholars do it all the time: specialist police statisticians guesstimate crowd numbers all the time, organizers of demonstrations guesstimate all the time, opinion polls guesstimate voter and other population numbers all the time. Only dysfunctional scholars do not guesstimate and when a journalist or other public users come to talk to them they give convoluted answers and end up not giving any satisfactory quantification. It has been said that if one cannot quantify something one cannot come up with meaningfully useful generalizations for policy makers and the tax-payer, financiers of one’s research, only ending up with dysfunctional academic idiosyncrasies.

## **Discussion**

The discussions so far in this paper may give the wrong impression that this is only a matter of numbers, of counting beans. However the issues raised here have deeper implications about research methodology in the humanities and social sciences. We believe that there has been too much of a dichotomy between the so-called qualitative and quantitative methods. What we think is more plausible in the 21st century as migration and diasporization get complex is more of a *mixed methods* approach to these complex humanities and social science issues.

Pursuing an exclusively qualitative approach leads to a lack of a solid empirical base when it comes to addressing numbers in a diaspora community. The data from the five year research project mentioned above (Bodomo 2012) involves qualitative and quantitative methods in order to denote reliable demographic and sociological information. Having quantitative data available is essential in order to develop socio-cultural theories such as the bridge theory espoused in Bodomo (2010, 2012).

It is clear that any deductions from quantitative data have to be made carefully as these data can vary according to their interpretation as can be seen in section 2 above. In order to calculate numbers for Africans in China, one has first to define this phrase precisely; otherwise misleading generalizations can follow as a consequence.

The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches is often referred to as triangulation of methods. Neuman (2003:139) states that “(...) *triangulation of method* means mixing qualitative and quantitative styles of research and data. Most researchers develop an expertise in one style, but the methods or styles have different, complementary strengths. Since there is only partial overlap, a study using both is fuller or more comprehensive.”

In many cases this strategy is applied to detect and correct the problems that occur when research is conducted using one method only. While we agree that the use of either of the two methods is beneficial in these cases, we believe that triangulation, involving the combination of these methods, is advantageous for research to an even greater extent. It allows covering every aspect of various phenomena in complex and interwoven areas such as social sciences.

Another argument for combining the approaches is the facilitation of the interdisciplinary aspects of various academic fields involved in the study of Africans in China. Research on the diaspora links several different academic areas such as African and Asian studies, linguistics, sociology, political sciences, and history. This combination has been proven to lead to an in-depth study of the phenomenon; Thus it is obvious that with this interaction of different academic areas, an interaction of different methods is also inevitable to make sure that as many relevant issues as possible can be examined and analyzed accordingly.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to answer the question: how many Africans are there in China? We began by outlining some of the difficulties involved in getting reliable statistics about Africans and foreigners, in general, in China. Official figures are mostly absent and even where they exist they are not realistic and reliable. Whereas the Chinese government figures indicate that there were only 633 000 foreigners resident in China in 2012, we believe the numbers may be anywhere around 30 million foreigners present in China in any twelve calendar months, given that the official Xinhua News Agency quoted 2007 figures to be 26 million foreigners in China. In the case of Africans, our estimates, based on five years of quantitative, empirical methods mixed with qualitative methods of participant-observation, tell us that there were around 500 000 Africans present in Greater China in 2012.

This paper is not just about statistics, its goes beyond “counting beans”, beyond mere quantificational issues to address profound matters about methodology in the humanities and social sciences where we propose that the future lies not in a strong dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods but in a skillful mingling of the two main approaches.

As future research issues and agenda, academics and government officials need to collaborate more closely in addressing the issue of making available reliable statistics. Policy formulations in the field of Africa – China relations studies depend to a large extent on quantifying the African presence in China, and the Chinese presence in Africa.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Counting beans” is an idiomatic phrase in English that usually refers to being too picky and looking at the wrong issue rather than focusing on something else.

<sup>2</sup> More foreigners get China’s residency permits: China Daily, Sept 16, 2013: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/chinadata/2013-09/16/content\\_16972530.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/chinadata/2013-09/16/content_16972530.htm), accessed 10 November 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The first author is aware of this since he is a constant reviewer of journal articles in this fast developing field.

<sup>4</sup> The latest figures for tourists staying overnight in Guangzhou hotels in 2012 is 542, 500 from Africa as a whole. While these numbers may not mean that 542 500 Africans visited Guangzhou since one person can come several times and live in several hotels, it is when one compares these figures to those from other parts of the world that one may get an idea of how relatively more important the African presence is. Comparative figures for Europe (at 515000) and America ((US and Canada) at 333400) show that more Africans come there than Americans or Europeans. In fact, apart from Asians (at 1 430 000) the next largest group are African occupants of these hotels. In all, more than 48 090 000 “tourists” occupied hotels in Guangzhou in 2012 (Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook 2013, page 508).

<sup>5</sup> “非洲裔人员聚集事件调查：数万人非法居留广州 Fei zhou ren jing li jian xin chuang Guangdong” [Africans experience hardships in Guangdong], *Sina.com*, (July 20, 2009), <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sd/2009-07-20/095918257011.shtml> [accessed March 2, 2014].

<sup>6</sup> Xinhua News Agency. (2010). China plans draft immigration law, China Daily.