Network, Mobility, and Integration
Undocumented African Migrants in Guangzhou, China

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Abstract

• Based on ethnographic fieldwork within the African diaspora communities in Guangzhou, I examine the structural constraints faced by undocumented Africans under China’s stringent immigration policy and their various coping strategies. Specifically, I focus on “illegal” residence as a business strategy maintaining vital transboundary trade networks between China and Africa.

• This paper questions the strict division between mobility and immobility by recognizing the existence of a continuum between the two. Through examining migrants’ decisions and choices in navigating the gray area between the “legal” and the “illegal”, it further argues that the relationship between mobility and immobility is mediated by both the scale of analysis (local, national, and transboundary) and migrants’ different levels of interactions with local society.
Outline

• Introduction
• Illegal Immigration as a Transboundary Mobility Strategy
• Incentives for Migration
• African “Illegality” in Guangzhou
• Conclusion
Introduction

• Beginning during the late 1990s economic boom, an influx of thousands of African traders and business people, predominantly from West Africa, arrived in Guangzhou and created an African community in the middle of the southern Chinese metropolis.

• They chose to reside in Guangzhou, partly because of its wholesale trading markets supplied by nearby factories, also because of its warm weather, religious diversity and relatively tolerant political and economic setting.

• The African population in Guangzhou is extremely diverse and almost every country in Africa is represented in the diaspora. The majority of Africans in Guangzhou are traders from West Africa, but there are also significant numbers of East and Central African migrants.

• Most Africans in Guangzhou are young males who speak English, French, or Swahili rather than Chinese language and they are not integrated into the Chinese society.
Methodology

• The data for this research was gathered between April 2014 and June 2016 through archival research (government legal documents, Chinese language newspapers, and journals) and participant observation in the African markets in the Sanyuanli and Xiaobei areas of Guangzhou.

• African migrants are commonly found in two major areas of the city: the Xiaobei area, where most of the French-speaking Muslims gather, and the Sanyuanli area, where most of the English-speaking Christians frequent. The division between the two areas is not clear cut. In reality there is a constant flow of people and goods from one area to another.
Illegal Immigration as a Transboundary Mobility Strategy

• This research regards Guangzhou as a contact zone where China’s internal migration converges with international migration. Collaboration with Chinese migrants enables African traders to bypass some of the constraints imposed by state immigration law. It also expands their motility options beyond Guangzhou to other cities in China.
Incentives for Migration

• The African migration to South China has been boosted by the enormous growth of Sino-African trade relations and the increasing presence of mainland Chinese enterprises and small entrepreneurs from Africa. The influx of inexpensive Chinese products has significantly changed consumer culture and marketplace hierarchies in some African countries. To bypass the Chinese middlemen, an increasing number of Africans prefer to travel directly to China to purchase cheap consumer goods and bring them back for sale in Africa.

• Another major reason for African migration to China is the relative ease of obtaining a visa.

• Although most of our African informants migrated to China for economic reasons, not all of them traveled to China for trading purposes. Quite a number of them became traders involuntarily due to the lack of alternative mobility opportunities for foreign migrants in China.
Start-up Capital

• There are several ways for migrants to acquire start-up capital for the China trip, which generally involves various types of family obligations and social reciprocity.

• One is to combine all family resources, including loans from distant relatives or the sale of family assets, to send a son to China. This person is usually under great pressure to succeed in China due to all the family expectations.

• Another way is to work for an experienced trader or a relative for a few years (usually seven or eight) as an apprentice. At the end of his service, the person is offered a plane ticket to China and a modest sum of money as start-up capital.

• A third way is through the help of friends. One Nigerian informant reported that a friend who has been traveling to China for business paid for his China trip, on the condition that he would return the money in a few years.
African “Illegality” in Guangzhou

• Reasons for Chinese prejudice against Africans at the personal level include the following: traditional esthetic values, ignorance of African cultures and societies, influence of Western media, language barriers, and cultural misunderstandings.

• The local Chinese media also plays a key role in constructing a negative image of Africans as guilty of illegal immigration, drug dealing, sex offenses, and the spread of AIDS.

• At the government level, the influx of Africans to Guangzhou was first considered a positive stimulus to the city’s economy. However, as media reports of “black-related crimes” increased, African migrants soon became the target of the local government’s campaign.
Conclusion

• While some earlier traders became undocumented due to abrupt changes in state immigration policy and other personal contingencies, quite a number of newcomers travel to China with the intention of overstaying.

• This research questions the strict binary between the “legal” and “illegal” by recognizing the shifting range of immigration statuses between the two. Through examining that migrants’ decisions and choices in navigating the gray area between the “legal” and the “illegal,” it uncovers a liminal space between mobility and immobility in the lived realities of undocumented African experiences in Guangzhou. Instead of blaming individual Africans for the sanfei problem, undocumented African migration to China should be interpreted as a structural problem that is mediated by China’s growing presence in the African continent, the expansion of Sino-African trade relations, gaps, and contradictions in China’s immigration policy and the intersection of internal and international migration in global cities such as Guangzhou.
China in South-South Migration

• While some earlier traders became undocumented due to abrupt changes in state immigration policy and other personal contingencies, quite a number of newcomers travel to China with the intention of overstaying.

• Until recently, China has been known mainly as an immigrant-sending country. However, with the rapid diversification of its immigrant population, China will soon be facing similar problems as experienced by more established immigrant countries in the West.

• China’s situation is also different from the West in several important aspects. Despite China’s recent rise as a global economic power, the majority of the African informants for this research do not regard it as an ideal place to settle down. The primary goal for African traders in China is for economic profits, and most of them have displayed little interest in integrating into Chinese society. China is a springboard to more desirable destinations, such as Japan, Australia, and Europe.

• China’s situation is unique due to the uneven development in its rural and urban areas. The intersection between internal and international migration in Guangzhou has significantly compromised the implementation of the Guangdong anti-sanfei legislation at the community level. It also helps create a tension between immobility and mobility by leaving some space for undocumented African migrants to maneuver and survive in urban China.
Policy Implications and Recommendations

• From the African migrants’ perspective, success, or social mobility is not evaluated by their difficult life in China, but by improved living standards at home in Africa.

• In terms of Sino-African relations, the Chinese government is confronted with a dilemma between the predominance of the Sino-African friendship discourse at the central state level and the growing anti-black racism at the personal and local level. Since many African migrants conduct their transboundary trade activities in the informal economy, their contribution to Sino-African trade relations cannot be fully reflected in official statistics.

• From the Chinese state’s perspective, Africa has been treated mainly as a strategic political partner, not as an economic partner on equal terms. Chinese state propaganda has been focusing mainly on China’s economic aid to Africa, not on Africa’s contribution to the Chinese economy. This has unwittingly perpetuated negative stereotypes of Africans as poor and always in need of help. Without positive interventions from the Chinese state, the future of African migrants in China remains obscure. However, the increase in the number and diversity of foreigners in China will continue challenging the inconsistent and improvised nature of state immigration policy.
Thank you!