

Transient: A Descriptive Concept for Understanding Africans in Guangzhou

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Abstract: “Africans in Guangzhou/China” seems to have become a buzzword in international studies and China studies in the last decade. While there has been a large body of academic papers on Africans in Guangzhou, they described the daily lives of Africans with a common assumption that Africans are “immigrants.” This perception is at odds with the Chinese legal system and Africans’ self-definition. Based on continuous ethnographic fieldwork and following sporadic interviews with Africans in Guangzhou, this article argues that the classification and definition of migration produced by scholars should be used in the specific context of the destination countries, with consideration of the viewpoints of legal settings and the researched groups themselves. This article introduces the concept of “transient” in China, a typical non-immigration country, to describe Africans in Guangzhou who travel between Africa and China without desire to integrate into Chinese society and without possibility to be integrated into Chinese society.

Introduction

“Africans in Guangzhou/China” became a buzzword in international studies and China studies over the last decade. Over the past few years I have focused my research on Africans living in Guangzhou, China. I was first drawn to this research topic by my curiosity in why they moved to China and what they were doing there. However, when I was involved in an emerging interdisciplinary “Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network,” in which scholars shared my interest in this research topic, I began to notice a difference in how different scholars defined Africans in Guangzhou. This difference first came to my attention as I read academic papers about Africans in Guangzhou, which described the daily lives of Africans with a common assumption that they are “immigrants.” Some scholars found Africans who had lived in Guangzhou for more than ten years, so they termed Africans as “migrants” and talked about their adaption, integration, rights, and the issues of the second generation of immigrants, including discussing these issues with me. Could Africans in Guangzhou be classified as “immigrants” just because it seemed like they were interested in staying there and they, as a visible group, were always there? Due to my familiarity with the Chinese legal system, I felt

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v17/v17i4a5.pdf>

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ISSN: 2152-2448

that I had to disagree on how my colleagues defined Africans living in Guangzhou. Moreover, this definition was also at odds with how Africans in China define themselves. Throughout my fieldwork, many Africans would say things such as, “We are not immigrants here,” or “China is not an immigration country.”

This article introduces the concept of “transient” to describe Africans in Guangzhou who travel between Africa and China, without the desire to integrate into Chinese society and with very little possibility or opportunity doing so. The structure of analysis follows the factors affecting the categories of Africans in Guangzhou. It will first introduce the types of occupation, kinship, and visas of Africans in Guangzhou, which are the reasons why they are transients. Second, it will introduce the patterns of residence and social organization, which are the results of being transients. Before taking up this analysis, however, the article addresses the concept of “immigrant” and “transient” in the context of migration studies, as well as introducing the methodology applied in the study.

Immigrant and Transient

All migration theories are related to the typology of migration. The history of migration studies stems from the development of the classifications of migrants by different dimensions. However, these kinds of classifications are problematic. The dichotomies of migration studies—internal versus international, forced versus voluntary, temporary versus permanent, legal versus illegal—blur as both the motivations and modalities of migration become much more diverse.¹ In addition, King advances the argument of “migration as a dichotomized field of study,” in which epistemological dichotomies, such as macro versus micro, structure versus agency, emic versus etic, theoretical versus empirical are also stressed.² Collyer and Hass also stress the blurred edges of migration categories. They claim that the understanding of migration and migrants has focused on predominantly dichotomous categorizations based on time/space, location/direction, cause, and state’s perspective, and highlighted “fragmented migration” as a way of conceptualizing migration as a process, in which people shift from one categorization to another.³ Although the argumentation is accurate and profound, seemingly, fewer people have found the concept of “immigrant” itself problematic when it is placed in specific societies where the majority of people, their bureaucracies, or even “immigrants” themselves, have a clear categorization of “immigrant.”

The concept of transmigrants absolutely has its relevance when challenging the concept of “immigrant.” “The word immigrant evokes images of permanent rupture, of the uprooted, abandonment of old patterns and the painful learning of a new language and culture” as Nina Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristian Blanc-Szantion suggest.⁴ However, transmigrant, as a new category of international migration, emerged in the context of the United States where authors observed the experience of immigrants from Haiti, the eastern Caribbean, and the Philippines living in New York. In other words, the pre-requisite of being transmigrant is that “they settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of

daily life of the country in which they reside.”⁵ They thus can “build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement.”⁶ Obviously, the concept of “transmigrant” cannot be used to describe people who travel back and forth between their home country and host country, without the desire to integrate into the host country and with little or no opportunity to do so.

“Transient” is not a new term to describe the global phenomenon of people being based in their home country and then traveling back and forth frequently between other nation states. As far back as the early 1970s, Bardr Dahya described transients by using the example of young Pakistani men in Britain who arrived there unmarried or unaccompanied by women. The majority of these young men planned to return to Pakistan when they earned and saved money for their families. They lacked the desire to learn English and were less incorporated in British society.⁷ “Transient” is also used to analyze the phenomenon of the international labor market and brain drain with reference to unsettled skilled migrants. In the early 1980s temporary skilled transients become dominant with the decline of settlement emigration in Britain.⁸ Transients are temporary or contracted professional, scientific, and technical migrants who may move quite often between nation states.⁹ The core meaning of “transient” in migration studies is connected with the concept of “transit migration,” “return migration,” and “sojourner,” and is related to “guest worker” in the formerly self-declared non-immigration country, Germany.¹⁰ The exploration about the concept of “transient” is inspiring and illuminating. They are still constrained in the rigid discourse of dichotomous migration categorizations, however, and cannot present transients’ individuality, high mobility, non-integration, and their instability of current life and multi-possibility of future life. Although some scholars, e.g., Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar, have made important contributions addressing the relationships between mobility and immobility, localization and transnational connection, experiences and imaginaries of migration, and rootedness and cosmopolitan openness by challenging conceptual orientations built on binaries of difference that have impeded analyses of the interrelationship between mobility and stasis.¹¹ They thus provide a conceptual tool to define the group or the individual with high mobility, especially for Africans in Guangzhou, described in this article.

“Africans in Guangzhou” as an interdisciplinary research topic has been researched since 2007, when Zhigang Li, Brigitte Bertoncello, et al. presented their pioneering research.¹² There has been a large body of academic papers, which approached the analysis of this population from varied perspectives, with most scholars declaring that Africans in Guangzhou are immigrants. There have only been a few scholars who have found that Africans cannot simply be regarded as immigrants. The newly established diaspora, Africans in Guangzhou, is largely composed of temporary residents and visitors.¹³ Heidi Haugen classified Nigerians in Guangzhou into three groups: itinerant traders, students, and undocumented migrants.¹⁴ Robert Castillo used the concept of “transnational entrepreneur” to replace the mainstream typologies of the “immigrant.” As he stated, “to assume that most Africans in Guangzhou (or China) are (or desire to become) ‘immigrants’ is not only a point of resentment amongst those Africans living in Guangzhou...but more importantly a legacy of sedentaristic methodological

approaches that assume that settlement is normal, and treat distance, change, instability, and placelessness as abnormal.”¹⁵

The reality of international mobility is far more complex than what I could observe, and it is not necessary to challenge the existing developed framework for understanding international migration. However, this article will be embedded in the context of mobility rethinking to build up a feasible concept, “transient,” which can be accepted by our research subjects—Africans in Guangzhou—and have this fit within the context in which our research subjects are embedded—Chinese society.

Methodology

This article is based on continuous ethnographic fieldwork and following sporadic interviews with Africans in Guangzhou. Twenty-two months of continuous ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Guangzhou from July 2013 to May 2015 and was carried out in conjunction with a larger study on Africans daily experiences in Guangzhou. This initial fieldwork was followed up by four return trips to Guangzhou to meet with informants and follow up on the situation Africans faced after my move to Beijing in August 2015. I tried to keep in touch with my African friends in Guangzhou by WeChat and met with them in Beijing when they visited their embassies in Chaoyang subdistrict or while they waited for flights at the Beijing Capital International Airport. Moreover, I interviewed some African students from universities in Beijing who had visited African neighborhoods in Guangzhou or who knew the neighborhood through social media or news reports. When I was in Beijing, I also attended a conference held by the Bureau of Exit and Entry Administration of the Ministry of Public Security (the highest bureaucracy taking responsibility for the management of domestic foreigners in China) and twice talked with officers in the Division of Exit and Entry Administration Department of Public Security of Guangdong Province (also known by Africans as “Guangdong immigration”). My continuous fieldwork, sporadic revisits to Guangzhou, remote interactions with Africans, and contact with authorities contributed to firsthand materials concerning Africans in Guangzhou. I can also confirm what I have abstracted from my materials is accepted by my African informants, as well as corresponded with the Chinese legal system and local management.

During my fieldwork, I encountered several social realities that contradicted the concept of “immigrant,” and this led me to develop the descriptive concept of “transient” for this article based on three sets of criteria. First, most Africans are traders and do not have complete families in Guangzhou. They keep close connections with their relatives who are still living in Africa and travel between Africa and China according to the limitations imposed upon them by Chinese visa policy. Second, several Africans from different countries will often rent an apartment and live together, which, as a residence pattern, is very common in Guangzhou. Third, the function of African social organizations in Guangzhou is not to fight for African rights but rather to help Africans settle down and be integrated into Chinese society, which

differentiates them from immigration associations in western countries. The terms “occupation,” “kinship,” “visa,” “residence,” and “social organization” discussed more fully below appeared frequently in my research materials. This in turn inspired me to organize an article under the descriptive concept of “transient.”

Participant observation was always the main way to obtain information on Africans’ experience in Guangzhou. Although semi-structured interviews could have helped focus more on a specific topic of research, most of the time questions were not posed until informants raised a topic, had something they needed to tell me, or I became really curious about a subject. During the research period, Guangzhou police were conducting a campaign against “illegal” foreigners, with “illegal” meaning foreigners who had broken the terms of their visa or overstayed their visa. In light of this situation most Africans, no matter if they were leaders of African associations or newcomers, became alarmed by any Chinese citizen collecting information, especially related to visa status. This negative attitude concerning inquiry towards the African community did not lead to much official discourse between a researcher and informants, so it forced me to go with them into varied social contexts to gain both their trust and a deeper understanding of what their daily life entails.

English and Chinese were utilized during and after fieldwork in Guangzhou. Newcomers from Africa preferred English, but for African students from universities in China and leaders of African social organizations in Guangzhou, Chinese was always the most appropriate and apt language for communication. When communicating with Africans who spoke French but not Chinese, student volunteers who were majoring in French at a local university provided assistance.

I also worked as a certified frontline social worker in a local social service institution based in the African neighborhood of Xiaobei while doing some of the Guangzhou fieldwork. The identity of social worker provided more opportunities to approach Africans from many different African countries, allow visits to Africans’ apartments, and also led to pursuing cooperation with African social organizations to help those in need. Though quitting the job and moving to Beijing some months later, some former clients have occasionally consulted via WeChat to ask questions about how to renew a visa or buy cheap airline tickets online. They regarded me as a trustworthy friend. Multiple identities sometimes trapped me into an ethical dilemma, especially when as a social worker, I was supposed to support the policies of the local government and help police to fight against so-called “three illegals” of Africans.¹⁶ At the same time as a researcher, I was expected to respect the privacy of my informants and assume an attitude of detachment and indifference. In the end, the reason for quitting as a social worker was because I chose to support my clients and informants without concerning myself if they were “legal” or “illegal.” The international and local atmosphere for Africans to do business or live in Guangzhou has changed dramatically in the last several years. Most of my informants or clients have left China because of forcible repatriation, failed businesses, or just normal graduation from their universities in Guangzhou. Meanwhile, new Africans are continuously arriving in Guangzhou in the context of the recent warming of Sino-African relations.

Witnessing these types of situations persuaded me that the categorization of Africans in Guangzhou as immigrants could be challenged, and hence this article.

China as a Non-Immigration Country

“In the age of migration” there can be few people in either industrial or less developed countries today who do not have personal experience of migration or its effects.¹⁷ However, different countries have varied attitudes toward immigration. Some countries have immigration recruitment programs, such as the US, Canada, and Australia. Many like France, England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland have declared that they are non-immigration countries; however, these countries actively recruit immigrants and have both a history of immigration and a large growing immigration population, which has been prompting their transformation from traditional nation-states to multi-national, multi-racial, and multi-cultural ones. Generally, immigration countries could be defined as those that have immigration programs or actually recruit immigrants, and have a relatively high proportion of immigrants in their population.

The rapid economic growth and huge social changes in China have happened since the Reform and Opening-up Policy in 1978.¹⁸ Statistics serve to demonstrate present-day China’s great differences from Mao’s era. For example, in 2016 the total number of foreigners who entered or exited China’s border amounted to 570 million individual entries/exits.¹⁹ Although the Chinese government would not neglect the majority of foreigners, and, as some scholars have declared, China has been a new migration destination for people from other global South counties, compared with Europe and North America present-day China is a typical non-immigration country.²⁰ “China is not an immigration country!” This declaration not only comes from most Africans in Guangzhou, but from both the central and local Chinese government officials.

China, indeed, experienced complex immigration and national merging in its long history, but since 1949 China has gradually drawn up a blueprint for a unified multi-nation country, composed of 56 officially recognized ethnic groups. In this country, first, there is no position for immigration law in its legislative framework, and so there is no immigration program to recruit immigrants. In all laws and regulations concerning foreigners in China, the most important are the Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China, and Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of the Entry and Exit of Foreigners. Meanwhile, there are some foreigner-relative rules scattered among the Nationality Law of the People’s Republic of China, Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Household Registration, General Principles of the Civil Law of the People’s Republic of China, Measures for the Administration of Examination and Approval of Foreigners’ Permanent Residence in China, etc. Correspondingly, there is no the concept of “immigrant” in Chinese laws and regulations, and there is no “immigration bureau” existing in the Chinese government. Any natural person who does not have the nationality of the People’s Republic of China will be

regarded as a “foreigner,” and different government departments manage all affairs about foreigners separately. Second, the conditions for obtaining permanent residency are extremely difficult. According to a government-backed report, there are just 7,356 foreigners who gained permanent residency (although called “permanent residency,” it has to be qualified every five years) from 2004, when the Measures for the Administration of Examination and Approval of Foreigners' Permanent Residence in China started to be implemented to 2013.²¹ Third, the proportion of foreigners among the total Chinese population is quite low. According to China's sixth national population census (2010), the country's total population is nearly 1.333 billion, but the population of foreigners who have lived in China for more than three months or can make sure that they will reside for more than three months is about 0.6 million.²²

Since 2015, policies regarding foreigners in China have been reformed. These reforms have allowed foreigners, who officially received permanent residency, to hold a Chinese identity card, which looks similar to a Chinese citizen's ID card. Yet this reform is not open to most foreigners in China. It is only focused on skilled immigrants, or so-called “professional talents.” Just a few Africans in Guangzhou belong to category of professional talent, such as the outstanding footballers serving Guangzhou Evergrandetaobao Football Club (广州恒大淘宝足球俱乐部) and Guangzhou R&F football club (广州富力足球俱乐部), whom the Chinese government wants to recruit.

In a word, China is a typical non-immigration country, which means it doesn't have immigration programs, hasn't actually recruited immigrants, and its foreign population is quite low compared with its total population. In this non-immigration context, the majority of foreigners, including most Africans, cannot get stable residence status, sufficient social services and necessary social benefits in China.

The Reasons for Being Transients: Occupation, Kinship, and Visas

The types of occupation, kinship, and visas explain why Africans in Guangzhou are not immigrants, but transients. As we know, normally the occupations of a migrant group should be diversified and those occupations such as civil servant, lawyer, and doctor will be common; the members of the group should live in at least nuclear family and foster their second generation in their host countries; they may get permanent residence or get naturalized in the host countries, or at least can hold a more predictable residence status. However, the following description about Africans in Guangdong differs much from their counterparts in immigration countries.

Occupation

For Africans in Guangzhou, occupation is an important part of their demographic profile and has been researched very well, especially by Adams Bodomo.²³ He lists twenty-one occupations, which include businessman, trader, student, teacher, artist, merchant, administrator, basketball player, boss of cargo, buyer, cooker, doctor, education service officer, housewife, journalist, lecturer, musician, football player, retailer, seller, and no occupation. However, as all scholars have found, most Africans in Guangzhou declared they were businessmen, traders, or

merchants and were doing business. In fact, those Africans who claim they are musicians, football players, or engaging in other occupations would not deny that they are doing business simultaneously. In general, most Africans fall into two categories: businessman and student. However, some African students were doing business in the name of studying different majors. Those newcomers could not resist the allure of their African pioneers' success through China-Africa trade and did everything possible to extend their stay in China. Meanwhile, most Africans in Guangzhou are medium and small business people. Generally, they share warehouses and co-rent containers, and they mostly keep their goods bought from Guangzhou markets as carry-on luggage for their flights back to Africa. This trade pattern was named as "trade similar to ant moving" by Chinese media, which means smuggling a small quantity of goods from Guangzhou to Africa.²⁴ Occupation, as a reason, drives Africans to travel back and forth between Africa and China.

Kinship

Few scholars have focused on the relation between African kinship and their high mobility. According to the number of Africans who have family members living in Guangzhou, all could be classified into three types: those who stay in Guangzhou alone, those who stay with some family members, and those who stay with his/her whole family.²⁵ Although doing business or studying in China is often based on a decision collectively made by the family, because of the increase in the cost of living in Guangzhou, most Africans cannot carry the heavy burden of supporting all their family members to come and live in Guangzhou. Commonly, as I found, an African family normally sends one of its members to go to work or receive higher education. So, when asked the question "Do you have family members living in China?" most Africans would answer "No! I'm alone." The sent Africans choose to bring their family members to Guangzhou only after they have earned significant amounts of money and became more established. Anyhow, most Africans do not have all of their family members in China, and so most choose to go back to their home countries to reunite with family members especially during Christmas and the Chinese Spring Festival, when the export-oriented factories stop working. This is why the African neighborhood in Guangzhou appears in recess during Christmas and Chinese Spring Festival, only becoming prosperous again during the China Import and Export Fair (also known as "Canton Fair").

Visas

The type of occupation they can attain or how many family members can stay in Guangzhou depends on the type of visa they are receive. As a typical non-immigration country, China strictly regulates visas, with each type of visa having just one purpose. For example, Africans who hold a family reunion visa (also known as Q visa) are prohibited from being hired for salaried jobs, and Africans who hold a student visa (also known as X visa) are supposed solely to study and attend classes and not do business in the markets. Because of their occupations, most Africans hold a business visa (also known as M visa) or a tourist visa (also known as L

visa). M visa validity normally extends from ninety days to one year, with renewing once per thirty days, whereas the validity of L visa normally extends from seven to thirty days. Some Africans have tried to stay longer by applying for a student visa, but in the context of the Guangzhou police campaign against illegal work and illegal stays by foreigners, undocumented Africans in Guangzhou are becoming less numerous. Most Africans have to leave China frequently. They must either go to Hong Kong or Macau to renew their visa or go back to their home countries to apply for a new visa.

Generally speaking, “Africans in Guangzhou” refers to business people who come to buy goods and sell them in Africa; whose stay in China is not stable, and travel frequently between Africa and China to reunite with their families and renew, or apply for a new visa. Chinese visa policy is what has shaped the high mobility of Africans. Because of their high mobility, statistics on Africans in Guangzhou should be based on a specific time point, and so, except for Chinese government departments such as the Bureau of Exit and Entry Administration, any individual or organization doesn’t have the capacity to count the number of Africans in Guangzhou. Since public pressure caused the Guangzhou police to start a fight against the so-called “three illegals” of foreigners in 2013, the population of Africans in Guangzhou has fluctuated, often falling anywhere from ten thousand to twenty thousand. According to a recent count, on February 25, 2017 there were 10,344 people from Africa staying in Guangzhou.²⁶ The types of occupation, kinship, and visas of Africans demonstrate that Africans are neither “immigrants” nor “transmigrants,” but transients.

The Results of Being Transients: Residence and Social Organization

Patterns of residence and social organization are key factors to examine to learn if Africans have settled down and been integrated into Chinese society. In some typical immigration countries, governments would assist landed immigrants to settle down and help them integrate into the host society aided by mainstream social organizations or ethnospecific social organizations. However, most Africans in Guangzhou are businessmen and students, who are not “professional talents” the Chinese government wants to recruit. So, there is no government department focusing on providing housing for Africans, and Africans cannot get formal social support from China. There are several NGOs which have been selected by the local government to help Africans, but their fundamental purposes are neither to help Africans settle down nor integrate them into Chinese society, but rather to impel Africans to obey Chinese laws and decrease conflicts between Africans and local Chinese in order to promote greater local social harmony and stability.

During my fieldwork, the sub-district government’s attitude towards Africans was very clear. They wanted to make sure that Africans registered their residence with the local police station within twenty-four hours of their arrival and leave the country before their visa expired. Transients’ individuality and non-integration could be reflected by the patterns of social organizations in Guangzhou.

Residence

As noted above, most Africans do not have all their family members in Guangzhou, so except those who married a Chinese citizen and brought houses in the names of their spouse, most Africans did not buy real estate and temporarily live in hotels or rent apartments. For newcomers, hotel residence is often the best choice, because the application for a tourist visa needs proof of a hotel reservation, and the hotel will register Africans' temporary residence. This saves short-term visa holders precious time in Guangzhou. However, experienced business people or long-term visa holders prefer to not live in hotels, because hotels are not convenient for storing goods and expanding social networks. Instead, they will rent an apartment. There are three patterns of apartment residence: co-renting with relatives and friends, "family hotel" renting, and renting alone.²⁷ First, there is co-renting with relatives and friends. Based on the large linguistic, cultural and institutional gap between China and Africa, most Africans need help from their relatives and friends, so many avoid living alone, especially away from their compatriots. At the same time, when it comes to business secrets, those who come from the same African markets do not want to live together, which leads to a common result that an African businessman would rent an apartment with other Africans who are his/her compatriots and have different business interests, or who are not his/her compatriots and have similar business interests. The following description may help to understand this kind of apartment residence. Entering an apartment rented by Africans, the feeling of familiarity came very naturally, because all African rental apartments seem to have a similar set up. For example, I have visited an apartment rented by Africans, where there were three bedrooms and one living room. In the living room, there was a table and chairs for dinner, a sofa set, a TV stand, and an electronic scale. The parts of the living room without furniture were stacked with packed T-shirts and jeans. Three Angolan men and two Congolese men rented the apartment together and share three bedrooms. During my fieldwork, all five Africans appeared to hold business visas, and they left mainland China to renew their visas or apply for a new visa.

Second, there is "family hotel" renting. Guangzhou apartment owners ask new renters for double rent as deposit, and to prepay one month's rent when lease agreements come into effect. If the rental unit is operated by rental agents, renters will have to pay 50 percent of their rent to agents. It means that new renters have to pay 350 percent of rent at once. Considering the rental rates, which during my fieldwork were between 250 to 500 US dollars for a one-bedroom apartment, a new lease agreement would cost an African 875 to 1750 US dollars, which is a considerable financial burden especially for any African who travels frequently and regards an apartment just as a place for sleeping. Africans try to rent a room from others residing more stably in order to decrease the financial risks since they cannot get long-term visas or are unable to foresee if their business will be successful. The sublease from original renters to secondary renters makes an apartment a "family hotel" with high resident turnover rates.

Third, there is renting alone. A few Africans, especially those established businessmen (who may be accompanied by spouses and children) and students, prefer to rent apartments

alone, because they do not want their private lives interrupted. In fact, there are some common features existing in these three residence patterns: simple furniture, numerous goods, and roommates without familial connections.

Social Organization

Africans in Guangzhou have also formed different types of social organizations, which are usually based on common nationality, center on leaders, provides internal mutual aid and guidance, and represent their people in interacting with other organizations or groups.²⁸ In the United States, African immigrants have developed various self-help groups and organizations in three levels to help new arrivals adapt and survive in their new environment.²⁹ The opening-up of the institutional opportunity structure in Italy favored an increase in the number of formal immigrant associations, because by doing so immigrants can get access to public contracts and funding.³⁰ Ghanaian immigrant associations fulfill a wide variety of economic, cultural, social, and political functions related to the needs of the immigrants in Canada. At the same time, the associations serve their needs in the homeland: the immigrants use them to contribute to community development efforts, fight for certain political rights, and maintain ties to the homeland.³¹ However, African associations in Guangzhou are very different. First, they are only run at the city level. Guangzhou is regarded as China's African hub, but the population of Africans in Guangzhou is too small to form organizations at different levels. Second, the associations cannot be registered formally in China because of limitations set by Chinese laws. Based on the Chinese logic as a non-immigration country, there are no immigrants in China, so there is no access for foreigners to register social organizations for mutual help. Thus, African associations in Guangzhou cannot get access to public contracts and funding from the Chinese government. Third, the associations' functions are limited. For most Africans, they exist just for providing mutual help and basic guidance for running businesses and visa application. "I always heard (our) association, but obviously the association can't do anything. I think we really don't need the association. Maybe only when somebody died or seriously ill, we need the association to donate," as one Congolese said. Fourth, the scale of African associations is not stable. As foreigners in a non-immigration country, Africans cannot get stable immigrant status in China. In this context, the members of African associations have not covered all Africans in Guangzhou. In most cases, the most active members of these associations are just their leaders.

In all, as the results of being transients, the patterns of residence, and social organizations of Africans in Guangzhou show, it is erroneous to talk about their integration in China. If their residence status is not stable and their future is uncertain, most Africans will not regard China as their new home. So, their dreams are embedded in their home country; they do not desire to integrate into Chinese society, and, actually, there is very little possibility for them to be integrated.

Conclusion

Conversations with fellow academics have led me to believe that Africans in Guangzhou should be reclassified from being viewed as immigrants to considering them as transients. Africans in

Guangzhou are very different from Africans trying to move or immigrate to other countries because they are restricted by Chinese law. Most in Guangzhou have not settled down or received citizenship. They are neither immigrants nor transmigrants, let alone do they constitute a diaspora. Rather, they are transients in China. The former categories have a stable status in the landed country, but transients are more unsettled. The types of occupation, kinship, and visas of Africans decide their individuality, high mobility, and non-integration, and make it easy to observe their distinctive patterns of residence and social organization.

This article introduces the concept of “transient” based on the argument that any classification or definition produced by scholars should be placed and used in a specific context, especially by the government of the host countries and the “immigrants” themselves. As we know, besides scholars, the classification of immigrants can be given by international organizations (such as the UN and IMO), different governments, or “immigrants” themselves. However, the tacit perception that Africans in Guangzhou are immigrants is at odds with the Chinese legal system and Africans’ self-definition. In China, the typical non-immigration country, public opinion is constantly alert to news regarding immigration from Africa to China. The emergence of an African neighborhood in Guangzhou seemingly was the result of poor management on the part of government officials of a particular group of foreigners residing in that city. Under the pressure of public opinion, Guangzhou police have strictly enforced Chinese laws on Africans in Guangzhou. In the process, scholars actually contributed to the deterioration of the environment for African business and residing in Guangzhou. The population of Africans in Guangzhou has decreased, and most of my informants have left to return to their home countries, which demonstrates that the concept of “transient” is valid for analyzing the existence of Africans in Guangzhou.

This article also wants to suggest that the concept of “transient” could be used broadly to describe not just Africans in Guangzhou, but all those who travel between different countries without desire to integrate into the host country or without the possibility of being integrated into the host country, where their current life is instable and future uncertain. Transients have been also found in other places, especially in East Asia. British and Singaporean migrants are, by their very nature, highly transitory and therefore almost impossible to “pin down” in China.³² With diversity and transient nature, westerners live in the “foreign gated communities” in Beijing.³³ Afro-Caribbean expatriates especially in Shanghai have little contact with a wide range of Chinese citizens.³⁴ Because of the lack of regional institutions pushing for family reunification rights, because of an elite political culture that still maintains the assumptions and repertoires of a “developmental state” where rights may be sacrificed for economic growth and order, and because of migrant perceptions of greater immigration control there is very little migrant settlement in South Korea and Japan.³⁵ No matter if the concept of “transient” could be used or not, it has to be placed in a specific context to examine the population in question, especially by the government of the host countries and by “immigrants” themselves.

Notes

- 1 King 2002.
- 2 King 2012.
- 3 Collyer and Haas 2012.
- 4 Schiller et al. 1992.
- 5 Schiller et al. 1995.
- 6 Schiller et al. 1992.
- 7 Dahya 1973.
- 8 Findlay 1988.
- 9 Beaverstock 2001; Beaverstock and Boardwell 2000.
- 10 Kolb 2008; Thränhardt 1995.
- 11 Schiller et al. 2013.
- 12 Li et al. 2007
- 13 Lyons et al. 2012, 2013.
- 14 Haugen 2012.
- 15 Castillo 2014.
- 16 “Sanfei (三非)”, the Chinese word literally means 3 kinds of illegal situations: enter illegally, work illegally and reside illegally.
- 17 Castles et al. 2014, p. 15.
- 18 Unless noted otherwise, the word “China” in this article means mainland China, which does not include Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.
- 19 Bureau of Exit and Entry Administration of People’s Republic of China releases the data about foreigners in China in January every year.
- 20 Haugen 2012.
- 21 See the official website of Bureau of Exit and Entry Administration of People’s Republic of China.
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