The Life of Africans in China: Experience and Perception
—— A Case Study of Guangzhou

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ABSTRACT

This study is a review of studies into the subjective experience of African students and workers in China and perceptions held by Chinese toward such group. This involves ways African people were marginalized from this society, how Chinese traditional ideas affect people's understanding towards them, and how they are discouraged from interracial relationships or social support under current globalization of massive and an increasing sentiment of ethnocentrism in China.

Keywords: Anti-blackness, migration, racism, racial discrimination, media representation, ethnocentrism, globalization, institutional barrier

1. INTRODUCTION

Bizumic and Duckitt[1] refer the term ethnocentrism to a common in-group favoritism in Europe —— that is, a strong sense of ethnic group self-centeredness including intergroup superiority, purity, cohesion and devotion. Such evaluation criteria based on in-group positivity and out-group negativity, however, is also prevalent in China and is relatively applicable to explain Chinese anti-Black racism that has long existed. Zhao Yi, a writer living in Canton in Qing Dynasty, was well-known for his *Miscellaneous Notes of Panyu,* in which he recorded the folklore in this region. There was one of the most fascinating stories (the story of "white devils" and "black devils" illustrates a tragedy in an interracial family. According to the story, the African man and the Cantonese woman had a baby, while the father was confused by the local rumors that the baby was not his own son. There was also rumors about how this interracial baby could damage the purity of "Chinese-ness" because of his half alien origin. Due to malicious gossip, the father gradually lost control and became violent. Doubting his partner's faithfulness and their child's legitimacy, he murdered the baby in order to prove his guess. However, he found that both the color of skin and bone was black, indicating that it is in effect his own son) directly describing a tragedy of interracial marriage between an African slave and a Cantonese indentured servant-girl. Being regarded as maybe the most fa-

mous story collection in China, the narration of this particular story is insightful and suggestive: black-skinned people are proved to be discriminated in this early era. The tragic story indicates that an ethnocentrism sentiment which praise for Chinese origin as well as discrimination on African people exist much earlier than we might expect. Moreover, the historical incident of "'Orphans' Temple" (History scholars Tang Kaijian and Peng Hui pointed out that during the Ming and Qing Dynasty in China, there is recordings about how Black and mixed-race children being abandoned and left at Macau's Holy House of Mercy, indicating that racial hierarchies about skin color had been prevalent even before the European colonist expansion in China) further indicates that concept of racialism have been existing even from a very long time ago.

In effect, the racial conflict between the two ethnic groups has never disappeared, but become increasingly apparent and intensified in recent years. Since the Reform and Opening-up, Chinese government set various reciprocal projects with the United States, Europe and Africa, including opening foreign trade and financial channels, employing foreign employed a well-paid foreign expert as technology advisor, as well as setting education exchange programs with higher spending in order to follow the new trend of globalization. Guangzhou, as one of the established special economic zone after Reform and Opening-up, has experienced maybe the most

dramatic economic growth in China and has consequently become the most attractive place for African businessman. In response to global commodity flow, and this coastal and thriving gradually became a standpoint for blacks, forming small black communities inside this region. Many African businessmen have been accumulating in Guangzhou, but historically, our response to blacks has also been very fierce.

Since Africans commonly believed that education level in China was higher than that in their mother country, many Africans come to China also for education. Various financial support and life benefits enjoyed by foreign students also attract a large number of African students to China. Shandong University, a famous school in China, even arrange study partners with the opposite gender for black students, making an indecent suggestion (Shandong University started to arrange learning partners with the opposite gender to foreign students in 2016. In 2018, the number of partners arranged to international students increased from one to three. The scandal of this policy was widely reported in 2019 and certainly sparked a heated debate. Shandong University and African students who form the majority of international students in this school were the most to be blamed in this issue). The incident of Shandong University further projected on African students and led to biased prejudice towards this race. Moreover, unlike African students who received high living subsidy from the government, many students suffers from poor living and learning condition but without any help from the school. Although it was an accidental event, it is still worth mentioning because the event at this intense level could undoubtedly explain a certain problem. The media coverage about Shandong University's policy caused public anger and became the fuse to rationalize the Chinese's long standing grievances on an anti-black sentiment. It is such intentional and unfair treatment between local Chinese students and African students which led to the first series of intense contradictions and conflicts between the two ethnic groups, and even contributed to further social tendency of anti-Blackness. If we look closer at the phenomenon, however, this racist sentiment has in fact always existed in this society. It is probably due to Chinese's natural aversion towards such differential treatment on education that long exist between Chinese and outsiders as well as the rise of both nationalism and ethnocentrism within this nation. Moreover, Chinese conventional ideas has been linking African people with peasants, considering African society to be under-developed and regarding African people as inferior races[2]. China's misrepresented media coverage, which conveys mainly negative reports of Africa, that suggests how Africans are more likely to carry disease and how chaotic African society is, also cause Chinese's single-sighted understanding towards black-skinned people, such as disease carrier and people with hyper-sexual desire.

2. REASONS OF AFRICAN'S ACCUMULATION IN CHINA

Globalization, which refers to the fact that we all increasingly live in one world so that individuals/groups and nations become interdependent, plays one of the most important factors in China's economic growth. After the propounding of Deng Xiaoping's theory (In 1978, Deng Xiaoping propounded his theoretical summary of the socialist construction experience obtained by the Communist Party of China, which is different from the Soviet model. Economically, Deng Xiaoping advocate restoring the function of the market, which gave more freedom to the producers and consumers and eliminated releasing price controls. In policy. Politically, he claims that Chinese government and Communist Party should shoulder different functions and in order to appropriately expand socialist democracy and let a country running efficiently and healthily. The decision Reform and Opening up was essentially the political and economic practice of Deng Xiaoping's theory) and the Reform and Opening up policy, foreign trade was encouraged by various government policies and exchange programs. China was experiencing arguably the most dramatic economic increase in its history. After joining the WTO in 2001, China's economy continued to take off and became the new world factory.

Exchange of products, information and people between China and the outside world all represent the great extent of China's globalization. In the first place, the rise of information and communication technology brings news all around the world, China's friendly politics toward overseas trade would thus become increasingly well-known by people in other countries, prompting international migration to China. The same communication technology enables immigrants to keep contact with their homeland after arriving in a new country like China, offering them sense of psychological security and connection. The spread of the Internet at a global scale also brings immigration information which help immigrants select the most suitable destination. In the second place, the thriving economy has caught attention from other countries. From 2000 to 2006, foreign direct investment (FDI) swarm into China's domestic market, and the total sum was up to 3777 billion dollars[3]. The flourishing economy and the quickly improved living conditions of the general public has made China more and more prominent as an immigrant destination. According to a reporter of Washington Post, China has even become the first choice of international immigrants[4].

Even though international immigration has been commonplace throughout history, which could be dated back to the exploration of the New World[5], what has undertaken in the last twenty years of the twentieth century is quite different. Thanks to the revolutionary improvement on technology in terms of communication and transportation, we have stepped into a new era of

borderless world, which means more closely related contact between countries, unprecedentedly promoted international immigration with a greater scale and span. The most popular migration destinations in China includes Shanghai and Beijing, in which immigrants built international communities such as Waiguoren shequ or ethnic enclaves such as K Town in Wangjing, a large residential area in Beijing. In Shanghai, Pudong receives 5800 international entrepreneurial elites (Shen, 2006), buying offices in Shanghai and running their transnational enterprises.

Although these cities welcome foreign immigrants and hold friendly policies towards them, in reality they are not equally suitable for all ethnicity groups. Beijing and Shanghai, as the first batch of cities opened to international traders, have a longer history of contact with foreign countries, which was predominated by white people from developed countries who try to expand their companies overseas. As these white people and domestic Chinese have built relatively saturated and mature market during such long period of time, it is hard for late-coming outsiders to get in. As a result, the fact that Beijing and Shanghai are two of the biggest international metropolises in the world does not mean that there are opportunities for everyone, especially for non-natives from developing provinces in China or from other developing countries.

However, the situation in Guangzhou, a southern coastal city which contains a long history of trading with other countries, was quite different from the other two largest cities in China. It was appointed by the Chinese government to be one of the special economic zones (SEZ) which enjoyed the most sufficient economic welfare and subsidy in the period of Reform and Opening up. Because it emerged relatively later as compared to Shanghai and Beijing, it represents more opportunities and appeals to foreigners who fail to take part in the market expansion in the two cities above. Guangzhou's economic benefits brought by government policies also attract a great amount of people from the Third World who search for opportunities to wealth, encouraging more and more individual entrepreneurs with small amount of capital to move to Guangzhou. Unlike the predominately white foreign population in Beijing and Shanghai who serve as the traditional bourgeoisie and mainly set up in the conventional company or are sent by trans-national corporations to work in their China offices, Africans in Guangzhou generally adopt a different business model. They tend to utilize small capital, in which they buy products in China and then sell them back to their mother country for profits to establish an export business. Li and Xue (2007) tried to analyze why globalization promotes China to be the most ideal country for immigration. In their case study of Xiaobei, a residential district which was famous for its large African population, most respondents call themselves "traders", which includes exporter, importer and wholesaler. Through such a model,

they keep accumulating wealth by receiving a modest profit over time, and eventually achieve material prosperity. The reasons that driven them to work in such model and their experience during their business period in Guangzhou would be explored in the following section.

3. AFRICAN'S EXPERIENCE IN GUANGZHOU

In recent years, more and more people started to call Guangzhou "The Chocolate City", reflecting the multiple growth of African population in the city. According to Zhu's study in 2012, the most widely reported and cited figure of African immigrants in Guangzhou is 200,000, with an annual growing rate of 30% to 40%. However, Zhu (2012) [6] also mentions that the accuracy of this figure has not be confirmed. In effect, the real number of African immigrants in this city might well exceed it, which usually does not include African tourists who are not staying in hotels (which requires official record) or registered with local authorities. This group of Africans might settle in Guangzhou for much longer than their tourist visa grants and run business secretly by pretending to be tourists.

In the case study of Xiaobei mentioned earlier, the survey showed that the average age of African traders in Xiaobei was 32, implying that the subject of these transnational immigrants was essentially young people (Li and Xue, 2007). This might be because that people in this age group showed greater desire for money and they tend to be more ambitious towards economic achievements. It was also easier for them to make money as compared to other age groups. Since many of them have the experience of being educated, they have experienced more of life as compared to younger teenagers, and they would be much bolder in their career choice as compared to the elder.

3.1. *Being expected by the mother country*

Most Africans come to China for one thing, and one thing only: wealth. Being called the Third World all along, African countries, most of which have not completed the industrialization after long being colonized by European imperialism, has been identified as low income communities whose national per capita income is less than 1036 dollars (World Bank, 2019).

Although they are economically poor, Africans place material success at the top pursuit in their lives. According to World Values Survey (2007), when exploring individualistic value by type of society, it suggests that many developing countries in Africa, such as Chili, Ghana and South-African countries place individual success highly on their value hierarchy. While other developed countries, such as Japan, Australia and Germany,

consider personal success not that important when measuring a person's life quality. According to Stewart, Late and Branscombe's study (2010), which evaluates appropriate methods for reducing prejudice, suggests that the increasing amount of wealthy and intelligent Africans do help decrease the level of prejudice towards this ethnicity group. In the following paragraph, we are going to explore how the particularly higher importance being placed on individual success in African societies might be because of their desire to change the prejudice of the international community against them.

Different peoples in our world remain in an economic hierarchy that could be changed. Industrialized countries are at the top of this hierarchy, China and other communist countries are the second class, and African countries which is yet to follow the industrialization course stay as the third and bottom[7]. Looking closer at this class system among nations, global economic inequality (which refers primarily to the systematic differences in wealth, incomes and working conditions that exist between countries) could be thoroughly explained and interpreted. In the past twenty years, countries in the Second World such as China have experienced a rapid economic growth, and the world's economic inequality for these nations has seemed to be diminishing. However, as shown in the figure1 (cited from *Sociology* by Anthony Giddens, 2006), while China and India was contributing to around half of the global gross domestic product (GDP) in 1980, in which one was experiencing 6% and one was experiencing 4% in its GDP growth, the economic development in the Sub-Saharan African countries remained relatively low. Some of these Third-World nations even experienced negative economic growth, which undeniably worsen their domestic living conditions. Taking these factors into consideration, the gap between low-income nations (mainly in Africa and in South America) and the world has been widened.
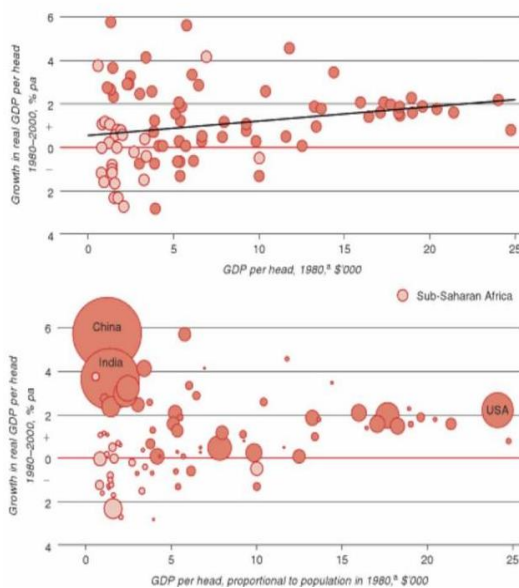
Figure1. Two Ways of Looking at global Income Inequality. Source: The Economist (11, March, 2004)

Since Africans value material success at a greater level, they tend to seek more potential fortune to get rich through seeking opportunities in other more economically-developed country and economies. In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, people from the developing African countries started moving over to fast-developing countries and try to seek opportunities to wealth and better lives. For many Africans, China embeds that very potential.

Moreover, the trend of such immigration is also due to African's desire to change the perception of world community towards them based on its hierarchy. As there is potential that the hierarchy could be changed, while African countries remain as the lower class of this system, many of the Africans might decide to change the status quo and thus migrate to other countries to seek material success. In the next section, we would explore how Africans carry their business in Guangzhou, and how the existing black communities offer convenience for these African traders.

3.2. Business career in the host country

The development of international business prompted by Africans in China reflect their active quest for economic prosperity and upward mobility in global economy[8]. In Guangzhou, Africans often rely on acquaintances or friends to obtain the initial survivability and run their business in the form of illegal smuggling. They run their business by buying products in China, which generally is at a lower price, and then import them via black market to their mother country at a relatively higher price (which is still much lower than the price of the regulated and official channel), thus gaining profit and able to continue to expand the scale of their business.

Besides friendly economic-supportive policies and its coastal location which provide convenience on transportation, another reason which makes Guangzhou more attractive to Africans is the already developed and populated African communities in this city. Generally speaking, communities with the same ethnic background help a new African trader integrate into the new country, including getting familiar with the policies and social rules of this region. Moreover, for immigrants, shared ethnicity within the same geographic location in the host country serves to provide a strong sense of security. Members of minority ethnic groups tend to consider themselves culturally distinct from the rest mainstream society. For the majority of these people, ethnicity is central to individual and group identity. The existence of such minority community serves to remind them of their ethnicity. Such black community could thus comfort them and prevent them from being too anxious in a new environment.

In the black community in Guangzhou, most traders' scope of activity is based on their social networks, in which elder African immigrants help new generation set up business and built social networks and relationships with local Chinese. *Guanxi*, which refers to social connection in Chinese, is considered fairly significant in China. Although guanxi is important in other societies, it reveals its unusual importance in China, a typical "society of human relationship". Many foreigners have recognized that doing business in China is particularly hard due to a key difference between Western and Chinese business practices —— in which the former lies more values on the specification and enforcement of contracts, while the latter relies more on *Guanxi*[9]. According to the empirical study of Hong Kong and mainland China business relationships, *Guanxi* positively affects business performance in China, mediated by relationship quality and interdependence[10]. In such a nepotist society, business range, operating region and interpersonal trust all serve as essential roles influencing business success in China. If those African traders don't have local friends or acquaintants, without *Guanxi*, they could hardly run their business on their own. According to the case study of Xiaobei (Li and Xue, 2007), 43% of the respondents have friends or relatives in Guangzhou, they constantly mention that guanxi is very important to their business and career.

Although many Africans achieved economic success in China, and many have formed strong social relationships with local people (*Guanxi*), they still often face great challenges such as a lot of groundless accusations discrimination or even hatred. Some specific regulations in China also lead to the limitation on the width and breadth of their activities locally. In the next section, we are going to explore how and why Chinese remain certain perception towards African population, and to what extent it contributes to anti-blackness in China.

4. REASONS OF DISCRIMINATION

4.1. Chinese Perception towards African people

It is not always easy to make friends in a new foreign country with distinctively sharp cultural contrast, especially since this foreign country has historically had an anti-blackness sentiment. For example, in the classic literature mentioned in the beginning of this study, black-skinned man tend to be portrayed to be lazy and foolish, who deserve violent treatment (*Zhaoyi*, 1915). In the recent years, the sentiment has not been eased but even worsened by a chain of events happened in Chinese universities（One example is Nanjing Incident in 1988 in Nanjing University. Chinese students in Nanjing University insist that there is two Chinese female hidden in the African student's dorm room. In order to prevent the evil and unsightly event from happening, Chinese

students protest to threaten the black-skinned students to leave the room. Shouting the slogan "Blacks get out of Chins", they throw eggs and squashed vegetables at the window of African student's building. These Africans have no choice but to secretly leave the city and go to Beijing, so that they can connect their embassy and ask for help), in which black people are treated in unfair ways. As a result, such negative attitudes are a general reflection in China.

In Guangzhou, the sentiment remains especially obvious and intense. According to Li and Xue's (2007) case study in Xiaobei, the general domestic residents report negative attitude towards living with African people. In effect, 82.9% of the Chinese participants are not willing to live in the same residential district with black people, and 54.3% of them even respond that if African population continue to rise in this region, they would consider moving houses. One significant explanation revealed from the study is that African people as having an intimidating appearance. Also, because of the language barriers, there is difficulties in black people's daily communication with local Chinese (The difficulties on communication is represented in mainly two dimensions. In the first place, the most officially spoken and popularized foreign language in China remain as English. Thus, instead of the mainstream language in African countries such as French, most Chinese could only speak English. In the second place, the local dialect in Guangzhou is Cantonese, causing the domestic's command on both English and other foreign language to be at a relatively low level, thus leading to communication problem with African traders). The landlords in Xiaobei also agree that African people are often hard to manage and are more prone to escaping from paying rent and living in poor sanitary conditions. Landlords thus have been increasing the house rent for black people which discourages potential African migration to this community.

4.1.1. Chinese traditional perception and Chinese Nationalism

On the one hand, traditional Chinese culture idealized fair skin and among associate it with intellectual endeavor. For example, the most attractive man was a "white-faced scholar" *(Baimian Shusheng),* which represent a high status in China and enjoys relatively leisure and free life. On the other hand, people with darker skin are associated with Chinese peasants (Sautman, 1994), who have to work in the field for all day and endure the ultraviolet rays which make their skin dull. As a result, black-skinned people are in effect the representation of poverty and the lower class in Chinese's subconscious. How such traditional concept influence Chinese's perception towards African people might explain part of the anti-blackness trend in China.

Other factors which are responsible for such racial discrimination set between Social Darwinism and the

emergence of Chinese nationalism. At the turn of the century, Chinese received the concept of Social Darwinism influenced by Western views, insisting that certain ethnicity in the world are responsible for being eliminated in the global competition based on the mechanism of being survival of the fittest (Sautman, 1994). As a result, white people and Asians remain a natural aviation towards black people based on such views. According to Sautman(1994), African people are considered honorable by most of the Chinese respondents, but they are seen as lacking the ability to manage their country; they are also widely regarded as humorous and intelligent by Chinese, but they think African are ignorant as well, which might easily lead to political instability in their countries by this reasoning. The inheritance remained since colonization such as historical burden, unsolved political mess and social turbulence and unrest are accounted to the slow development speed in Africa. Additionally, the fast-growing population and the spread of disease also contributed to Chinese's recognition that African countries are underdeveloped.

China, in specific, has been invaded by the imperialism during the nineteenth and twentieth century and thus gradually accepted the theory of Social Darwinism, using such theory to view the survival and competition between peoples. According to Lufrano(1994), Chinese consider only Asian people similar to white people based on the color of skin. As a result, while other ethnicities are economically eliminated by the white, the Asians remains as the only one that could compete with white people.

However, Lufrano(1994) also claims that the sense of racial superiority and inferiority in China are based on their traditional ethnocentrism and the early experience of poverty. In the past 150 years of catching-up to the West, China still worry whether they could really catch up with western countries, and are also worried that the majority in the international community would classify them as "loser" with the same level of Africa. They try to prove to the world that they are not listed as a loser in the global-survival competition, and African people become a symbol of failure, fear and depravity in Chinese's point of view. At one level, then, disparagement of blacks may reflect a sense of self doubt and insecurity among Chinese. When interacting with Africans in China, or confronting them with potential conflicts, they tend to say that it is after all their own country, and foreigners, especially Africans who are seen as inferior, should follow their, more superior, cultural norms. The resentment here can be somewhat but not entirely separated from a gut-level racism on one hand, and the Social Darwinism struggle on the other hand.

In the recent years, many Africans in China have realized the unfair treatment they have been suffering and tried to protect their rights by arranging marches and protests. However, the media coverage of such events have further deteriorated the image of this group. In the next section, this study explores how media coverage influence Chinese public perception towards African people and promote anti-blackness in China to a broader extent.

4.1.2. Media Representation

When McLeod, Hertog and James.K [11] tried to explore what role of media play in promoting racism , they identified four key frame that the reports about protests follow: riot, confrontation, spectacle, and debate. Riot (violence, deviant sabotage), confrontation (conflicts with authorities, police and opposition) and spectacles (sensational, dramatic and individualistic narratives) emphasize actions or behaviors. The theory also suggests that reports using the frames mentioned above would make the movement lose legitimacy and have a negative impact on public opinion. Moreover, McLeod, Hertog and James.K (1999) suggests that certain protest theme tend to suffer more severe treatment as compared to other themes. For example, in reports of feminism march, the frame used is generally in the legitimizing debate frame. However, the report about anti-racism generally use the frame of riot, making it seem out of legitimacy and deteriorate public impression towards these minority groups (for example, in Nanjing Incident, Chinese media attempted to eliminate the fact that African students are suffering unfair treatment by Chinese students. By using the frame of riot, they put more attention on reporting how African students use violence during the protest, making the event look out of legitimacy and deteriorate general public's impression towards African people in China).

Considering all the factors, the result indicate that the news coverage of protests focused on racial issues, specifically for those related to Black and Indigenous people, have not evolved beyond the traditional paradigm's structure of riot frames [12]. As a result, although protests against racism by black people help make the public aware of the existence of minority groups, they still cannot change their present situation of being marginalized due to certain ways media use to report such event, as the frame they use might make the society focus not on the opinion and requirement of these people, but on the violence and rude actions which are involved in the protest, thus deteriorating the image of this ethnic group in the perception of Chinese majority.

What's more, instead of reporting the positive developments of Africa, China's media coverage mainly focus on reporting negative aspects such as drugs, AIDS, illegal immigration and crime happened in African countries, which influence Chinese's perception towards African people to a great extent [13]. No matter whether the content of TV reports is true or not, viewers are more willing to believe in this form of representation as compared to newspapers or radio stations, causing large-

scale dissemination and acceptance. As a result, the perception held by Chinese towards African people tend to be single and unfavorable.

4.2. *Institutional Barrier*

Beside the factors discussed in the earlier paragraph, the most direct difficulties and discriminations are institutional barriers among all the challenges faced by African traders in China, which force them to be marginalized from the society and spur their lives to be more itinerant.

As the African communities continue to grow in Guangzhou, the municipal government has put forward policies to redirect some Africans to other surrounds cities in order to prevent Guangzhou from being a "Chocolate City". The most direct and seemingly efficient approach is to implement stricter visa policies. Due to a drug smuggling case in 2017 involving Africans, which involved almost 11 kilograms of smokable methamphetamine and thus provided a strong argument for government officials who remained anti-blackness, the immigration laws in Guangzhou started to become more strict than ever before, tightening visa policies (Lan, 2015). Some African traders could only receive a business visa valid for 30 days, which hardly satisfy their requirement on running their businesses. Due to these short-termed visa, some African traders have had to travel back and forth between China and African countries for countless times every year in order to sustain their business operations.

However, black-skinned people could still stay in Guangzhou through different channels after the government has set such stricter policies. Because China's political and administrative system lacks a sound legal system, it impairs the government's ability to thoroughly monitor the tightened regulations it issues (Zhu, 2016). Since the 2015 Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook showed that the city received 609800 African tourists in 2014, the African population may far exceed 200, 000. Furthermore, a great amount of Nigerians, who form the majority of African population in Guangzhou, they still are able to stay in China with a fake passport purchased from a visa agency, so that many of them could avoid the problem brought by the new visa policy. Not surprisingly, the undocumented African immigrants and racism are being linked to the high crime rate in Guangzhou, and the increasingly rapid expansion of African communities in Guangzhou also further intensify local Chinese malice and hatred towards these them.

5. CONCLUSION

Although Guanxi is fairly important when doing business in China, many African traders are forced to be marginalized in this society and cannot grasp essential *Guanxi*. Further, Chinese traditional conception and their consequent perception towards Africans have made the

situation worse, and media representation also make Chinese perceive them in an increasingly negative way. Even though there is grey zone for African traders to escape government's strict policy, their living situation are still fairly harsh. In the future, we still need more studies to support and explore theories of anti-black racism in China.

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