

Identity and diaspora

A multidisciplinary understanding of African migrants in Yiwu city and Guangzhou, China

Only recently, as China and Africa become increasingly entwined politically and economically and a growing number of Africans live in China, have scholars and practitioners started to look at the African diaspora communities in China, Asia, and other nations of the Global South (defined by the South-South Cooperation framework) more intensively. Over the past decades, the Chinese government has usually provided scholarships for African students to study at Chinese universities. However, beginning from the early 1990s, a fast-growing population of African individuals has chosen to come to China—particularly to the cities of Guangzhou and Yiwu—to take advantage of a variety of business opportunities. The Africans, often dubbed “African traders,” make money by exporting low-priced Chinese products (e.g., clothing, electronics, hardware, and daily commodities) back to African countries.¹ According to a study by Sun Yat-Sun University in 2008, there are around 20,000 Africans who legally reside in Guangzhou city. Nonetheless, Bodomo estimated that there are 500,000 Africans living in China, with many of the 300,000

African traders conducting small trade businesses without legal paperwork.² Aligning with the elevated research interest on the Africans in China, my doctoral research aims to investigate the identity construction for Africans who have lived in China for more than five years or have established families in China. The research questions to be examined in this research include what kind of identity they are constructing, whether it is an “African-Chinese” identity, a pan-African identity, or hybrid cultural identities, and how they are constructing their diaspora identities by living and conducting entrepreneurial activities in urban enclaves in China. To answer these questions, I have developed two hypotheses: (1) there is a pan-African identity being formed by the African immigrants who live in enclaves in Guangzhou city and Yiwu city in China for more than five years through participating in small commodities trading activities; and (2) pan-African identity construction in China is a more internally driven process taken on by African immigrants as an adaptation strategy in the host society rather than determined by social contexts, as sociologists would argue.

¹ A. Bodomo, “Constructing Knowledge through Online Bulletin Board Discussions,” in *Encyclopedia of Distance Learning*, ed. C. Howard et al. (IGI Global, 2005), 386–93.

² Ibid.

The study of Africans in China transcends the confines of existing literature on the African diaspora and the notion of pan-Africanism. The majority of existing literature on the African diaspora and black cultural identity focuses on African immigration to Western countries rather than to Asia. The theory of pan-Africanism has focused on responding to European superiority and acts of imperialism that are not part of Chinese history.³ The United States and Europe have been the primary host societies for African immigrants, particularly since Africa's independence movement in the 1960s. Over the past half century, the African diaspora communities in the United States, for instance, have contributed to economic sectors such as transportation, domestic work, restaurants, etc.⁴ The transnational ties that African immigrants keep while they live in the United States have also forged widespread business connections and cultural interactions.

Since pan-Africanism mainly grew out of a response to Western treatment and stereotypes of African diaspora communities, the new wave of African immigration to China highlights the limitations of the pan-Africanism theory because the colonial and slavery legacies are absent from China's history with African countries. Even if there were evidence of

pan-African identity in China, it is expected to be completely different than that in the United States or Europe. Moreover, the type of pan-African identity that African immigrants adopt in China—again a relatively monolithic racial identity environment that has a set of diametrically different values and ethnicities from the West—could expand the scope of pan-Africanism or even contradict the current understanding of pan-Africanism.

Furthermore, identity formation itself is a multidisciplinary concern. The different approaches to identity by psychologists (e.g., Erikson), sociologists (e.g., Jenkins; Lawler), and political scientists (e.g., Smith) provide us with theoretical understanding of existing concepts and debates on identity formation.⁵ There is a new theory called “complexity theory” that is being developed by social scientists who seek to understand how order emerges in complex and nonlinear systems such as social systems. Cilliers and Resier contest the classical sociological approach of identity and argue that identity formation is more of an internal and autonomous process rather than mostly dependent on social contexts and socially prescribed values.⁶ This is a new approach to identity formation and an experimental theory that I will test in the

³ W. Ackah, *Pan-Africanism: Exploring the Contradictions: Politics, Identity and Development in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999).

⁴ H. Reed and C. Andrzejewski, “The New Wave of African Immigrants in the United States,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America (Dallas, Texas, 2010), <http://paa2010.princeton.edu/papers/100606>.

⁵ E. Erikson, “Reflections on the Dissent of Contemporary Youth,” *Daedalus* 99, no. 1 (1970): 154–76; R. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 3rd ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2008); S. Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008); A. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1991).

⁶ P. Cilliers and R. Preiser, eds., *Complexity, Difference and Identity: An Ethical Perspective* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2010).

study of identity construction for the African immigrants in China.

My research builds on the initial sociological observations and interviews by Bodomo⁷ and Haugen⁸ and investigates whether the African diasporas in China are constructing an “African-Chinese” identity, a pan-African identity, or hybrid cultural identities. These Africans often speak Chinese and socialize with local Chinese in China’s monolithic racial identity environment. Therefore, according to the sociological approach of identity formation, they have more propensity for adopting a Chinese cultural identity than the newly arrived immigrants who have little or no contact with local socialization. Should they construct a new pan-African identity or even hybrid identities that combine religious, political, or cultural elements, it would show the validity of complexity theory in explaining identity formation and add a new dimension to understandings of pan-African identity.

The qualitative research methods of public policy analysis, such as surveys and field interviews, often intersect with approaches from sociology, anthropology, and ethnography. Given the strong sociological backdrop of this research and a lack of aggregated data about the Africans’ biographical information, I will engage extensive ethnographic research by immersing in the immigrant community and using ethnographic methods that include

participant observation, field surveys, interviews, etc. This approach will help me gather primary information on these immigrants’ biographical backgrounds and their daily lives so that I can explore the identity formation question further with this group of immigrants.

Some preliminary interview results from my pilot research sponsored by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship (DPDF) Program in Guangzhou city and Yiwu city validated most prior research findings by Bodomo, Haugen, and Freeman.⁹ The African immigrants live and conduct business in a few areas of Guangzhou city and Yiwu city that are dubbed “Chocolate City” and “Exotic Street.” There is often limited verbal communication between Africans and Chinese due to the language barrier, and they often communicate via calculators since the sole purpose for them to come together is to make business deals. The local Chinese that I interviewed appeared to associate these Africans with drugs, prostitution, and untrustworthy business counterparts. Racial comments toward the Africans do come up, as Bodomo described in his book.¹⁰ The Muslim Africans pray daily and weekly in the Yiwu Mosque in Yiwu, and the local police block the roads near the mosque for their Friday services. In the meantime, Christian Africans regularly attend church services at the Sacred Heart Cathedral and Royal Victory Church in

⁷ Bodomo, “Constructing Knowledge,” and A. Bodomo, *Africans in China: A Sociocultural Study and Its Implications on Africa-China Relations* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2012).

⁸ H. Haugen, “Nigerians in China: A Second State of Immobility,” *International Migration* 50, no. 2 (2012): 65–80.

⁹ Bodomo, *Africans in China*; Haugen, “Nigerians in China”; S. Freeman, *China, Africa, and the African Diaspora: Perspectives* (Washington, DC: AASBEA, 2009).

¹⁰ Bodomo, *Africans in China*.

Guangzhou city, just as Haugen mentioned in her study of Pentecostal Nigerian immigrants in Guangzhou.¹¹ All such prior research provides empirical evidence for my research on the African diaspora identity issue and examination of the applicability of existing theories and literature.

¹¹ Haugen, "Nigerians in China."