# Analysis of Social Adaptation and Integration Issues Faced by Foreigners in China -Taking African Business Community in Guangzhou as an Example

Weilin Lai

School of International Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, 510632, China

**Abstract.** In the recent twenty years, with China's gradual opening up to the outside world and continuous improvement of Sino-African trade relations, the number of Africans coming to Guangzhou has shown a rapid growth trend, inevitably leading to a series of related social issues. Among them, the issue of social integration faced by African businessmen in Guangzhou has always been a focus and hotspot in research on African residents in Guangzhou. By analyzing and comparing their social adaptation and integration patterns, it is shown that these two stages are part of one process influenced by economic, community, cultural, and psychological factors, etc., resulting in different behavioral patterns. This study aims to provide a reference value for research on foreigners' social integration into Chinese society.

**Keywords:** International migration, Social Integration, African residents in Guangzhou.

## 1. Presentation of the Issue

Over the past decade or so, research on international migration has focused on issues related to social adaptation and integration. Especially with deepening globalization leading to capital flows without borders worldwide including people's movement across borders (migration), there have been a series of changes in the world, including people, goods, information, symbols, and ideas. According to the "World Migration Report 2022" released by the United Nations, the number of international migrants worldwide reached nearly 281 million by 2020, accounting for 3.6% of the world's total population. From an overall perspective, the departure of such a large number of migrants from their home countries to other countries has an undeniable impact on both the destination and origin countries. From an individual perspective, how migrants adapt and integrate into the local society of the destination country, in order to achieve the goals, they expected when leaving their home country, is also extremely challenging. The global COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 has accelerated the wave of deglobalization, making the process of international migrants integrating into local society even more difficult to a certain extent. Therefore, paying attention to the social adaptation and integration issues of international migrants, exploring different mechanisms to promote their adaptation and integration into the local society, and seeking methods to solve these problems and enhance migrant welfare, having salient practical significance.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the number of foreigners applying for settlement or temporary residence in China has significantly increased, and Guangzhou is one of the cities with a relatively enormous number of foreign residents in China. According to statistics, in 2019, the number of foreign residents in Guangzhou exceeded 80,000, ranking third in the country. Due to the annual Canton Fair and its unique transportation location, Guangzhou has attracted a large number of African businessmen to trade and formed African communities in the city. The settlement or short-term residence of such a large number of Africans in Guangzhou inevitably leads to a series of social integration issues. How do these African businessmen adapt to local life in Guangzhou? How do they integrate into the local society? What mechanisms do they apply to interact with it ? What are the differences in the social adaptation and integration strategies they adopt? These questions are the focus of this research. Hence, based on the African business community in Guangzhou, this article analyzes the methods, channels, and mechanisms used by this community in social adaptation and integration, explores various factors that affect the social integration of African communities in Guangzhou, and attempts to compare the differences in social adaptation and integration models

among African businessmen. The hope is to provide a valuable reference for relevant research on the African community in Guangzhou.

## 2. Literature Review on Domestic and International Research

### 2.1. Research on Social Adaptation and Social Integration

The Western academic community has conducted in-depth research on the social integration of immigrants, analyzing the social adaptation and integration issues of international immigrants using interdisciplinary theories. Liang Bo and Wang Haiying believe that the research on immigrant integration in Western literature mainly uses the concepts of assimilation, social adaptation, social integration, acculturation, social inclusion, and social incorporation. (2010) John Goldlush and others point out that social adaptation is the "interaction and coordination between individuals and groups, as well as the individual's reflection on a specific social environment," and includes objective and subjective aspects of social adaptation. (1974) Martens believes that the social integration of international immigrants in the receiving country not only includes the "integration and absorption of immigrants by the host society," but more importantly, the immigrant group's cognition and actions towards the new society. (1995) The British philosopher Herbert Spencer pointed out that individual adaptation to society is of great significance, and individuals can adapt to the new society through language, customs, laws, systems, and by other means.

The concept of social integration is relatively broad compared to social adaptation. It includes the integration of migrants into the host society and the reaction of the local society to migrants. In this process, the relationship between both parties can be shaped. Noah Lewin-Epstein believes that social integration is a multi-level concept, including integration at the interpersonal, societal, ethnic, and national levels (1974). Huang Kuangshi classified research on social integration theory into three levels: macro, meso, and micro, interpreting them from three aspects: "grand narrative," "ethnic pattern," and "psychological construction" (2010). In addition, more researchers tend to define or measure the concept of social integration from the perspectives of political, economic, and cultural adaptation.

Overall, in the field of international migration research, the concept of social adaptation mainly focuses on the process of migrants actively adapting to the host society, with a one-way direction. The concept of social integration, on the other hand, emphasizes the interactive behavior between migrants and the host society and the impact or even shock of these behaviors on both parties. It includes not only the process of migrants integrating into the new society but also the absorption of migrants by mainstream society.

### 2.2. Research on African communities in Guangzhou

The meaning of the African community in Guangzhou is relatively broad, which includes not only African students who come to Guangzhou for study but also African traders who come to Guangzhou for business, as well as other types of people who come to Guangzhou for a short stay (such as visiting relatives). The research object selected in this article is the most common and populous group among the African community in Guangzhou - African traders.

It is generally believed that the academic research on the African community in Guangzhou began to gradually take off after 2005 and has since achieved rich research results. The research on this group covers multiple disciplines and fields in the social sciences, such as the application of theories from anthropology, sociology, and international politics to explain research questions. Different researchers have also chosen different research directions, leading to progress and development in various aspects of the current research on this group. In this study, all existing domestic research results on this group and some foreign research results were reviewed. The existing research on the African community in Guangzhou was broadly classified into three categories.

The first category of research mainly focuses on governance issues of Africans in Guangzhou. Representative works include Yan Haiming's "Exploration of Governance Issues of Africans in

Guangzhou". The author believes that the current immigration management laws are unable to adapt to mainstream international migration management concepts, lack relevant provisions for social integration, and even have biases and discrimination against African integration. He points out that "a migration management strategy guided by social integration" needs to be adopted, and legal protection needs to be improved in multiple dimensions to achieve a "positive cycle" of governance for Africans in Guangzhou. (2019)

The second category of research mainly uses a sociological perspective and empirical methods to focus on the characteristics of Africans in Guangzhou and their interactions with the city. As early as 2009, Adams Bodomo of the University of Hong Kong conducted an overview of the African community in Guangzhou through questionnaires, field research, and interviews. He believed that the existence of this group significantly reinforced trade relations between China and Africa. (2009) Li Yaji and Liu Lixin explored the causes and mechanisms behind the "daytime hiding and nighttime activities" phenomenon among Africans in Guangzhou by analyzing daily behavior data of the African community. (2021) For example, Li Zhigang, Xue Desheng, and others explored the social space of black communities in Guangzhou, believing that "the social space mechanism of Xiaobei Road includes both passive isolation and active clustering and its economic form has begun to develop toward 'ethnic community economy'." (2008) In addition, there are few kinds of literature that focus on themes such as the migration behavior of African communities in Guangzhou and the interaction patterns between Africans and local residents.

The third type of research covers the widest range of topics, and its core issue is the social integration of Africans in Guangzhou. It includes research on concrete features such as migrant infrastructure, African communities, African religious activities, and African music, as well as abstract issues such as social relationships among Africans in Guangzhou, intermarriage between Central Africa and Guangzhou locals, social adaptation and integration mechanisms, and the construction of African migrant identities. The social adaptation and integration issues faced by African business communities in Guangzhou, which is the subject of this article, belong to this category. Specifically, the analysis of social adaptation and social integration of Africans can be divided into two subcategories: social adaptation strategies and social integration degree surveys. Tong Jinxing, a graduate student at Guangzhou University, believes in his master's thesis "Social Adaptation and Social Work Intervention from the Perspective of Social Space Theory: A Case Study of Africans in Guangzhou" that the social adaptation effect of Africans in Guangzhou is best in the economic space, but not ideal in other social spaces. Therefore, social work intervention should be used to promote the social adaptation of Africans in Guangzhou. Zhou Yang and Li Zhigang (2020) start from the internal and external social relationships facing "Central African partners" and explore the social and cultural adaptation mechanisms of "Central African partners" and their mixed-race children. The study believes that "Central African partners" have actively chosen the cultural adaptation process of "separate and integrate." Wen Guozhu (2012) explains the social integration behavior of Africans in Guangzhou after migration using the theory of migrant adaptation and the social integration problems faced by this group at multiple levels. He believes that the relationship between Africans and ordinary Guangzhou residents has undergone a process of "from tension to acceptance." However, at present, there are not many studies on African business communities in Guangzhou focusing on social adaptation and social integration, and most of the research has not paid attention to the inherent connection between social adaptation and social integration and their manifestation in the social interaction between African businesspeople and Guangzhou locals. Therefore, this article draws on the research of scholars in this field, combines social adaptation theory and social integration theory to analyze the relevant issues, and puts forward related thoughts.

## 3. Overview of African residents in Guangzhou

The influx of African immigrants to Guangzhou started after the 1997 Asian financial crisis and benefited from the relaxed restrictions on the management of foreign residents in the city. During this

period, a large number of African immigrants shifted from Hong Kong or Southeast Asia to Guangzhou, becoming the first batch of African merchants to arrive in the city. They purchased cheap goods to sell on the African continent and earned huge profits. As trade relations between China and Africa continued to improve in the 21st century, more and more African traders came to Guangzhou to seek business opportunities, and this group became to some extent the link supporting trade between China and Africa.

According to data from the Chinese Public Security Bureau's Exit and Entry Administration, in 2017, the number of legal African residents in Guangzhou was about 20,000, but due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the current number has dropped to less than 10,000. The large African community in Guangzhou has formed ethnic enclaves in the city, and Guangzhou is also known as the "Chocolate City".

The African community is mainly concentrated in the Yuexiu and Baiyun districts. Among them, Xiaobei, Dengfeng Village, Sanyuanli, and Taojin have the highest density of African residents in Yuexiu District, and Tianshui Building, Dengfeng Hotel, Xiushan Building, Hengsheng Building, Sino-Africa Trade City, and Bai Ma Clothing Market are the main gathering places for African merchants. In Baiyun District, Sanyuanli and Guangyuan West Road are the main areas where Africans reside. In recent years, some Africans have also moved to Huadu District, Huqi, and Sanshui.

Most of this group is engaged in trade between China and Africa, and most are self-employed, with a few working for others. Among them, the most engaged in trade in clothing, electronics, and mechanical parts procurement. In terms of national distribution, Nigerians, Cameroonians, Malians, Ivorians, and Africans from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and other East African countries are the main group, and there are also a significant number of Africans from North Africa.

Due to the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, the city's police and immigration department strengthened the crackdown on "three illegals" (illegal employment, illegal entry, and illegal residence), so the number of "three illegals" among African immigrants in Guangzhou has significantly reduced. Most of the African residents currently living in Guangzhou hold valid visas, mainly business visas (M visas), and a few African businessmen have obtained long-term residence permits in China.

## 4. Social Adaptation and Integration Patterns of African Business Community in Guangzhou

### 4.1. Social Adaptation Patterns

There are several different dimensions for analyzing the social adaptation effects of international migrants, such as subjective and objective; language, law, and identity; cultural learning, stress coping, and social identity. In order to facilitate research and analysis, this section will select the economic, social, and cultural dimensions to explain the social adaptation strategies and effects of African businessmen. (1) Economic Level At the economic level, African businessmen adopt diversified social adaptation strategies. Since their main purpose is to engage in commercial activities, rapid adaptation in the economic aspect is the top priority for every African businessman. Currently, the goods operated by most African businessmen are relatively basic and low-cost, and the wholesale markets in Guangzhou can fully meet their needs. For example, the Yuyang Commercial City, the XinHongHui Commercial City, and the Jinshanxiang Commercial City in the Xiaobei Road area, the commodity wholesale market in Yide Road, the Xingzhiguang Electrical Appliance City, the Haiyin Electrical Appliance General Market, the Haiyin Cloth Market in the Dashatou Road area, and the small shops in the surrounding areas can almost fully cover the product types for African businessmen to conduct foreign trade. Therefore, African businessmen engaged in different product trades can easily find corresponding purchase markets and even establish stable purchase channels. In fact, for these African businessmen, communication in the business context is the most challenging aspect of their adaptation in the economic level. According to the research of Tong Jinshu of Guangzhou University, in typical Sino-African economic spaces such as commercial cities, most Chinese

businessmen use "Pidgin English" and "Calculator Language" as the main tools for conducting business with Africans. "Pidgin English" refers to a kind of Chinese-style English that does not comply with grammatical rules. It often translates Chinese and English word by word and is commonly used in daily oral communication. "Calculator Language" refers to the bargaining between the buyer and the seller through the computer and gestures, and finally, they reach or terminate the transaction. In fact, Chinese businessmen who operate in areas where African communities gather, such as Xiaobei and Sanyuanli, often have a lower level of foreign language proficiency and cannot communicate fluently in English or French with African businessmen. Therefore, "Pidgin English" and "Calculator Language" have naturally become more effective communication media. In addition, the rise and improvement of the translation software in recent years have made it easier for African businessmen to adapt economically. With the help of real-time translation software on smartphones, communication between different ethnic groups can be more efficient, and accurate, saving transaction time.

It is worth noting that newly arrived African businessmen need to build their local business network in Guangzhou. This is crucial for the group of African businessmen whose main business is foreign trade and is also a crucial part of their social adaptation in terms of the economy. Generally speaking, most Africans who have just arrived in China will seek help from African associations or chambers of commerce. The leaders of these associations and chambers of commerce will help these African businessmen establish business relationships with other African businessmen or even Chinese businessmen, and assist them in dealing with matters such as renting, transportation, visas, and entry and exit. Some African businessmen will also make friends with Chinese businessmen to gain their trust in terms of the economy, and thus expand their trade channels. In addition, the issue of differences in business logic and values between China and Africa can also be adapted in the long-term trade practice through dealing with Chinese people.

### 4.2. Social Aspect

Secondly, in terms of the social aspect, the social contacts of African traders in Guangzhou consist of two groups: Chinese and other Africans. They hardly establish social relationships with other foreign nationals who come to Guangzhou, such as Koreans. In fact, except for transactions such as renting housing and asking for directions, and the case of Sino-African partners, there is little social interaction between the African community and residents in Guangzhou. It can be said that the majority of African traders in Guangzhou mainly engage in social activities within their group.

The main social venues for African traders in Guangzhou fall into three categories: religious places, community restaurants and cafes, and public spaces in their gathering areas. As most Africans are religious, various religious places in Guangzhou not only provide spiritual sustenance but also offer opportunities for them to worship and socialize with people of the same ethnicity or faith. For example, every Sunday, a certain number of Africans will come to the Sacred Heart Cathedral on Yide Road in Yuexiu District to attend mass, meet friends and expand social relationships. In addition, cafes, bars, and restaurants in Xiaobei Community are also gathering places for African traders. At night or on weekends, many Africans will drink, dance, and party in bars, where they can make new friends. It can be seen that this group exhibits a high degree of integration between living space and social space.

The last type of social venue is the public space in the gathering areas of African traders, such as the square in front of the Trade City or nearby parks and lawns. In these places, it is common to see African traders conducting business transactions, and even in the early years, some Africans used to spend the night outdoors.

Overall, the social adaptation of African people in Guangzhou is not achieved by seeking external contacts but by establishing social relationship networks within their ethnic groups. This phenomenon reflects that even though African traders have some contact with local people in their daily economic activities, deeper communication and the establishment of deeper social relationships rarely occur between Africans and Chinese people. This "huddling together for warmth" phenomenon is to some

extent detrimental to Africans who want to adapt and integrate into Guangzhou's life. Of course, most local people have no intention of interacting with Africans, and discrimination against Africans often occurs, which increases the difficulty of African people adapting to Guangzhou's social life. Of course, the situation of "Sino-African partners" is a special case, and it is believed to be a further step towards social integration rather than just social adaptation.

### 4.3. Cultural aspect

The cultural adaptation of African merchants in Guangzhou is mainly manifested in two aspects: language and culture/customs. According to field research conducted by Wang Liang from Guangzhou University on African people in Guangzhou, more than 80% of respondents said that their biggest difficulty in trying to integrate into the local society was the inability to speak Chinese. Guangzhou, as the capital of Guangdong Province, gathers people from various regions such as Guangfu, Hakka, and Chaoshan, as well as from all over the country. Therefore, there is a mixture of Cantonese, Hakka, Chaoshan dialect, and Mandarin used in the language. Even if African merchants master Mandarin, it is difficult for them to communicate effectively with locals who use Cantonese. Therefore, the social adaptation difficulty of African merchants in terms of language is very high.

In terms of cultural customs, the social adaptation strategy of the African merchant community in Guangzhou is shaped by both their ethnic lifestyle and the local lifestyle. For example, most of this group adopts a "stay up at night and sleep during the day" schedule, which is to maximize avoiding contact with the Chinese population and is essentially social segregation. In addition, African people in Guangzhou have a good integration effect in terms of religious adaptation. As mentioned earlier, various religious places in Guangzhou can often provide material conditions for African communities to develop their religious consciousness. It is worth noting that in recent years, some African associations and hometown associations have also been enthusiastic about spreading and introducing the culture/customs of their countries in the community where they gather. This is an important measure to promote two-way communication between residents and Africans, and it also reflects the active adaptation of Africans to the local society.

### 4.4. Social Integration Model

Different from the concept of social adaptation, the concept of social integration focuses on a wider scope. It not only concerns the immigrants' deep integration into the host society but also involves the host society's reaction to the immigrants' arrival. It is a process of mutual influence.

Generally speaking, since most Africans have a short duration of stay in Guangzhou and tend to live and socialize within their ethnic group, currently, only a few African merchants can truly integrate into the local Guangzhou community. There are two main ways for them to be accommodated into mainstream society: one is to marry locals or non-local residents in Guangzhou (the "Sino-African partner" model) to gain access to their social resources; the other is to actively integrate into the local society by settling in Guangzhou for a long time, thus accumulating social relationships and networks to achieve identity transformation.

The "Sino-African partner" model is undoubtedly a deep level of integration. Having a Chinese partner can help African merchants adapt quickly to Chinese culture and lifestyle, and they have more opportunities to connect deeply with Chinese society compared to their African peers. However, even if they integrate to a certain extent by marrying Chinese people, these African merchants are still likely to face exclusion from locals. Therefore, they tend to choose to join non-mainstream groups in mainstream society to compensate psychologically. For example, families formed by "Sino-African partners" generally establish a sense of belonging and identity by socializing with other "Sino-African partner" families.

African merchants who opt for the second way to achieve social integration tend to consciously promote "sinicization." They make an effort to master Mandarin and Cantonese, adopt local living habits, realize the differences in values and ways of thinking between themselves and Chinese people, and actively socialize with locals. For instance, with the help of the Social Work Development Center,

a foreign-related community in Dengfeng Street, Yuexiu District, established a youth football team composed of local youth and people of African descent. By using football as a bond to promote communication among different ethnic groups, local families, "Sino-African partner" families, and African families gradually built harmonious neighborhood relationships. Africans could also expand their circle of social contacts, enhance their sense of community belonging and identity, change from being excluded from the community to actively integrating into it, and achieve identity transformation.

## 5. Comparison of Social Adaptation and Integration Patterns of African Businessmen in Guangzhou

From the above two social integration patterns of international migrants, social integration is a further manifestation of social adaptation. The social adaptation of African businessmen in Guangzhou is only a simple superficial integration behavior, especially in terms of economic activities, where they have some understanding of the local business model and quickly form a set of operating models. In addition, in terms of social and cultural aspects, since most African businessmen only focus on obtaining economic benefits, they rarely fully adapt to social and cultural aspects. In fact, they tend to establish social relationships within their ethnic groups to improve their adaptability in Guangzhou. However, in the process of social integration, African businessmen consciously seek the help of locals to change themselves, and by imitating and learning the local people's lifestyle and thinking patterns, they become more "Chinese." In addition, establishing social relationships with residents is also one of the important characteristics of African businessmen actively pursuing social integration.

At the psychological level, African businessmen who pursue social adaptation always maintain their identity as Africans, distinguishing themselves from residents or other Chinese people. Most of them believe that they are only traders and temporary residents, not a part of the local society. However, African businessmen who seek social integration hope to maintain social contacts with other African residents in Guangzhou and also want to establish social networks with locals to become a member of the local community and thus gain a sense of belonging in a foreign land. In the process of social integration, the identity recognition of African businessmen has transformed, that is, from "rejected foreigners" to "accepted community members," which is a gradual process.

In summary, social adaptation and social integration are two different stages of African businessmen's integration into Guangzhou life. They adopt different strategies at different stages of integration, but sometimes the process of social adaptation and social integration is intertwined and not completely separate.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, social adaptation and social integration issues are two different stages of the same process. This study believes that the difference between social adaptation and social integration of African businessmen in Guangzhou lies in whether they subjectively promote deeper interaction with local people and things. The two most important evaluation dimensions are whether the interaction between the two parties goes beyond the economic level and whether there is a transformation in the identity recognition of African businessmen. Through the analysis of the social adaptation and integration patterns of African businessmen in Guangzhou in this study, it is hoped to provide reference ideas for the social integration issues of other foreign groups in China and to add research results to the relevant research of African residents in Guangzhou.

## References

[1] Huang Kuangshi, Ga Rida. Review of theoretical studies on social integration [J]. New Horizons, 2010 (06): 86 - 88.

[2] Lang Bo, Wang Haiying. Review of social integration studies of migrants abroad [J]. Journal of Gansu University of Administration, 2010 (02): 18 - 27 + 126.

[3] Ruan Xuxian.Research on the governance of African immigrants in Guangzhou based on the perspective of collaborative governance [D]. Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2017.

[4] Wang Bingyu, Lu Yanxuan. Immigration Infrastructure and South-South mobility: Institutional identity dilemma, daily life experience and initiative practice of African businessmen in Guangzhou [J]. Guangdong Social Science, 2021 (02): 190 - 204.

[5] Liu Tiannan. Development and trend of African immigrants in China [J]. Foreign Language field, 2020, 6 (00): 132 - 146.

[6] Xu Tao. Weakening, breaking and reconstruction of social support for Africans in Guangzhou [J]. Southern population, 2009, 24 (04): 34 - 44.

[7] Liulin, Liang Yucheng, Song Guangwen, He Shenjing. Analysis of the migration status and influencing factors of African people in Guangdong - Survey from Guangzhou and Foshan [J]. Population Science of China, 2015 (01): 115 - 122 + 128.

[8] Wang Liang. Community self-organization participates in the governance of foreign communities—Take the self-organization of non-African football team residents in JL community of Guangzhou as an example [J]. The Academic Forum, 2015, 38 (09): 109 - 114. DOI: 10.16524j.45 - 1002.2015.09.014.

[9] Zhou Yang, Li Zhigang. Partition blending in: the social and cultural adaptation of “Chinese-African partners" in Guangzhou [J]. Journal of Minzu University of China (Philosophy and Social Sciences edition), 2016, 43 (01): 70 - 79.

[10] Wang Liang. The current situation and goverance of foreigners in China—Take African foreigners in Guangzhou as an example [J]. Unity, 2018 (04): 53 - 56.

[11] Niu Dong. "Passing Community”: A social organization of Africans in Guangzhou [J]. Sociological Research, 2015, 30 (02): 124 - 148+244. DOI: 10.19934/j.cnki.shxyj.2015.02.006.

[12] Wen Guozhu. Research on the degree of social integration and its influence of African businessmen in Guangzhou based on the perspective of immigrant adaptation theory [J]. Reform and opening-up, 2012 (04): 111 - 114. DOI: 10.16653/j.cnki.32 - 1034/f.2012.04.034.

[13] Luo Lei. A study of Africans in Guangzhou from the perspective of Sino-African relations [D]. Jinan University, 2013.

[14] Li Zhigang, Xue Desheng, Michael Lyons, Alison Brown. Social space analysis of the African settlement area in Xiaobei Road in Guangzhou [J]. Journal of Geography, 2008 (02): 207 - 218.

[15] Tong Jinxing. Social adaptation of foreigners and the intervention of social work from the perspective of social space theory [D]. Guangzhou University, 2020.

[16] Li Yazhi, Liu Lixin. Diurnal sleep-the social adaptation strategies of the Africans in Guangzhou [J]. Tropical geography, 2021, 41 (04): 857 - 869.DOI: 10.13284/j.cnki.rddl.003364.

[17] Xu Tao. Social interaction relations and logic of African people in Guangzhou [J]. Youth Studies, 2009 (05): 71 - 86+96.