

A “Transient Neighborhood”: Africans’ Spatial Concentration in Guangzhou, China

Dong Niu, Sainan Lin, Hongsheng Chen, and Zhigang Li

Abstract

The formation and rise of African neighborhoods in Guangzhou, particularly Xiaobei (小北), have recently aroused much scholarly concern. The Africans’ spatial cluster imparts knowledge, allows for the exchange of information, is a hub of business and acts as a spiritual home, which links the businesses and lives of Africans, who may live far away, to Xiaobei. However, the formation and development of this spatially concentrated area were not natural and arbitrary; they were strictly controlled by the state and local administrative regime. Based on ethnographic research in Xiaobei, we found that the high

Dong Niu is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of International Studies and Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies, Jinan University, China.

Sainan Lin is Associate Professor in the School of Urban Design, Wuhan University, and in the Hubei Habitat Environment Engineering Research Center of Engineering and Technology, China. Correspondence should be sent to sainan.lin@whu.edu.cn.

Hongsheng Chen is Associate Professor in the School of Architecture, Southeast University, China.

Zhigang Li is Professor and Dean in the School of Urban Design, Wuhan University, and in the Hubei Habitat Environment Engineering Research Center of Engineering and Technology, China.

* This study is funded by National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 41801156, 41771167). The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for very helpful feedback on the earlier drafts of the article.

ethnic-social diversity, high mobility, nonintegration, and network of the members of the neighborhood differ in nature from ghettos, immigrant/ethnic neighborhoods, or immigrant/ethnic enclaves in typical immigration countries. As such, we argue that the traditional term “immigrant” or “transmigrant” neighborhood, which developed on the basis of migration phenomena in the Global North, cannot address the Africans in Guangzhou properly. Therefore, we turn to the term “transient neighborhood” to better understand recent “immigration” in Chinese cities. In this vein, we articulate the flexibility and instability of recent globalization and how the state plays an increasingly significant role during the process.

As a developing country, China has seen many social elites emigrate to other countries in search of a more relaxed economic, political, social, and cultural environment. Meanwhile, China, as the world’s second largest economy, has also attracted many foreigners. Although foreigners from South Korea, Japan, the United States, India, and Russia make up the top five in terms of their numbers in Guangzhou,¹ Africans in Guangzhou have recently received the most attention. Xiaobei, as a major African spatial cluster in Guangzhou, has been widely discussed in social media and administration and academic research.² However, the current research often described the African-concentrated area of Xiaobei as an “immigrant neighborhood” or “enclave”³ that developed from research based on studies of migration to the Global North (specifically the United States). Are terms such as “immigrant” and “immigrant enclave” applicable to the Global South? Specifically the Africans in Guangzhou, China? Following the call upon “comparative studies”⁴ and “provincializing urbanism”⁵ in the literature of recent urban studies, the theories originated in the North may not be applicable to the situation of the South, while a comparative study of existing concepts and local practices may generate important new insights or even new theories.

As such, this article aims to examine the nature of African-concentrated areas of Xiaobei in Guangzhou—whether they can be regarded as “immigrant enclaves,” as we have learned from the experiences of countries in the Global North. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: The first part is a literature review on immigrant settlement research in Western Countries and current studies of Africans in Guangzhou, China. Largely from a comparative historical and politic-economic perspective,