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Nigerian migrants, daily life domains and bordering processes in the city of Guangzhou

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how interrelated processes of bordering – i.e. delimitation, interface and affirmation – work out in domains of Nigerian migrants' daily life in Guangzhou. The results reveal that migrants make use of marketplaces as interface platforms for economic exchange and cooperation with Chinese entrepreneurs, yet within a highly delimited playing field and with affirmation of cultural differences. They find residence in the city, with opportunities delimited by state and city laws. In neighborhoods, they find their stigmatization affirmed and lack inter-ethnic interface. Migrants also create underground churches, yet delimited into remaining invisible in the urban landscape. In churches, migrants affirm their identity and community but have limited inter-ethnic interface. The paper pinpoints fierce segregative and exclusionary outcomes for Nigerian migrants but they also persevere and gain agency in becoming a successful entrepreneur through instrumental inter-ethnic contact. Moreover, through non-instrumental intra-ethnic contact, they negotiate a sense of belonging in the city.

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Social space; daily life; bordering; power; Nigerian migrants; Guangzhou

Introduction

Across the globe, "transnational migration is a central and constitutive dynamic in the contemporary social production (and transformation) of urban space" (De Genova, 2015, p. 4), with Nigerian migrants in the Chinese city of Guangzhou as intriguing case. Since the 1990s and conditioned by a selective and tight immigration policy of the Chinese state (Haugen, 2012), many Nigerian migrants moved into mainland China as entrepreneurs and traders. At the time, most of them congregated in the marketplaces in downtown Guangzhou and its surrounding neighborhoods. During the last decade, however, with the city campaign to more intensively control and regulate African migrants in the downtown area, changes in terms of their spatial distribution and effects on daily life in the city have become important issues for analysis and debate in migration studies (Jin et al., 2021). In this context, several migration studies have explored the

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forced and voluntary mobility of Nigerian migrants within and beyond the city confines, and the transnational and transient spaces they produce (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2012; Niu et al., 2020). This mobility resulted in the dispersal of the daily life domains of African migrants over the city of Guangzhou – with the downtown area having lost its importance for migrants' housing but with remaining importance for business and leisure activities (Jin et al., 2021). Most studies so far have focused on the disappearance of the African community from, or their clamp down in, the marketplaces (Bredeloup, 2012; Lyons et al., 2012; Niu et al., 2020). Due to the main focus on downtown marketplaces as daily life domain, migration studies contain rich insights into instrumental interaction and relations between African migrants and Chinese residents – i.e. required for business and trading activities (Jin et al., 2022; Liang & Le Billon, 2020; Zhou et al., 2016). However, this is less so for inter-ethnic contact that is more non-instrumental and also takes place in daily life domains beyond the downtown marketplaces. Moreover, how the different and dispersed daily life domains are combined by the African migrants for their daily life in the city is still under-investigated.

To overcome this lack of attention, our paper investigates the inter-ethnic social interaction taking place and the social relations taking shape in neighborhoods and underground churches – used for residential, leisure and religious purposes – in combination with marketplaces used for business and leisure purposes. Resonating with Massey (2010), attention will be paid to how various daily life domains are related to the social production of space and how the migrants combine social spaces during their daily in the city (Van Ham & Tammaru, 2016). We will investigate how particularities of marketplaces, neighborhoods and churches generate social interaction and intergroup relations between Nigerian migrants and Chinese citizens as well as how their interactions and relations, in turn and dynamically, produce a variety of social spaces. In so doing, social space is considered to produce, and being produced by, institutional arrangements and power politics (Lefebvre, 1991) – operating at scales ranging from the national to the local and with often involuntary and unequal outcomes for migrant groups in the city. To shed light on the production of multiple social spaces of Nigerian migrants in the city Guangzhou as a dynamic, political and multi-scalar process, this paper adopts a bordering perspective. In so doing, we not only aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the social production of urban space in Guangzhou in particular but also to urban border studies more generally – by going beyond the still conventional focus of border studies on boundaries at the *inter-national* level (Almeida, 2021), and paying attention to bordering at the *intra-urban* level. In so doing, we answer to the call made by Scott and Sohn to "bring [borders] back to the heart of the concept of place and place-making" in the urban context because the "tension-laden qualities of borders are intrinsic to the social production of space" (2019, p. 310).

Building on urban border studies and from the perspective of Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou, this paper will investigate the extent to which the interrelated bordering processes of (1) "delimitation" – including the separation, filtering and control of migrants –, (2) inter-ethnic "interface" between migrants and local residents, and (3) "affirmation" – including the socio-spatial differentiation of and divisions between cultural groups – pervade urban daily life (e.g. Almeida, 2021; Iossifova, 2015; Rossmeier & Weber, 2021; Sohn, 2014; Spierings, 2012). These processes are considered to involve a large spectrum of practices and a variety of actors, with different degrees of agency. They

may range from the formal exercise of national sovereignty by the state – e.g. through visa regimes – to the everyday construction of identity, community and belonging – e.g. through cultural expressions and spatial claims by migrants and residents (Ramírez, 2020; Thompson et al., 2021; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). While shedding light on the production of African migrants' social spaces, bordering processes are conceived as highly political and tension-laden. We will explore how bordering conditions the social accessibility of and visibility of ethnic communities the urban landscape. More specifically, we will analyze how bordering simultaneously manifests mechanisms of social segregation and spatial exclusion as well as strategies applied for negotiating, reinforcing and resisting the appropriation of and belonging in urban social space (Keresztély et al., 2017).

In the following, this paper will firstly develop an analytical framework for understanding the social production of space from a bordering perspective. This will be done by discussing the bordering processes of delimitation, interface and affirmation. After that, the research design and methods employed will be presented. Thirdly, the research findings on Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou will be unraveled, with specific attention for the social spaces of marketplaces, residential neighborhoods and underground churches. The paper concludes with a summary and discussion of the main findings.

Bordering processes of delimitation, interface and affirmation: an analytical framework

Drawing on (urban) border studies from a variety of contexts, with particular inspiration from Sohn's (2014) border functions framework, bordering as analytical framework for this paper will address the following interrelated "border functions".[1] Firstly, territorial "delimitation", including the separation, filtering and control of African migrants in China – exercised at both the state and city level, with the aim to protect the Chinese territory and its citizens. Secondly, provision of a platform for inter-ethnic "interface" between Nigerian migrants and Chinese residents in the city of Guangzhou – including their interaction and relations in urban social space used for business, residential, leisure and religious purposes. And thirdly, "affirmation", including the socio-spatial differentiation of and related divisions between cultural groups in Chinese society – when it comes to discrimination against and hostility towards Nigerian migrants in particular. Because borders have "dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled" (Balibar, 2004, p. 1), border functions not only operate at the *inter-national* level, in-between states, but increasingly at and in interplay with other spatial scales, including at the local, *intra-urban* level (Ramírez, 2020; Thompson et al., 2021). As such, "cities can be more generally understood as products of bordering processes; they are composed of a mosaic of interlinked yet differentiated spaces that give a particular city its social, economic, cultural and political character" (Scott & Sohn, 2019, p. 300). The border functions of delimitation, interface and affirmation will be elaborated on next by paying attention to interrelated state-level and everyday processes of bordering (De Genova, 2015; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018), together with the grounding of these processes through urban place-making (Keresztély et al., 2017).

Borders can be understood as "institutions of territorial structuring" (Almeida, 2021, p. 2) which are often drawn as objective, yet heavily contested, "lines on a map"

(Newman & Paasi, 1998). These lines function as *delimitation* of the sovereignty of, for instance, a state, region, city or neighborhood – with the aim to separate what is included from what is excluded (Karaman & Islam, 2012; Sohn, 2014). In this context, a border is often conceptualized as a dividing "barrier" which regulates a degree of territorial control, facilitating the filtering and repelling of particular mobilities, and the protection against external threats at the level of the state (Anderson et al., 2002; Flusty, 2001). Immigration laws and regulations, for instance, can be used by a state authority to control access to its territory, filter particular groups of wanted immigrants, and separate them from other groups of unwanted immigrants for the protection of its territory and citizens. However, borders as barriers are being employed by institutions at multiple levels to exercise power in defining who is included and who is excluded, in and from what urban space in particular (Akar, 2012; Almeida, 2021). This involves the "extension of borders deep into the putative "interior" of nation-state space" (De Genova, 2015, p. 3) with "national border regimes manifest[ing] themselves in urban neighbourhoods" (Thompson et al., 2021, p. 4). In addition to institutions enforcing borders at the national level, therefore, bordering simultaneously and increasingly takes place by institutions operating at the regional and local levels, "creating and enacting exclusionary mobility control" (Juul, 2022, p. 2). According to Rumford (2012), these dispersed borders are also made and remade by ordinary people during everyday life. Based on assumptions regarding the citizenship status of immigrant groups, for instance, ordinary citizens may operate as "border guards" performing surveillance in cities (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Through everyday bordering, citizens then tag migrant bodies as "foreign" and "illegitimate" during social encounters, exacerbating the discrimination, marginalization, and segregation of particular cultural groups in cities (Karaman & Islam, 2012; Scott & Sohn, 2019).

In addition to delimiting and separating, borders can also be seen as connecting urban spaces through the "juxtaposition of difference" (Iossifova, 2015). The focus of attention then lies on actions and interactions taking place "at the messy points of intersection of difference" (Hammar & Millstein, 2020, p. 274) – where cultural groups meet and have *interface* (Karaman & Islam, 2012; Sohn, 2014). In so doing, they may develop cross-cultural understanding, interdependencies and solidarities but may also develop misunderstandings and tensions, and perhaps even clash (Hammar & Millstein, 2020). In this context, a border is often conceptualized as a connecting "bridge", providing a variety of opportunities for socio-cultural and economic interaction (Spierings, 2012). When these differences are considered appealing and profitable, they may generate mobility and contact, with borders and their surroundings operating as zones of social interaction and relation building (Iossifova, 2013; Rumford, 2012). The interface, together with the mobilities and contact involved, could be driven by economic benefits – resulting in instrumental, or transactional, interaction. This is the case, for instance, when tax differences at the inter-national level are profited from through "focused interaction" (Goffman, 1967) with formal retail traders "on the other side" in a cross-border metropolitan region, or when traders themselves move across borders to exploit transnational price differences. At the intra-urban level, it is through transactions with, for instance, informal street vendors that local price differences with formal retailers can be profited from. In addition to being driven by economic benefits, the interface may as well be driven by socio-cultural interests – promoting the exploration of and contact

with "unfamiliar" places and people, resulting in more non-instrumental interaction (Stevens, 2007). This may be the case, for instance, when international migrants have "focused and fleeting interaction" (Goffman, 1967) with local residents in a variety of urban settings and public spaces across the city. However, as found by Moyo and Cossa, social-cultural interaction may also be avoided as much as possible by migrants preferring to "lead quiet lives out of the public eye" (2015, p. 156) – involving "tactics of invisibility to the state, the fear of arrest and the impending return" (ibid, p.153). this brings to the fore that interface and agency always occur "within the constraints and limits placed by contextual and structural factors" (Brunet-Jailly, 2011, p. 3).

Next to be a territorial product and an interactive platform, borders simultaneously are "symbolic systems" (Liao et al., 2018). Borders are then subjective by nature and drawn "in the mind", often as an *affirmation* of social identities and cultural values (Almeida, 2021; Sohn, 2014). These "mental representations of difference" (Spierings, 2013) are "loaded with places, images, material points of reference within the urban landscape, feelings, and value judgement" (Scott, 2021, p. 802). According to Karaman and Islam (2012), mental borders are drawn through narratives, often reflecting discursive constructions of national identity having the "effect of confirming hegemonic understandings … by demarcation from the spatially bounded other" (Almeida, 2021, p. 12). It is narratives of otherness and elsewhereness, often including popular stereotypes (Keresztély et al., 2017), that people tend to live by to negotiate complexities of the urban and everyday (Scott & Sohn, 2019). In so doing, they construct and navigate social and spatial differentiation in and across cities. This social differentiation or "othering" of cultural groups and their identities indicates which group one belongs to, or not, making a distinction between "us" versus "them". Stressing the spatial dimension and implications of differentiation, bordering also involves processes of "ordering". This indicates where a cultural group belongs, or should belong, making a distinction between "here" versus "there" (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Both othering and ordering can be exemplified by the influx of immigrants into cities resulting in xenophobia among local residents, racism against foreigners and protests or even outbursts of violence against these "others" in the urban spaces where they reside – which the local residents considers to be "their" territory. This may occur in particular when immigrants and their numbers as well as concentrations, but also their values and beliefs, are being perceived as an "invasion" and as a threat to the social order (Zolberg, 1989) – giving "rise to a collective "us" (Zill et al., 2021, p. 2). As a response to a racist and hostile environment, migrants may apply the strategy of spatially clustering in cities to develop a sense of comfort and protect themselves against harassment and attacks, in particular when their legal status is precarious (Jin et al., 2021). At the same time, according to Almeida (2021), the spatial othering and ordering – as well as concentration – of particular cultural groups, with the symbolic projection and confinement of associated threats to bounded and peripheral urban spaces, may work as "socially reassuring" for citizens living in central urban areas.

Methodology

Although Africans in China constitute a heterogenous group of migrants, we focus on Nigerian migrants as research respondents in this paper for the following reasons. Firstly, they are a relatively stable group of migrants in China, providing grounds for

the development and embedding of a community. Exploring dynamics of their social space in the city of Guangzhou can enrich our understanding of how this "transnational and transient community" (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Müller & Wehrhahn, 2013; Niu et al., 2020) is actually being practiced and the extent to which it becomes grounded in the city. Secondly, many Nigerian migrants have settled in Guangzhou by overstaying their business, tourism or student visa. In addition, migrants with a valid tourism and student visa are not entitled to work in the city. With respect to the latter, Mathews et al. (2017) during their research "met more than a few traders with student visas who spend little time in the Chinese-language classes that provided them visas" (2017, p. 121). Not having a working or residence permit means that Nigerian migrants are often caught up in legal troubles and related stigmas. Nigerian migrants in China are often associated with criminality, especially when it comes to drug-related offences, resulting in a bad reputation and discrimination. These issues, related to overstaying and discrimination, clearly speak to the bordering processes under scrutiny in this paper.

The first author started recruiting Nigerian migrant respondents through their Chinese business partners and the local leader of the Nigerian community. This was followed by finding additional respondents by means of the "snowball" approach. In total, 24 Nigerian migrants were recruited – who are predominantly male (22), mostly self-employed (20) and whose length of staying in China ranges from 2 to more than 10 years. The low number of female respondents in our sample can be explained by Mathews et al.'s (2017) argument that African traders in Guangzhou are predominantly male, with female traders staying in the city only shortly – i.e. usually not more than 2 weeks –, adding further complexity to their recruitment. For the purpose of anonymity, all names of respondents have been replaced with fictional ones.

To find and analyze the multiple urban social spaces of Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou, an ethnographic approach was adopted. Respondents were accompanied to explore their practices, perceptions and experiences on-site in a variety of daily life domains across the city (Kusenbach, 2003). During fieldwork from November 2015 to April 2016, marketplaces, residential neighborhoods and underground churches were found to be the most important domains of daily life – where different kinds of encounters take place for business, residential, leisure and religious purposes. While accompanying respondents, practices being performed when socially interacting in marketplaces, neighborhoods and churches were observed (see Figure 1 for a spatial indication of the migrant's daily life domains in the city of Guangzhou). The first author also went along to the wholesale markets and factories to further explore how respondents communicate and engage with Chinese citizens when doing business. In so doing, extensive fieldwork diaries were made to collect the findings of observations in a detailed and accurate manner.

The on-site interviews were conducted in English with respondents, discussing the social interactions taking place in marketplaces, neighborhoods and churches. The aim of these in-depth interviews was to gain information about the experiences of having social interaction with other people in the city as well as to investigate their perceptions of encountering and negotiating social differences and similarities in and across a variety of urban settings. The interviews revealed detailed narratives of social and emotional support during daily life, illustrating perceptions of and experiences with both intra and inter-group interactions in marketplaces, neighborhoods and churches. Probing

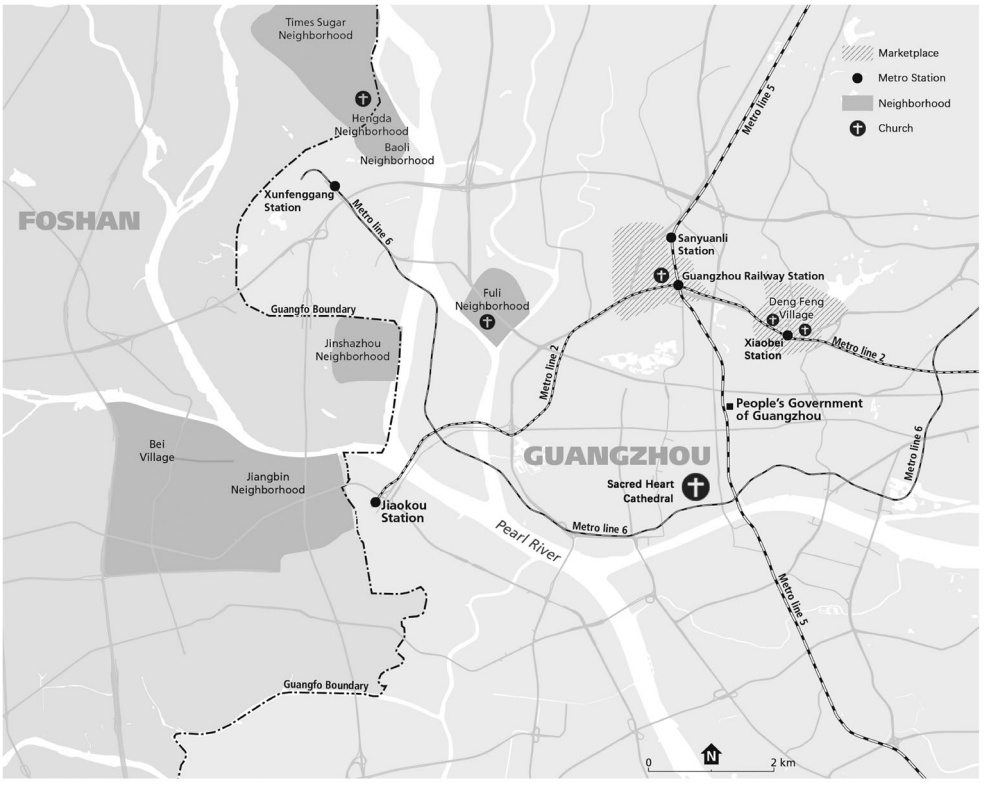

Figure 1. Map of important daily life domains of Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou (Source: the authors).

on the answers with respect to practices, perceptions and experiences of encountering and negotiating social differences and similarities during daily life resulted in further reflections on the local institutional context and hostility of the social environment. Most in-depth interviews were taped with the consent of the respondents and subsequently transcribed. Extensive notes were made of interviews for the interviews without consent to record on tape. All interview material was coded thematically by the first author during multiple rounds of data analysis – with particular attention for the different aspects of delimitation, interface and affirmation as bordering processes in marketplaces, neighborhoods and churches as daily life domains.

Nigerian migrants and daily life domains in Guangzhou

Guangzhou, as capital of the Guangdong province located in the southeast of China on the border with Hong Kong, has played a key role as outpost towards the "outside world". The national economic and social reforms from 1978 onwards started with the Special Economic Zones in the Guangdong province. Since then, this province has attracted many investors and rural workers who specifically concentrated in industrial areas labeled as "world factory". The international character of Guangzhou together with its

extensive and export-oriented manufacturing activities provide an important basis for the contemporary settlement of Africans in the city (Haugen, 2012).

According to our respondents, most Nigerian migrants enter China with a valid visa. Several then overstay their visa and become undocumented. Some of these undocumented Nigerians have been repatriated back to their home countries. Others have so far managed to escape from the purview of the local government, exercised through checks and controls. At the same time, some of those who were repatriated bought a new passport in the black market with a new name from a neighboring country like Niger. They then applied for a new visa and illegally, but successfully, entered the country of China again.

When it comes to border controls at the national level, the state has delimitated the Chinese border through the application of a selective and tight immigration policy towards Nigerians, including the issuing of a business or tourism visa for 30 days only. In this way, the state authority regulates and restricts both the type and timing of Nigerian's cross-border movements. In addition, the local government is involved in the process of border delimitation at the local level through residence permit regulation. Foreigners are required to register with the local government if they want to reside within the territorial confines of the city. They need to qualify for a residence permit with demanding criteria in terms of, amongst others, the amount of capital and type of company. When not qualifying, access to hotels for short-term residence in around marketplaces is the only remaining possibility. For most Nigerian migrants this boils down to the fact that only *marketplaces* provide them with access to Guangzhou – i.e. for the sake of economic exchange and transnational trade (Jin et al., 2022) – and that these marketplaces are also their main social space in the city for interface with Chinese citizens. Generally speaking, border delimitation processes at both the state and city level intertwine to regulate and concentrate Nigerian migrants in the marketplaces of Guangzhou.

Within the city of Guangzhou, African migrants and trade businesses are particularly concentrated in two areas. The fieldwork firstly showed that Nigerian businesses concentrate in the trade centers in the Sanyuanli neighborhood. In this area with a high concentration of migrants, African itinerant traders may stay overnight in one of the many hotels providing them with short-term residence services while others with a residence permit stay there in apartments. The second area with a high concentration of African migrants is the Xiaobei neighborhood. It comprises a larger variety of African traders, with a strong presence of Muslim and Francophone Africans. Some of them may occupy apartments in this neighborhood, while others live in hotels as itinerant traders. Since 2008, however, the local government has been frequently checking visas and residence registrations of traders in both the Sanyuanli and Xiaobei neighborhoods. This has resulted in undocumented migrants moving out of the areas and towards *residential neighborhoods* on the edge of the city – such as the neighborhoods of Fuli and Baoli – in order to escape from police control. More recently, similar checks started taking place in these peripheral areas, resulting in Nigerian migrants being "on the move" on the edge of the city for residential purposes. More specifically, most Nigerians prefer to live beyond the city boundaries and have moved into residential neighborhoods in the adjacent city of Foshan. This has resulted in the rise of new clusters of African migrants in upper-middle-class areas such as the neighborhoods of Jinshazhou,

Hengda, Times Sugar, Jiangbing as well as Bei village. With the increased mobility of Nigerian migrants within and beyond the city boundaries, the social space of this group has also expanded and developed from marketplaces towards other urban settings across the city. These settings not only include residential neighborhoods but also *underground churches*, as important daily life domain for the affirmation of the Nigerian migrants' identity and community. Many also visit the state-sanctioned Sacred Heart Cathedral in downtown Guangzhou where Chinese Christians gather together with foreigners and with worships in Cantonese or English. The non-sanctioned, and therefore, underground churches are dispersed over the city and often hosted in hostel lobbies. These Pentecostal churches are predominantly visited by African migrants.

In the following, we will elaborate on how bordering processes – i.e. delimitation, interface and affirmation – work out in the different daily life domains of Nigerian migrants and what consequences this has for social space production in the city of Guangzhou.

Social space of marketplaces

During the fieldwork, Nigerian migrants were frequently present in the marketplaces in Sanyuanli while Africans from other countries were often present in the marketplaces of Xiaobei. Some were managing their shops in the trade buildings whereas others were working as intermediaries by buying and selling. However, the marketplaces are also the areas where visa inspection and strict law enforcement usually takes place in order to find and repatriate illegal African migrants – pinpointing, as Thompson et al., 2021 would put it, the manifestation of national border regimes in these social spaces through interventions by local authorities. Despite this *delimitation* process at the city level, having pushed many of the migrants out of the downtown area and into the urban periphery of Guangzhou, the African migrants persevere in finding strategies to do business in the marketplaces and avoid the control of local authorities at the same time (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016). As traders and entrepreneurs, their primary goal is to reap economic benefits and become successful in China. Strategies adopted to run a business often are related with economic cooperation with Chinese entrepreneurs. The cooperation involves frequent and focused interaction in the marketplace (Zhou et al., 2016) – providing African migrants with access to the neighborhood territories of Sanyuanli and Xiaobei for businesses opportunities. The social space of marketplaces not only reflects processes of delimitation executed by local authorities but also interrelated interface and affirmation processes between Nigerian and Chinese entrepreneurs.

One of the strategies adopted to avoid repatriation and conduct business is related with economic cooperation, or *interface* based on instrumental contact with mutual benefits, between Nigerian and Chinese entrepreneurs by means of the leasehold relation. Some Nigerian migrants with a student visa are managing their shops in the trade buildings by leasing from Chinese property owners and renters. This provides an indication of interface generating – what Hammar and Millstein (2020) would describe as – interdependencies, yet in a highly unequal manner. The dependency for migrants derives from not having an official permit to work and run a business, together with the business and shop not being registered under their own but under a Chinese name. In fact, Chinese entrepreneurs can register and rent a shop under their name, and then informally

provide leases to a Nigerian migrant with a student visa. In that case, the situation becomes rather complex and ambiguous when the police come to check for visas and permits in the marketplaces. The reason for this is that the migrants who are managing shops in trade buildings are to some extent legal due to their student visa and related residence permit. Mr. Nick, who studied Chinese at a university in Guangzhou for years and also managed a jean shop with a student visa, explained the situation as follows:

> Respondent: I paid to the Chinese and I paid to the management. The only contract I have is for the Chinese person because I rent the shop from the Chinese. I don't know, maybe they own the shop or maybe they just rent the shop as well.
>
> Interviewer: Will police check here for your business sometimes?
>
> Respondent: If police want to check anything, they go to the management of the building. They cannot come to your shop and don't allow you do business. (April 2016)

Since 2014, local authorities aimed to stop this situation by means of visa cancelation – as Mr. Jackson, an entrepreneur in electronics who has stayed in Guangzhou for three years with a student visa, described:

> In 2014, I went to the market and police asked me to show the visa. And he asked me not to go to the market anymore. Otherwise they will cancel my visa. In 2013, it's ok. But 2014, it was not allowed since then. (February 2016)

Even those migrants staying in China legally with a student visa are not permitted to be present at the marketplace because they are expected to be studying at a university instead of doing business. The reason for this probably is that local authorities are aware of migrants acquiring a student visa in order to get a residence permit, facilitating them to stay in the city and then also providing opportunities to conduct business.

While strategies adopted to avoid deportation and conduct business are often related with interface processes between Nigerian and Chinese entrepreneurs, their cooperation and relationship are not without any challenges – involving the *affirmation* of cultural differences between both groups. For instance, when the cooperation involves Nigerian traders buying goods provided by Chinese entrepreneurs, their relation may become easily complicated, and even broken, due to misunderstandings about and unfamiliarity with the cultural "rules of the game" in the Chinese market. Some Nigerian migrants are very well familiar with Chinese entrepreneurs using different prices for different degrees of "realness" or "fakeness" for goods. Nigerian migrants without this knowledge, however, would easily assume that buying real goods for a low price is possible and a good deal. Although a Chinese entrepreneur would understand that "it is impossible to provide a real good such a low price", Nigerian entrepreneurs may complain that "the Chinese goods are fake" and that "Chinese people like to cheat you". As such, both groups of entrepreneurs can only develop a stable economic relation and cooperation when reaching an agreement about whether a certain price level matches a particular degree of "realness" of the good provided. Another potential reason for a complicated and rather fragile interface between Nigerian and Chinese entrepreneurs comes from the unstable nature of their economic relationship, reinforced by the strong competition among Nigerian entrepreneurs. According to some Nigerian entrepreneurs, Chinese entrepreneurs may easily end their cooperation and start a new

cooperation with other African entrepreneurs – providing yet another indication of highly unequal interdependencies between both groups.

Interaction between the two groups of entrepreneurs in the marketplaces also involves other processes of affirmation through both fleeting and focused interaction, while maintaining symbolic borders between Africans and Chinese. Some African migrants may meet and hang out with their Chinese counterparts in bars and restaurants on the edge of the marketplace but they consider these social relations to be mostly instrumental, without making real connection or any affinity. Many of them emphasized that Chinese only like money and therefore only interact because it will bring economic benefits. They are not "real friends". The African migrants only talked about "real friends" or "brothers and sisters" when referring to those with whom they have a close relationship, and to those people from their hometown or with a blood relation. They consider socializing with Chinese much more as a transactional "business deal" than a sociable "friends' meal". The socializing taking place affirms cultural differences between both groups – socially differentiating "them" from "us" (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002) – rather than that it results in close interaction and inter-ethnic community building – let alone solidarities as postulated Hammar and Millstein (2021). Moreover, the migrant entrepreneurs often feel pressured to engage in socializing, engage in drinking alcohol together as a Chinese cultural habit in particular. They often feel uncomfortable when doing so, also due to the language barrier. As Mr. Calvin, a trader who has lived in Guangzhou for many years, said:

> Most times they invite me, but I don't like to go because I don't like to be feeling odd. I don't take alcohol and most of them like drinking … Maybe you go and they will tell you "hey hey hey", what is that called, like this "hey hey hey" [Chinese way of drink-urging]. Most places they want you to drink. If you don't drink, maybe they will think you don't like them or things like that. So, I don't like to break their feelings. So, and then the language, you know. You just like, I will politely turn you down. Sorry, I'm busy. (April 2016)

Despite the cultural misunderstandings, distrust and discomfort in the social space of marketplaces, many interactions and relations between Nigerian and Chinese entrepreneurs occur and continue to develop – based on economic exchanges and mostly instrumental contact.

Social space of residential neighborhoods

Visa inspection and strict law enforcement occurring in the marketplaces resulted in African traders being deprived of their right of residence in neighborhoods around these marketplaces. It is due to strict police control that they moved to residential neighborhoods on the edge of Guangzhou city. The uneven spatial distribution of law enforcement by local authorities makes some areas quite closed for residency (i.e. the downtown neighborhoods) and other areas much more open (i.e. suburban neighborhoods). In the latter, police control is rather loose and related *delimitation* processes based on visa and permits are much less prevalent. As a consequence, African migrants without legal status – like Mr. John, a shopkeeper in a trade building in Sanyanli – are being excluded from the social space in downtown neighborhoods but are able to live in neighborhoods on the edge of the city for many years. He explained as follows:

> Respondent: … only I have encountered with police once in 2011, when they were asking foreigners to register their houses. And that time, I didn't register, because my landlady came, we went to the police several times to register. They often refused to register, and Guangzhou refused to register … So, one day I was going out, and I met some policemen at the gate. In the morning, I just went to work and met some policemen at the gate, with the security man. So, they asked me for the visa, and I gave them my passport, and they checked. Because I'm using a student visa, I just want to tell you true, and my school is not in Guangzhou. So, they asked me why I didn't register. I didn't register because I was not living here. I was living in school, but I used to come here to rest, because I also have business in Guangzhou and study Chinese. And they say ok, that I have to provide to bring the register next time, even if you are in school. I say ok, that is the only time I met police.
>
> Interviewer: Did you do that as the police say?
>
> Respondent: It's not possible for me to do that so I didn't do that.
>
> Interviewer: So, you have not registered?
>
> Respondent: No. (March 2016)

Living together in neighborhoods in principle provides Nigerian migrants and Chinese residents with many opportunities to have social contact and develop inter-ethnic relations. However, based on our observations, both groups rarely stopped for a conversation when walking the streets, or had any other kind of focused interaction. Social interaction in the neighborhood between Nigerian and Chinese residents were very rarely characterized by more-than-fleeting encounters. Moreover, the migrants emphasized that they often deliberately avoid having social contact, or *interface*, with their Chinese neighbors, to stay out of trouble – resonating with the work by Moyo and Coss (2015) discussing migrants only having casual contact in the street and applying tactics of staying "out of the public eye". This is also to prevent that Chinese neighbors may get involved in delimitation processes – working as local "border guards", as Yuval-Davis et al. (2018) would put it, – by reporting to the local authorities that their black neighbors are making trouble in the neighborhood. For instance, Mr. Robinson, a cook in a Nigerian restaurant, argued that such unpleasant encounters with a previous neighbor in suburban Guangzhou made him avoid contact with Chinese neighbors altogether, after having moved to another house:

> I lived in another garden[2] before. That time, I usually said hi to my neighbour when I saw her. Suddenly one day she called police and accused that I was making noise in my house. But I didn't do that. I was very anxious because the police come to house, check my documents and ask everything. They also checked my house, every corner. I don't like the way they treat me, so I moved to this garden. I don't like to contact with my Chinese neighbours anymore, because if they see you, they may call police and make a lot of trouble. (April 2016)

Mr. Jackson, an entrepreneur as well as a student in Guangzhou, represents a rather extreme example of African migrants and Chinese residents living "segregated lives" in the same residential neighborhood and having a lack of interface – in the sense that he aims to hide in the house as much as possible, and only go outside if he really needs to:

> I like to stay in my house on my own. And you will only get your problems when you go out, when you look for trouble or trouble looks for you. Trouble cannot come to my house and

> look for me, and I cannot look for trouble in my house. So, I like I go to school, I come back if I have order from Africa. I would stay in my house, make the order on phone, like now. I am making some order on my phone. I already have some customers; I will send them request. They will give me on account. I go to the bank and pay. They will take the good in the warehouse. Then, if I have chance, I will go to the warehouse to confirm the goods. After that, I send, finish. (February 2016)

The African entrepreneurs experience the residential neighborhoods as an extremely hostile environment, something which is heavily influenced by local media and policy reports. These media and reports construct a stereotypical and stigmatizing representation of black people as "dirty", "illegal" and "criminal" (see also Cheng, 2011; Lyons et al., 2012) – illustrating how symbolic borders are drawn through "narrativity" (Karaman & Islam, 2012). This representation can also be found on the websites of the Chinese communities in suburban neighborhoods. It is on these websites that Chinese residents see black people concentrating in what they consider "their" neighborhood as threatening the social order. This substantiates Almeida's (2021) argument that both the confinement of migrants and the projection of associated threats to a bounded and distant neighborhood "other than your own" may work as "socially reassuring". More specifically, the argument is substantiated here by showing the perspective of residents from the neighborhood where the actual confinement and projection seems to take place, with "socially alarming" effects. Via online posts, the residents therefore call for no longer renting rooms to illegal black people and kick "them" out to protect suburban neighborhoods:

> They like to live together and make noise; they have been low educated and bad habit of sanitation and security; they are not polite. (March 2015)

> This is not racism, I think most blacks in Guangzhou are "three illegals", many of them are illegal entrance, illegal residence and illegal work. They like to concentrate together, for example in Xiaobei, and may induce some social problems. I hope our neighbours to think clearly and to make sure they are legal. (December 2014)

This stereotyping and stigmatization of, and the related discrimination of and hostility towards, African migrants clearly reflect processes of *affirmation* – distinguishing "us" versus "them" and simultaneously involving spatial differentiation by pinpointing "where" the African migrants are unwanted. These processes have roots in the historical ideology of nationalism in China, with its key feature of socially differentiating between Chinese citizens and foreigners (Cheng, 2011; Sautman, 1994). In Iine with Almeida's (2021) argument, a hegemonic understanding of Chinese identity is being affirmed by spatially differentiating it from the foreign others.

Social space of underground churches

According to the fieldwork, most Nigerian Pentecostal churches are underground. Apart from the prominent and state-sanctioned Sacred Heart Cathedral in downtown Guangzhou that is visited by both Chinese and non-Chinese Christians, the Pentecostal underground churches are dispersed over but also invisible within the city. They are predominantly visited by African migrants and often located and hidden in hotel buildings in residential neighborhoods or around marketplaces. According to Mathews et al.

(2017), the underground churches are also mobile in the city by frequently relocating from one hidden site to another. The invisibility of these churches in the urban landscape is required due to restrictions, executed by local authorities, for non-sanctioned churches. All religious activities in China are monitored by a Religious Affairs Bureau at the level of the state. Officially, religious worship is only allowed to take place in state-sanctioned churches with an official registration (Potter, 2003).

Similar to the situation in other parts of the world, African Pentecostal churches are utilized by Chinese state authorities to reach, check and control the immigrant communities within their territories (Knibbe, 2009). Local authorities are very well aware of the existence of African Pentecostal churches in Guangzhou, despite their unregistered and underground nature. Officially speaking, these churches are unwanted and forbidden by law, but the local authorities adopt a pragmatic approach and tolerate churches, as long as they keep a low profile in the urban landscape. The local pragmatism derives from the fact that Chinese authorities have only few other ways to gather information about and control undocumented migrants than negotiating and cooperating with church leaders (Haugen, 2013). This "cooperative" relationship between underground church leaders and city authorities reflects *delimitation* processes – adding churches to the growing list of institutions operating at subnational levels and enacting "control policies", as Juul (2022) put it.

Although limiting their presence in residential neighborhoods, in order to avoid interface with Chinese citizens as well as direct confrontation with Chinese law enforcement, the Nigerian migrants do pay regular visits to the churches. In so doing, they are familiar with the local authority's ambiguous attitude towards Pentecostal churches in the city. Knowing that their presence and worshiping in these churches is being tolerated, even though they may have an undocumented status, provides them with some sense of security and comfort in the city. As Mr. Nick, a regular visitor of the underground church called "Victory", located in a hotel nearby Sanyuanli market, put it:

> Chinese government knows everything, just like those underground churches. They just open one eye and close one eye. They might think it's not an important thing. And we Africans are Christians, they know what Christians are like. If the government wants to close all the churches, they will be closed in one day immediately. But they don't do like that. And Chinese government knows who enters in China and who leaves China, they know how many Africans staying in China. If the government wants to let all Africans leave China, we can leave in one week and could not do anything. But they don't do like that, they know what we contribute to China. They know they need us, so they just balance it. On one side, they do some crazy thing to you. On the other side, they also comfort you. That's Chinese government. (April 2016)

The always ongoing negotiation of delimitation processes at the local level – related with undocumented status, for instance –, combined with a lack of interface with Chinese citizens, makes that the African entrepreneurs experience their stay in China as a real struggle and a lonely and isolated undertaking. Both social relations with Chinese residents in neighborhoods and business relations with Chinese entrepreneurs in marketplaces develop in a hostile and competitive environment. These relations are also imbued with high levels of risk and distrust – inducing an avoidance of non-instrumental inter-ethnic contact and a focus on instrumental contact. It is the underground churches that are embraced by the migrants as a space and opportunity for *interface* with what they

describe as "brothers and sisters". To counter loneliness, get through difficult times and overcome problems, the Nigerian migrants often talk to the pastor or to other migrants who they feel close to and attend the same church with. When going to church, they not only practice their religion together but also develop intra-ethnic relationships and share feelings. Actually, the Pentecostal churches emerged in the city of Guangzhou not only because the African migrants required a space for religious needs but also for social and affective needs. As Mr. Nick said:

> There is no help bigger than seeing somebody to talk to, seeing somebody to tell your problems, seeing somebody to share your feelings with. It's not good to stay alone, loneliness can kill you. So, when you see somebody you can talk to, that you could get news from each other. It's a very good help. And I often go to my church to meet up with brothers there, we are all Christians with the same belief. I feel that I can trust them and tell them my issues and difficulties in China. And they are very glad to listen to you and help you. (April 2016)

The underground church is also the most important place in the city where the Nigerian entrepreneurs display their social identity and feel a sense of belonging to "their" community. In addition, our observations in some of the churches revealed that they are predominantly visited by Africans although some churches also welcome Chinese citizens to join the gathering. The very few Chinese joining in, providing some indication of non-instrumental inter-ethnic contact and cultural interest in "the other", are mostly Nigerian migrants' wives. However, for African migrants, having a Chinese wife is also highly instrumental because the latter are influential in creating trust with Chinese business partners. Altogether, the *affirmation* processes taking place in the social space of underground churches involve a lack of inter-ethnic interface between Nigerian migrants and Chinese residents in Guangzhou – reinforcing the segregation between both cultural groups in the city.

During the observations, we also clearly witnessed the extent to which the African community puts a claim on the churches as "their" space, reflecting processes of socio-spatial othering and ordering. A pastor requested one of the Nigerian entrepreneurs to no longer bring a Chinese citizen (i.e. the first author of this paper) to the church because the Chinese have "their own churches". This claim seems to originate from the felt need by the African group to display their identity, develop a community and gain some degree of control over their daily life in the city. The claim also seems to resonate with the finding by Mathews et al. (2017) that, according to local regulations, only foreign passport holders are officially allowed admission to the churches. In their study, this is interpreted as a measure to prevent the mixing of Chinese and Africans in church – providing indications for social segregation not only being pursued in everyday life practices, something Keresztély et al. (2017) found as well, but also being implemented through seemingly official policy, something Keresztély et al. (2017) did not find, through the church.

Conclusion and discussion

To develop an understanding of how Nigerian migrants produce multiple social spaces in the city of Guangzhou, this paper explored how interrelated bordering processes – i.e. delimitation, interface and affirmation – work out in important domains of migrants'

daily life – i.e. marketplaces, residential neighborhoods and underground churches. In so doing, everyday bordering was unraveled as pervading urban social space of Nigerian migrants.

For Nigerian migrants, the social space of marketplaces provides the interface platform for economic cooperation with Chinese entrepreneurs. Yet, this occurs within a highly delimited playing field because the marketplaces are also the areas where most of the visa inspection and law enforcement occurs. It is by cooperating with Chinese entrepreneurs that the migrants find ways to avoid the control of the local authorities as well as repatriation. They, for instance, manage to run a business in the marketplace by combining a student visa with a leasehold relation with a Chinese entrepreneur. However, the mostly transactional cooperation in the marketplaces also involves affirmation of cultural differences between both groups – such as in the case of misunderstandings due to migrants' unfamiliarity with the "rules of the game" in the market.

When it comes to the social space of residential neighborhoods, state and city institutions use the visa system, permits and law enforcement in delimiting housing opportunities. It is due to strict police control that the Nigerian migrants have moved from living in downtown to suburban neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have rather loose police control, but it is Chinese residents who may report them to the local authorities. The migrants, therefore, often deliberately avoid social contact – with lacking non-instrumental inter-ethnic interface as a result. The migrants experience the neighborhood setting as extremely hostile. This is heavily influenced by popular representations of black people as criminal and dirty – having historical roots and affirming processes of "othering" and stigmatization in the neighborhood setting.

The social space of underground churches has been delimited into remaining invisible within the urban landscape of Guangzhou, due to restrictions executed by local authorities for non-sanctioned churches. They are forbidden by law but tolerated for pragmatic reasons because they are seen by Chinese state authorities as an important tool to reach, check and control undocumented migrants and their communities. The churches provide migrants not only with a space for practicing religion but also for their social comfort and affective needs. The migrants embrace the space for affirming their identity and building a community. This is accompanied by only limited interface with Chinese citizens taking place in the churches – reinforcing the social and spatial segregation of both groups in the city.

These findings concur with the work by migration scholars – such as Zhou et al. (2016) and Liang and Le Billon (2020) – showing that the downtown marketplaces in Guangzhou are an essential domain of Nigerian migrants' daily life, where much of the contact with Chinese citizens takes place. Social interaction in the marketplaces tends to be instrumental in nature – i.e. required for work, business and trading. However, this paper has pinpointed additionally important domains of urban daily, where social interaction is mostly non-instrumental – i.e. for residential, leisure and religious purposes – with a focus on intra-ethnic contact and avoidance of inter-ethnic contact. Following Massey (2010), the distributed and interrelated nature of the multiple domains of African migrants' daily life was investigated. This is where migration studies seem to fall short when it comes to analyzing Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou – i.e. due to their focus on investigating instrumental contact in downtown marketplaces. Altogether,

our study confirms that marketplaces provide the migrants with economic access to the city – in the sense of being able to run a business there – but, most importantly, adds insights into how residential neighborhoods and underground churches provide them with supportive social opportunities of becoming embedded and developing a life in the city.

Having adopted a bordering perspective allowed us to grasp the importance and implications of institutional arrangements and power relations for the production of urban social space, also speaking beyond the case of Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou and informing urban border studies. In terms of bordering processes, we found that strong emphasis on institutional delimitation may promote instrumental inter-ethnic contact – while hampering non-instrumental contact – and prevent visible cultural affirmation. A specific contribution to urban border studies came from unraveling the complex and powerful role of underground migrant churches in processes of othering and ordering, exacerbating social and spatial segregation while also facilitating the development of an intra-ethnic community. Altogether, migrants' social space of marketplaces, residential neighborhoods and underground churches appeared deeply structured and conditioned by everyday processes of bordering. These processes have fierce segregative and exclusionary outcomes for migrants while the negotiation of borders may also reveal their perseverance and agency in becoming a successful entrepreneur, through instrumental inter-ethnic contact, and negotiating belonging in the city, through non-instrumental intra-ethnic contact. Another generalizable finding informing urban border studies was that bordering processes take place at multiple and intertwined levels. The state plays an important role in controlling and regulating migrants' economic access to and social opportunities in its territory while city authorities, citizens and institutions such as churches execute intertwined control and surveillance at the local level. For the promotion of urban economic development, migrants may be enabled access to marketplaces in the city but simultaneously may be tolerated and isolated in residential neighborhoods and institutions such as underground churches. This results in migrants' production of social space with a focus on running economic business and facilitating social life – although ingrained with institutional means and mechanisms for controlling and regulating their daily life in the city.

Notes

1. In this paper, the 5 border functions of delimitation, separation, interface, differentiation and affirmation – as defined by Sohn (2014) – have been combined into 3 border functions due to found close-knit meanings and implications. More specifically, delimitation has been merged with separation and affirmation has been merged with differentiation.
2. Garden derives from "花园" (*Hua Yuan*), the Chinese word for middle and higher class neighbourhoods with both good housing and environmental qualities.

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