

# Faith-Based Business Ethics Among African Muslim Small-Scale Business Owners in Guangzhou, China

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## Abstract

Based on 14 months of ethnographic research, this article examines how African Muslim migrants build and maintain faith-based business ethics and how they apply these ethical business norms to help navigate their transnational lives in Guangzhou, China. Most of the African Muslim migrants included in the study are small-scale business owners who engage in semi-formal economic activities in both local and home markets. They face racial, cultural, and legal challenges on a daily basis. Unable to access formal means of support due to their precarious economic and legal status, many African Muslim small-business owners rely on informal business ethics to ensure a safe trading environment and mitigate risk. Their business ethics, I argue, are rooted in what I term “religious common ground” – the moral and ethical values shared among migrants from different Muslim groups. This article also explores the enforcing mechanisms of African Muslim small-scale business owners’ business ethics, such as mosques and co-religion business networks. This article concludes that there is no universal, standard code of conduct among African Muslim business owners in Guangzhou. Individuals among different Muslim communities have diverse interpretations of business ethics and practice them differently based on their nationality, ethnicity, religious habits, and socio-cultural backgrounds. This article contributes to a small but important literature that addresses the central role that religion plays in Muslim migrants’ business practices in a non-Muslim society.

Keywords: African migrants, Muslim migrants, Africans in China, Islam, religious common ground

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## INTRODUCTION

In December 2013, Dina, a second-hand clothing trader from Zambia, told me a story about how she and her three business partners were cheated. They had met a Guinean man and his Chinese wife two years earlier. The couple had a big showroom in Tianxiu (a trading mall popular among African traders in Guangzhou, a large manufacturing city in Southern China) where they displayed various samples for bulk orders. The items they showed Dina and her partners were of good quality at a fair price, so Dina and her partners each placed an order, returned home, and waited patiently for the goods to arrive. However, when the items did arrive at the port in Angola to then be transported on land to Dina's business in Zambia, they were quickly re-directed to Guinea instead, and mysteriously disappeared completely. Together, the four Zambian traders lost USD 59,000, of which Dina lost USD 22,000.

Last year when Dina visited Guangzhou for business, she found the Guinean man whom she believed had cheated her. She got into a physical fight with him and ended up scratching him. But the confrontation did nothing to help her get her money back. Nor did her efforts to enlist the help of law enforcement:

I went to [the] police twice for this. ... I see something going on there: the first time I went to the police, they asked me to come back the next day at 12 p.m. The next day I went there, the policeman was not there, but another one was there. The Guinea guy did not even show up. And the other policeman said to me, "What do you want us to do? If we deport him, you won't get your money back; if we send him to court, you still cannot get the money back." The next time they say if this is a case between Chinese and Africans, they can take care of it. But if this is between Africans, they cannot do anything about it. You see, they are defending him! After that, I do not do business with Africans. I see a shop opened [operated] by Africans, I go [leave]. (Dina, 20 December 2013).

Dina keeps the business card of the Guinean man, hoping that one day she will find a way to get her money returned. During my fieldwork among African traders in Guangzhou, I heard stories like Dina's almost every week. With cheating in business so common in Afro-Chinese trade (Mathews et al., 2017), how can small-scale business owners like Dina protect themselves and mitigate risks? This article explores that question through focusing on the business ethics of small-scale African Muslim business owners in Guangzhou, especially on its creation, practice, and implementation.

African migrants in Guangzhou have drawn considerable scholarly attention as a growing migrant group over the past two decades. Within this literature, many studies have focused on Afro-Chinese business relations and African trading activities and networks (e.g., Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007; Haugen, 2011, 2018; Lyons et al., 2012; Cissé, 2015; Marfaing and Thiel, 2015; Mathews, 2015; Marfaing, 2019; Rösenthaller, 2022). This research shows that most Africans in Guangzhou

are engaged in low-end globalization, which is defined as “global migrants who only have a small amount of capital and who make a living through semi-legal or illegal activities” (Mathews et al., 2017: 2). Traders come from virtually every country in Africa, purchasing a vast range of goods, including mobile phones, clothing, computers, furniture, and construction materials (Castillo, 2014).

Despite the frequency of cheating among traders involved in Afro-Chinese trade, business ethics and their implementation in this branch of commerce are insufficiently addressed in academic work. Mathews et al. (2017) attribute cheating in business between Chinese and African traders to “mistaken cultural assumptions”: Africans assume the Chinese will always cheat them, so they bargain for a low price believing that the quality of the goods they receive will stay the same. In response to the low price, Chinese traders substitute their products for lower quality ones in order to make a profit. Mathews (2022) further points out that in response to this widespread distrust, religious beliefs among devout Christian and Muslim traders from Africa and refutation (interpersonal trust) are two major mechanisms to mitigate African traders from cheating customers, while African traders have also developed tactics to avoid being cheated. Most prominent among these tactics are to be present in person to supervise the process of acquiring goods (i.e., they physically travel to China to negotiate, purchase, and load goods on transport) or to rely on fellow African brokers and logistics agents in China to facilitate trade for a commission fee.

Religion provides a suitable angle from which to consider business ethics. Previous studies have pointed out that being religious can reinforce ethical decision-making and the implementation of a higher number of ethical practices in business (Astrachan et al., 2020). Other research has shown a correlation between religion and work ethic in Muslim communities: some scholars link Muslim entrepreneurs’ work ethic with Islamic religious values (Elfakhani and Ahmed, 2013; Hidayah et al., 2019) and argue that the development of Muslim enterprises is inseparable from an Islamic spirit that places emphasis on hard work, honesty, trustworthiness, thrift, and charity (Othman, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2019; Machmud and Hidayat, 2020). However, most of these studies focus on the role of religion in formal business contexts, where business is conducted at medium-to-large scale. Less studied is how religion shapes business conduct in situations where people with limited capital trade on a small-to-medium scale.

This article responds to this gap in knowledge by investigating how African Muslim small-scale business owners create business ethic norms in the context of the informal economy between China and Africa. Research has pointed out that the impact of religion on business ethics is stronger in informal than formal business contexts, where institutional safeguards such as laws and contracts are often irrelevant or inapplicable to small-scale traders (Mathews, 2022). This article builds on this insight and argues that business ethics based on religious norms among small-scale African Muslim business owners in Guangzhou, serve as an essential tool for these business owners to maintain a safe and positive trading environment. By

documenting diverse experiences of participating African Muslim business owners concerning business ethics, this article contributes to a nuanced understanding of a key aspect of growing international migration and economic connections between Africa and China.

My research also updates current literature by providing an ethnographic account on the business ethics of African Muslims in Guangzhou, an important yet largely neglected transnational migrant minority in China. Despite Guangzhou experiencing growth in its African Muslim migrant population in the recent two decades (Su, 2017), there is little research specifically on African Muslims and their interactions with Chinese and other foreign Muslims. While Li et al. (2009) briefly mention that African Muslims in Guangzhou have established a tightly-knit and active community, their research lacks detailed documentation. In comparison, Mathews et al. (2017) offer a more thorough and comparative study of religious practice among Africans, yet they focus primarily on Christian Nigerians. In a more recent article, Jiang (2022) argues that Islamic charitable giving enables African Muslims to cope with everyday challenges in China, particularly related to their tenuous immigration statuses and social exclusion. By examining the religious and moral comprehension of trade among Muslim business owners, my research offers a novel understanding of the intersection of religion and business ethics in the context of Afro-Chinese migration.

In this article, the term “African(s)” refers to Black Africans from sub-Saharan Africa; as Mathews et al. (2017; 55) state, “this is what ‘African’ typically means when used in Guangzhou.” The term was used by many Africans I met to self-identify. However, it nonetheless can overgeneralize and ignore the diversity among the individuals with whom I interacted. Therefore, I use the term “African(s)” in this article mainly to signal geographic origin rather than identity. In most cases, North Africans associate themselves more with – and often are considered by others to be – Arabs. In some situations, though, some also consider themselves “Africans.” I will point out these nuances as this article unfolds. I use “African migrants,” “African traders,” and “African small-scale business owners” to highlight different facets of Africans I met in the field. The term “African (Muslim) migrants” emphasizes the temporality of their legal status in residing in China. I use “African traders” and “African small-scale business owners” to emphasize occupation and economic status. The term “African trader” includes both small- and large-scale traders, while the term “African small-scale business owner” includes small-scale traders as well as these Africans who engage in semi-legal commerce, like operating unlicensed restaurants and hostels. Although many of my interlocutors were small-scale traders, in this article, I address them as “African small-scale business owners” to emphasize their diverse occupations and low-end economic status.

This article has three main sections. First, I introduce two key contexts that are essential to understand the African Muslim migrants in the study – Guangzhou’s multi-ethnic Muslim community and the informal economy in which African small-

scale business owners engage. Second, I discuss what business ethics are and how they connect to the moral and ethical values shared among the Muslim community – what I call “religious common ground.” Through two ethnographic cases, I show how different Muslim individuals practice business ethics and point out the fluidity of the business ethics. In the third section, I discuss the enforcing mechanisms for ethical norms, such as safety nets (e.g., mosque staff, leaders in the group, etc.) and peer pressure (e.g., co-ethnic and co-religion networks). I conclude that while religion provides a common ground through which individuals can establish some common norms, the informal nature of their business ethics means that they are hard to enforce, and therefore, other factors have an impact on them as well.

## CONTEXTUALIZATION

### *Guangzhou’s multi-ethnic Muslim community*

Previous research has pointed out that Guangzhou’s history in the maritime trade, its current economic position as China’s southern manufacturing center, and comparatively lenient policy on religion together have contributed to the formation of a multi-ethnic Muslim community in the city (Li, 2014; Su, 2017; Jiang, 2022). There are three principal Muslim groups in the city: Chinese Muslims, African Muslims, and Arab Muslims. Muslims tend to live close to the four mosques located in the Yuexiu District. The neighborhood of Xiaobei, in particular, has become a place where Muslims of diverse origins congregate. African Muslims do not only interact with each other and Chinese residents, but also with other Muslim groups. Inspired by previous scholars who adopt a holistic view by situating Africans alongside either Chinese internal migrants (e.g., Lan, 2015) or other groups of foreigners (e.g., Mathews et al., 2017), and echoing Adebayo (2022: 211) who argues that “contemporary Afro-Chinese interactions cannot be understood without considering how African communities are constituted in Chinese cities,” I examine how African Muslim small-scale business owners practice business ethics in relation to other groups rather than looking at them as if they were independent.

Most African Muslims in Guangzhou come from West African countries, such as Guinea, Nigeria, and Niger, with smaller numbers coming from East African countries, such as Uganda, Somalia, and Tanzania. In the field, I witnessed a range of socioeconomic statuses among the Africans I met, with the majority being economically disadvantaged. Due to rigid immigration control, it is hard for many small-scale business owners to obtain a long-term visa (Lan, 2016). Among my interlocutors, a few obtained a 6–12-month business visa (after which some were able to renew it); others remained in China illegally or semi-legally by either being undocumented or conducting business while on a tourist or student visa.

There is no consistency in the documentation of the size of the African population, making it hard to estimate accurate numbers due to their high mobility (Castillo, 2014). During the time of my fieldwork in 2014, an estimated 16,000

Africans registered legally in Guangzhou (Qiu, 2015). Between 2,500–3,500 African Muslims (they were identified by skin color through the mosque’s staff) attended the morning prayer on Eid al-Fitr, an important holiday that marks the end of Ramadan (the Islamic holy month of fasting) in 2014 (Guangzhou mosque staff, 30 July 2014). This constituted about 10–15% of the 26,000 Muslims who prayed at that mosque on that day (Third Division within the City Administration for Religious Affairs of Guangzhou, 2014). I have not encountered one person among the African Muslims I met who did not attend the Eid al-Fitr prayer.

Since 2014, several sociopolitical factors have had an impact Guangzhou’s African community at large, leading to changes in population numbers. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an even smaller African presence in the city. So, too, has the rise of online business, which has limited the necessity of conducting trade through local brokerage businesses (Mathews, 2022). According to a recent study, the Guangzhou government in April 2020 disclosed that there were approximately 4,500 Africans legally residing in the city (Castillo and Amoah, 2020). Despite the time gap between my fieldwork and the publication of this article, the research herein nonetheless provides insight into how business ethics develop and operate within a migrant community, and the particular importance of religion in facilitating the ethical business norms in the context of the informal economy.

### *Informal economy and its vulnerability*

The informal economic activities that African small-scale business owners engage in and the challenges they face provide a crucial context for understanding the development of their business ethics and the significance these ethics hold for them. Like other non-Muslim Africans in the city, African Muslims engage in diverse business types in different sectors, but in general can be divided into three main occupational categories based on their business activities: traders (purchase and resale), middlemen (business based on commission), and caterers (provide service, especially catering to African clientele such as restaurants, hostels, and hair and nail salons; see “catering networks,” Castillo, 2014). Many of my interlocutors had multiple occupational identities both over time and at the same time. For example, Gambo, a Hausa businessman from Niger who owned a men’s fashion shop in Xiaobei, later expanded his business into catering by starting two halal restaurants in nearby shopping malls. Lansana, a young Guinean man who studied Chinese full-time at a local university, worked part-time at a barbershop, while occasionally working as a middleman for his relatives back home.

The informality is reflected not only on the scale of the businesses that African Muslim business owners operate but also on their questionable legal status (e.g., the lack of a formal registration and paying taxes). Many of these businesses are conducted without a proper business license. In order to avoid police checks, these businesses are conducted hidden in apartments among many residential buildings in Xiaobei. I once visited a secret family inn owned by a Senegalese entrepreneur. She rented a

big apartment in one high-rise building and turned it into a restaurant, specializing in Senegalese food, and a hostel that charged between 30 and 50 RMB (about USD 5-8) per night. She was very discreet: there was no written menu, nor were there any signs. From the outside, the restaurant was no different from an ordinary apartment. One had to call for the daily menu, order in advance, and later either take out the food or eat in the living room of her “apartment.” Besides business, she also offered a free praying corner for Muslims.

Informality also presents itself in the lack of a formal format of the contracts that many Africans in Guangzhou enter into. Many times, deals and business agreements are done orally or a handwritten “receipt” is provided rather than a formal invoice. These off-the-record transactions mean that there is no guarantee of the condition of the goods that African purchasers receive. Thus, Africans are particularly vulnerable to business risk and potential fraud (Mathews et al., 2017). For example, Sekou, a Guinean trader, once purchased a carton of shoes but left the country before he could check the final products being shipped to Guinea. He had no idea that the shoes displayed in the pictures sent by a Chinese trader were made from cardboard that eventually got destroyed by the humid conditions during shipping by sea. This became apparent only after the goods had reached customs in Conakry two months later. Since the sale was not formally done, with no quality assurance, Sekou lost all his money. After that, Sekou bought products only from people he previously worked with or ordered in smaller quantities, even though that meant an increase in his purchasing costs (Sekou, 22 March 2014). In addition to fraud like this, African migrants’ precarious legal status has placed them in a further disadvantaged position. Many African traders are on short-term tourist visas to China, making them vulnerable to business failure (Lan, 2016), as it does not give them sufficient time to stay in China to supervise the process of preparing and shipping an order. This also makes establishing long-term, trusting relationships and networks difficult. In other words, by remaining in China for a short period of time, African traders take greater business risks. Even when African traders return to China and find the person who sold them defective items, it is hard to obtain compensation, primarily due to lack of institutional mechanisms to help small traders like them in China (such as in Dina’s case at the beginning of this article). Additionally, because some undocumented migrants do not want to risk being deported, they must accept their loss in silence. These circumstances underscore the necessity of African business owners establishing a certain standard of ethics when dealing with each other to ensure a safe, trustworthy business environment to mitigate risk.

## METHODOLOGY

I conducted anthropological field research in Guangzhou over a span of 14 months between 2012 and 2014, with additional follow-up interviews conducted remotely via the Internet and telephone in 2018. While in the city, I made extensive use of qualitative data collection techniques. My primary research methods were participant

observation and interviews. My actions in the field were very much in line with what Clifford Geertz (1998) calls “deep hanging out,” a research methodology by which an anthropologist immerses themselves in a collective, social, and cultural experience on an informal level.

As a female, non-Muslim anthropologist, I faced some barriers when conducting research primarily among African Muslim migrants, who were predominantly male (see Jiang, 2022). To increase opportunities for engagement, I received permission from the Imam of a local mosque that is popular among African Muslims to conduct research while volunteering there (on Mondays, Thursdays, and Friday Jumu’ah prayers, and on religious holidays). My main duties were tidying the prayer room, putting the canvas on the ground, and cleaning up after each prayer session. I also participated in other religious activities centered on the mosque, coming to know a number of African Muslims through my time there. Furthermore, I volunteered as a Chinese language teacher to Africans for six months at a family service center run by a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) in a neighborhood where many Africans resided. Additionally, I met interlocutors regularly at their shops, was invited to their homes, and communicated with them online through chat platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and WeChat).

In total, I interviewed 27 Muslims (25 males and 2 females) who came from Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Guinea, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda, Senegal, and Liberia, with the majority hailing from West Africa. All my interlocutors resided in Guangzhou for most of the year. My informants came from diverse backgrounds: they were traders, shop owners, wage laborers (e.g., retail, cargo companies), students, barbers, hairdressers, and housewives. Some were associated with multiple of these categories, which were not always stable, but nonetheless they were involved in some kind of business, no matter how small the scale was. They all had different experiences in Guangzhou, informed by diverse factors: their nationality, socioeconomic status, gender, and time spent in Guangzhou. To ensure anonymity, I allocated pseudonyms to all participants.

When analyzing the data, I used an approach that combines anthropological interpretation (Geertz, 1973) and the reflexive approach in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). My analytic procedures consisted of three consecutive processes of reading. First, I conducted a broad mapping of the fieldnotes and interview transcripts. I did this both to familiarize myself with the material and gain an overview of the qualitative data. Second, I followed an inductive approach (analytical themes come from the data), I labeled (coded) the material and generalized several themes. I paid special attention to different terms that shared meanings (e.g., good Muslim, honest earning, modesty, etc.) and the terms that emerged multiple times but carried diverse interpretations (e.g., honesty). Third, I conducted a close reading of the materials within the themes, with my interpretations for the explicit and implicit meanings behind data. However, no matter how

systematic or scientific the analytical process is, the analysis always remains a matter of a researcher's personal interpretation.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss what I term religious common ground and how various factors – including nationality, ethnicity, and socio-cultural background – result in different interpretations of the ethical business norms among different Muslim communities in the city.

### *Religious common ground*

Islam sets moral and ethical boundaries for followers when engaging with the market economy. It also provides a cultural explanation for certain business conducts and outlines guidelines on how followers ought to conduct business (Santoso et al., 2020). Among many of my interlocutors, Islamic values are embedded in their business conduct. For example, Moussa, a Senegalese trader who came to Guangzhou in 2012 and successfully established himself, conveyed his guiding principles in life: “As for me, I am primarily guided by my faith, embodying kindness, providing assistance, and helping those I engage with, with my personal interests taking a secondary place” (Moussa, 10 April 2018). Sharing a religious common ground means recognizing a “universal morality” that Muslims across different cultures acknowledge and follow (Osella and Osella, 2009). Specifically in this research, religious common ground manifests in how one runs a business, the type of business one operates, and how one views business gains and losses.

Islam has historically placed a strong emphasis on commerce and encourages individuals to sustain their livelihood through trade and business activities. As the Quran (2: 275) states,

Those who consume interest will stand “on Judgment Day” like those driven to madness by Satan’s touch. That is because they say, “Trade is no different than interest.” But Allah has permitted trading and forbidden interest. Whoever refrains – after having received warning from their Lord – may keep their previous gains, and their case is left to Allah. As for those who persist, it is they who will be the residents of the Fire. They will be there forever.

This verse emphasizes the distinction between lawful trade and the prohibition of interest in Islam. Muslims are permitted to seize any opportunity to sustain their livelihood and engage in various buying and selling activities within the parameters of lawful trade. Many African Muslims use their faith to explain the meaning of profit and to justify making a profit. For them, profiting from business activities is necessary in order to support their family and is a blessing from Allah. This means that making a profit is allowed, but only if achieved in the proper way.

Specifically, Muslims need to balance money-earning and religious modesty, as being greedy is frowned upon by Islam (see also Mathews et al., 2017). Many business owners I interviewed emphasized that they charge their customers fair prices and that doing otherwise would make them feel uncomfortable. Interestingly, A-Ming, a Libyan middleman who held that one should get as much profit as possible in a business deal, would attribute business gains to Allah's generous offerings and argued that it was Allah's will; therefore, he accepted such big profits. A-Ming attached a background screen sticker to his phone that contained an image that read, "I am a Muslim. Islam is perfect, but I am not. Please do not blame Islam for my fault. Blame me," in case fellow Muslims blamed him for being too profit-driven.

Islam also influences how some of my interlocutors view business incidents in their lives. While some attributed business losses to a human flaw (e.g., cheating), some devout Muslims see business ups and downs as the will of Allah. According to the Quran (9: 51):

Say, "Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us; He is our protector." And upon Allah let the believers rely.

This means that success and failure are ultimately determined by Allah, and as believers, they are encouraged to put their trust in Him and rely on His guidance and support. In the previous case, Sekou sees the setback as a test from Allah, and said this means that he should work hard and try again to succeed, with a full acknowledgment of Allah's ultimate control over all events and outcomes in his life.

In addition to skepticism over excessive profits and a framework for interpreting success and failure, Islamic belief also limits what types of business Muslims can conduct. As Bah, a Guinean shoe trader, explained to me that as a Muslim,

You don't kill. Don't sell beer [alcoholic beverages]. Don't lie. Don't sell drugs. Religion tell[s] you what to do [and] how to do it. There are things you don't do. If you sell these things – when you get the money – it is haram [any act that is forbidden by Allah]; you cannot use that money to do anything. You cannot build a mosque [with that money]. You must do things that make God happy. The person does bad things – [even if] you build a house, you have lot of money, but when you die, all these [things] cannot bring with you. You have to be careful, because when you die, God will judge [you]. (Bah, 09 April 2018).

Similarly, Kaddy, a hair salon owner, told me that she could not do certain hairstyles (referred to as al-Qaza, a popular hairstyle whereby one trims parts of the hair while leaving other parts longer) even though there was a high demand from young people because Allah would not allow it. As Bah and Kaddy's remarks illustrate, not all money is viewed equally, and religious outlooks can limit certain economic activities. Just as Islamic regulations dictate how much profit one can make, they also indicate that

how one earns a profit is important, perhaps even more important than the amount of the profit. However, despite the shared values and ethics, as my fieldwork revealed, I encountered several cases that demonstrate the diversity and fluidity of the business ethics among African Muslim small-scale business owners in Guangzhou, which I discuss in the next section.

### *Diverse interpretations and practices of ethical codes*

#### § Case 1: Different interpretations of honesty

Aside from regulations on profit, Islam also contains rules about how business should be conducted, and what values should be central to business transactions. Honesty in business, for example, is an important value among my interlocutors. Many verses in the Quran emphasize the importance of honesty and fairness in financial dealings and interactions. For example, “Do not consume one another’s wealth unjustly, nor deliberately bribe authorities in order to devour a portion of others’ property, knowing that it is a sin” (Quran, 2: 188). An honest business transaction brings a Muslim a profit that is blessed (Santoso et al., 2020). While all Muslims regard cheating and selling religiously-prohibited items as disgraceful behavior forbidden by Islam, perspectives on what is considered proper business conduct sometimes vary due to different factors, including socioeconomic backgrounds and different theological and religious doctrine considerations of the Muslim business owner(s).

Guangzhou is notorious for its counterfeit products (Mathews, 2015; Mathews et al., 2017) where one can buy fake – but convincing – big-brand products, for example, a Prada purse for USD 100-200. These counterfeit items are popular in the African market. During my fieldwork, I sought to establish whether the acceptability of the making and selling of these counterfeit products was conceived differently by different Muslims from different backgrounds. For some Muslims, like Ali, a cell phone trader, counterfeit goods are not acceptable and selling them is considered a distinguishing factor between Muslims and non-Muslims. On the other hand, other Muslim traders make and sell counterfeit products. For example, Nancy, a Chinese national who converted to Islam through her marriage to a Cantonese Muslim, sells counterfeit high-end designer jewelry part-time. She provides her own theory on selling counterfeit goods, which, according to her, is shared by other Chinese Muslims:

I don’t think Allah would be mad if I sell fake goods. I think as long as I tell my clients that this is fake, it is ok. I always am honest with my clients. I made this piece of Tiffany necklace using the same material as the original one, but I sell it at about 1/4 of the price they would have to pay for the original one. I earn my share but I would not sell a fake one to someone as the original, or tell them it is made of 18-carat gold but actually it was gold plated – that is cheat[ing]. That is not allowed by Islam! (Nancy, 01 August 2014).

In discussing the attitude toward counterfeit goods among African traders in Guangzhou, Mathews et al. (2017) demonstrate the complicated relationship between the moral and the legal aspects in informal business that African traders engage in. Morality is how one conducts one's life (e.g., being honest with clients and refraining from shipping copied items as if they were authentic goods), and legality pertains to the arbitrary rules that are often neglected (e.g., knowing the counterfeit goods are not legal but still selling and shipping them). Nancy's case is a perfect example of the different understandings of the moral and the legal dimensions. For Nancy, the principal moral quality in business required by Islam is honesty, which she understands as being honest with clients about the status of her goods. But it does not matter to her whether her action – making and selling counterfeit goods – is legal, or whether her morality is selective, which means that she is dishonest toward the original brand by plagiarizing its design.

For other traders who sell counterfeit goods, their reasons are different. As mentioned earlier, Bah would not sell items forbidden by his religion, such as cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs but he does sell counterfeit clothes and shoes. When I first came to a shoe market with him, I noticed that the Puma sports shoes he ordered cost only 65 yuan (about USD 10) per pair. I warned him about these shoes being fake, concerned that he would be cheated. He laughed and said,

Of course, I know this is [these are] fake. No one wants to buy fake if they can afford the original. But in my country, many people cannot even afford shoes. So, they don't care. If I sell them the original Puma for over USD 100, no one has the money for it. But some people can pay USD 20 or USD 30 for fake shoes. ... Of course, the quality is not the same. They know! But at least they can wear good-looking shoes at a cheaper price. (Bah, 14 October 2013).

Bah's case shows that selling imitation goods is more about the economic status of one's clients, than moral or legal considerations. In addition, it also shows that Chinese counterfeit goods, to some extent, offer economically disadvantaged people an opportunity to enjoy new things at a lower cost.

The cases outlined above illustrate the diversity of understandings about what being "honest" entails and the "more acceptable" way of trading counterfeit items. While the legitimacy of making and selling counterfeit products is debated among Muslims, with different reasons for selling (or not selling) copied goods, the morality embedded in the religious common ground is the same. There appears to be consensus that a Muslim trader should be honest – be it honesty regarding the status of the goods sold to the clients (as seen in Nancy's and Bah's cases) or honesty in legal terms (as seen in Ali's case).

## § Case 2: Friendship versus business

In 2014, I spent some time with a Nigerian entrepreneur, Songo, and his Chinese wife, Fang, a Cantonese woman from a small town outside of Guangzhou. They fell in love and got married in 2009 and conducted business together, mainly trade and commission-based consulting. Songo and Fang's business is slightly larger than those of most small-scale African traders in Guangzhou: they rent a proper office and legally registered their business. Fang later converted to Islam. In many ways, Fang is a pious Muslim: she dresses modestly, cites the Quran, and prayed at Lailah al-Qadr (Night of Power) all night.

One story I heard about a debate between this couple offers an interesting window into how cultural and personal factors impact on the ethics involved in conducting Afro-Chinese business. Soon after Songo married Fang, one of his long-term clients visited them in Guangzhou and gave Fang USD 5,000 in cash as a wedding gift. Then the client asked Songo to purchase some goods for him, as usual. Songo left Fang in charge of the purchase. As mentioned before, middlemen usually take a percentage of the total purchase from the actual buyer. The business was done smoothly and Fang charged that client a 5% commission fee. However, in this particular case, the client expected something different. When the client found out about the commission, he got angry and terminated his business partnership with Songo. In his opinion, the USD 5,000 gift indicated that they were now friends and no longer clients. In his view, the couple should not charge him the commission like they would a stranger. While Songo and some of his African friends agreed with this client and sought to repair the relationship, the damage was done, and rumors about Songo and Fang being greedy started spreading. In her defense, Fang stated,

What should I do then? I need to think about my own family. There are bills to pay: the rent of the office, the mortgage, the tuition of my kids ... Songo always says that they are all family, they are our Muslim brothers and sisters, and we should not charge them. But I need to think of my small family first before thinking about his "big family" (xiangu xiaojia, zaigu dajia). (Fang, 22 June 2014).

The question in this dispute is simple but tricky: to what extent should a line be drawn between friendship and business? Fang and African Muslims hold different opinions on it. Both perspectives have some merit, and it is impossible to "win" this debate. Fang's case again proves the fluidity and diversity of business ethics in practice.

### *Enforcing mechanisms and trust building*

As discussed previously, due to the informal and semi-legal nature of African migrants' business activities, there is a lack of formal mechanisms to enforce ethical business norms. The above section also shows that even though people follow business ethics

on a daily basis, their diverse interpretations on business ethics also result in different business practices. Therefore, African Muslim business owners in Guangzhou have developed some informal mechanisms to maintain and enforce their ethical norms: in particular, mosques, co-ethnic (native-place) networks, business associations, and social networks (word of mouth). Sharing the same religion adds a mutual trust between the two parties, who shared neither the same nationality nor ethnicity (Su, 2017). Many Muslim business owners I interviewed prefer doing business with other Muslims, although not exclusively. For example, Edel, a Hausa entrepreneur from Niger, and Ahmed, a young man from Yemen, met at a restaurant near one of the mosques and later developed a working relationship. As Edel explained:

I will buy [stuff from] and sell [stuff to] non-Muslims, but I prefer to do business [develop a partnership] with Muslims. Do you know what is Islam? It is about how to conduct life. You see, we have a similar rule on how to conduct life, so there will be less unnecessary conflicts. I trust Ahmed. I work with him because he has a belief [in Islam], so we both have the same thing to guide us. I found it is interesting how many Chinese do not have a religion. ... What if someone cheats you in business? You [Chinese people] cannot do anything about it. But, for us, at least we have a God to look for. If we did something wrong, we have this guilt in ourselves, and inshallah this bad person will be punished. But I don't know what you can do with people without beliefs? (Edel, 30 April 2014).

This statement, as biased as it may sound, should not be interpreted solely as discriminatory toward non-Muslim traders from a different background. Due to the high risk involved in the informal economy, it is not surprising to hear an African Muslim trader express that they only want to trade with others from the same circle (country, mosque, and religion), as in their minds, the co-religion and co-ethnic network (Muslim community, the mosque, and religious authorities like Imams) exert social pressures that reinforce moral standards in business conduct. In addition, the smaller the circle, the more controllable the situation, and safer and more trustworthy that businessperson is. In this sense, some Muslim business owners even explicitly expressed their preference for hiring Muslim employees due to the mutual trust based on shared religion rather than shared nationality, ethnicity, or place of origin (Su, 2017). They believed that sharing a similar moral code would reduce the rate of dishonesty and that believing in the same religious values would be a good mechanism to prevent cheating, as “there are only a few mosques where you can go” (Edel, 30 April 2014). Edel's earlier remarks also indicate another layer of enforcement that goes beyond secular law, that even if in this secular world where one cannot get punished due to lack of formal institutional assistance, there exists the judgment and punishment by God in the world of afterlife.

*Consequences of code-breaking*

In many cases, cheating or deviating from established ethical norms transpire without any consequences. There are, however, a few instances where people do get justice meted out to them. Previous research has shown that the networks that African migrants have help them cope with the difficulties they face in Guangzhou, such as by providing social aid and creating a sense of community, which in turn reinforce ethical business codes and business networks (Jiang, 2022). Therefore, to be excluded from a religious network can be harmful for someone who wants to remain in Afro-Chinese business, especially among African Muslim business owners; their religious networks are tightly-knit, making cheating and code-breaking especially dangerous.

In the introduction of the article, I shared the story of Dina, who was betrayed by a Guinean trader and his Chinese wife. Coincidentally, a few weeks later, I learned that a friend of a Hausa businessman from Niger, Daran, was also cheated by the same Guinean trader, but with a different ending:

That was two years ago (2012). I brought my friend to Tianxiu to this Chinese lady who I always buy things from ... Next time when he went alone, he found this Guinean guy who offered him a cheaper price. So, he paid USD 2,000 as the deposit. The next day I went to Tianxiu, the Chinese lady told me, "Daran, I saw your friend ordered from that guy but he does not have [any] things. He is cheating." So, I went to ask him for [the] money back. He speaks French. He said, "ne pas avoir d'argent" ["don't have any money"]. How come [he has] no money? I fight and fight. And I called the police. The Chinese woman (his wife) works there, also cheats. She lied to the police. The police knew him! They asked him to give back the money to us. Finally, he did.

The next time, he saw me, he said, "Sorry, bro." And we made peace. After that incident, I find out that he is even a friend's friend. Now we just say "bonjour" ("hi") if we meet on [the] street, but he is not my friend. I identify myself as a Muslim. [Being] Muslim is not just about praying, not eat[ing] pork, these kinds of things, but it is about here [he pointed to his heart]. He is not a true Muslim. (Daran, 21 January 2014).

The somewhat different attitudes this Guinean man displayed to Dina and to Daran are interesting. First, he gave back the money to Daran, but not to Dina, which seemed like a demonstration of a gender bias. Second, he apologized to Daran – perhaps this came from a sense of morality based on religious merits? Scholars have pointed out both the benefits and the limits of co-ethnic and co-religion networks of transnational migrants in conducting business (Kim, 1999; Yuniarto, 2015). Perhaps in this sense, the co-religion network functioned stronger than the co-ethnic one, in that the Guinean man felt peer pressure from the Muslim community? Perhaps the conversation with Daran was done in French – which both sides are fluent in – so that

they avoided any miscommunication, which might have taken place in Dina's case? Moreover, the police handled these two cases differently; but why did the alleged connections between the Chinese wife and the police work in Dina's case, but not in Daran's? Perhaps this was because Daran was a tough-looking African man, and Dina was a woman? Perhaps because Daran has a resident visa, and Dina is transient (on a tourist visa)? Perhaps Daran speaks fluent Chinese and Dina does not? Perhaps this happened so many times, that the police finally got tired of this couple and decided to take action? I tried to locate this Guinean businessman but he and his wife had moved, so my questions will remain unanswered, although I suspect that sharing the same religious network alarmed him and pushed him to make amends with Daran.

## CONCLUSION

The historical presence of Islam in Guangzhou combined with the city's extensive trading economy have attracted Muslims from diverse origins, making the city home to one of the largest and most diverse communities of foreign Muslim migrants in China (Su, 2017). The majority of African Muslims interviewed in this study are small-scale business owners, engaging in various informal activities in the context of low-end globalization. Their marginalized social status and their low-end, informal economic activities make them vulnerable to business risk and potential fraud. As the article shows, without formal means of support, African Muslim small-scale business owners largely rely on the business ethics to ensure a safe trading environment and to mitigate unforeseen risk. However, their business ethics are informal, dynamic, and context-shifting. Various factors, especially one's cultural background and socioeconomic status would impact on the interpretation and implementation of such business ethics. The article then explains what faith-based business ethics entail and discusses two cases where people held different interpretations of them. In the last part of the article, I discussed how business ethics were enforced, emphasizing the importance of co-religion business networks. Future studies are needed to explore the effectiveness of other enforcing mechanisms, especially the role of communities in enforcing ethics – the role of Muslim leaders, mosques, and leadership of African business and ethnic associations.

This article highlights the vital role of religion in acting as an alternative source of formality and guide in an inherently precarious environment for small-scale business owners in the context of Afro-Chinese informal trade. The discussion of morality, and particularly morality among Muslim traders, hence provides insights into not only the study on relationship of religion to economy but also studies on religious minorities at large. In addition, this article introduces the term "religious common ground," referred to as a shared set of values that regulate individuals' social, economic, and religious conduct. This term helps researchers better understand the religious networks and ethical guides that African and other Muslim groups have built and on which many of their interactions are based. Ethnographically, this article provides an ethnographic account of a group that is important yet often overlooked,

considering the scant research on African Muslims and their interactions with Chinese and other foreign Muslims in Guangzhou. By studying how African Muslim small-scale business owners practice business ethics in Guangzhou, this article adds a nuanced perspective to a growing literature on the African presence in China in the context of emerging international migrations between China and Africa.

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