

Deportability, Deportation, and Nigerian “Deportspora” in China

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Abstract

How do the manifestations of deportability in everyday life and deportation experiences constitute African migrants into a “deportspora” in China? Despite the scholarly attention paid to the migration of Africans to China, questions of deportability and the simultaneous, reverse flows through their deportation are under-explored. In this article, I examine this critical gap by exploring the lifeworlds of Nigerian migrants and deportees from China, using data from two separate studies conducted in 2017 and 2020–2021. Nigerians are exposed to “illegalization,” experience deportability threats, and become vulnerable to arrest and re-dispersal as deportees. The realities of being undocumented and overstaying, the social act of running, and the host society’s instrumentalization of deportation to regulate or order the migrant community all point to the existence of Nigerian deportspora in China. The import of this form of social formation makes deportability and deportation an essential part of social life in the African migrant community in the Chinese city of Guangzhou. The article advances critical debates in deportation studies, especially in the under-researched context of Sino-African migrations.

Keywords: Africa-China, deportation, Guangzhou, illegality, migrant deportability

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INTRODUCTION

The “influx” of migrants from African countries to China has attracted significant research attention. While some debate the presence of African resident populations in Chinese cities (Bodomo, 2010; Castillo, 2014), others describe the emergence of the African community (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007; Gordon et al., 2017; Adebayo, 2022a), the precarious homing experience of Africans (Castillo, 2015), issues of racialization, regulation, and control (Lan, 2017a; Liang and Le Billon, 2018; Huang, 2019), and the extent of the temporariness of African presence, as marked by the realities of circulation, transiency, stuckedness, and immobility (Haugen, 2012; Niu, 2018; Adebayo, 2022b). However, the issue of deportability and deportation as they affect African migrants in China has received less attention. Despite the deportation of Africans as state practice in China (Wilczak, 2018), we know little about how deportees experience it nor understand how deportability threats and the reality of deportation influenced the evolution of the African community in China. This article seeks to fill this gap by exploring deportability and deportation in the everyday lives of Nigerians and how they shape social relations and associational life in the Nigerian migrant community in China.

As immigration regimes of the Global North toward Africans tightened over two decades ago, China became a choice destination for some African migrants (Lan, 2017b), thus emerging as a frontier for the formation of the new African diaspora in Asia (Bodomo, 2010, 2016; Anshan, 2015). Since the 2000s, the narrative of China as the “New Promised Land” (Lan, 2017b) for Africans has crept into discussions. Moreover, the phrase “China Dream” also emerged (Marfaing, 2019), framing a Chinese version of the popular “American Dream,” which is suggestive of the ideal that citizens and immigrants alike should have access to equal opportunity to prosper and be successful in the United States of America. Different figures exist on the population of Africans in China, from hundreds of thousands (Bodomo, 2016) to 22,000 in Guangzhou city alone (Haugen, 2019). Thus, a formidable African community has emerged in China, and Afro-Chinese families are no longer uncommon (Zhou, 2017; Adebayo and Omololu, 2020). In Guangzhou, where most Africans reside, the majority are undocumented Nigerian men (Haugen, 2012; Bodomo, 2016). Therefore, many Africans fall into the category of deportable diasporas or a group of undocumented migrants vulnerable to “illegalization” (Haugen, 2019) and removal. Because of their “illegalization,” these migrants experience what De Genova (2002) framed elsewhere as deportability threats. Under massive state surveillance and anti-Black policing practices, undocumented Africans are routinely arrested and re-dispersed as deportees (Lan, 2017a; Haugen, 2019; Huang, 2019). This environment makes Chinese cities qualify as critical nodes to explore experiences of deportability and deportation among African migrants.

Exploring the experiences of deportability and deportation of Africans in China calls attention to a chronically under-researched aspect of African-Chinese exchanges. More than filling a critical gap in African deportation research, the context

of study provides significant insights into the contradictions in the host country's disposition toward the undocumented foreign population, which is simultaneously tolerated and persecuted. In Guangzhou particularly, I show this contradiction by documenting how the Nigerian migrant community structure is recognized and, at the same time, the members of the same community are targeted, routinely arrested, and hauled to the airport empty-handed for deportation. Further, the experiences of Nigerians, as a sub-population of Africans in China, offer a compelling case for unraveling how Africans experience deportability and deportation as part of their presence and community making in an emergent migration destination. This attempt can unveil hidden processes in the constitution and diasporization of Africans in East Asia. Moreover, I contend that deportation is a fundamental process to understanding the making and unmaking of the African diaspora in East Asia. Finally, I use this contribution to advance critical debates in deportation studies, especially connecting deportation to migrant community structures and processes in the context of Sino-African migrations.

This article starts with introducing the socio-political context of the study – with a focus on the Chinese immigration policy and particularly its enforcement and evolution during the last 15 years. I present my analytical framework proposing deportability as a governmentality while deploying *deportspora* as a concept that reflects the lived experience of African – specifically Nigerian – migrants in Guangzhou. The third section of the article presents the methodology, while section four focuses on analyzing the empirical materials to describe the role of deportation in the Nigerian community's emergence, structuring and unmaking, the materiality of deportability as evidenced by migrants' interpretation of running objects, and how the community responds to the deportation reality through relations of information sharing and mitigation of impact of deportation. The final sections discuss and conclude the article by underscoring the critical role of deportability and deportation in the social life of an African migrant community in China.

Chinese immigration enforcement and the notion of deportspora

For a long time, China did not have a coherent immigration policy in place. Immigration matters were managed through a number of laws and regulations, such as “the Law on Control of the Entry and Exit of Aliens (1985), Detailed Rules on the Implementation of the Law on the Entry and Exit of Aliens (1994), Regulations on the Examination and Approval of Permanent Residence of Aliens in China (2004)” (Lan, 2014: 5). Lan (2014) asserts that, prior to 2012, authorities at multiple levels of the Chinese state – up to 17 of them and sometimes working in an uncoordinated manner – participate in the administration and enforcement of the regulations. However, as immigration became increasingly prominent in China, it also became apparent that a relatively unified immigration policy was necessary (Pieke, 2012). The growth of a resident African population in provinces such as Guangdong already in the 2000s made the need for such a policy more urgent. The

media presented this population in a negative light, interpreting their socio-political engagement and occasional protests as disorderly behavior perpetrated by *mafan*, that is, troublemaking foreigners. During the 2010s, African communities in the Guangdong province were increasingly targeted by police through random checks in public areas (Adebayo, 2022a).

Early experimentation with an expansive immigration policy, the Interim Provisions of Guangdong Province on Administration of and Services to Aliens (2011) in Guangzhou created the so-called *sanfei* population, a special label applying to migrants who enter, stay, and work in China illegally (Lan, 2014; Haugen, 2019). The policy introduced several radical changes compared to previous laws and practices: it rewarded citizens who report *sanfei* aliens, tasked institutions and organizations that Africans normally engage with to verify passports and visas and reporting irregularities to authorities, imposed heavy penalties on those who failed to report *sanfei*, and prevented foreigners from residing near areas the state deems to have implications for national security and public order. Expectedly, the national Exit-Entry Administration Law passed on June 30, 2012 and that went into effect on July 1, 2013, took inspiration from and retained the harsh provisions of the Interim Law of 2011.

Despite the introduction of such a law, practices associated with the regulation of the migrant population have changed frequently and for the worse. For instance, the Registration Certificate of Temporary Residence (RCTR), which foreigners are required to obtain from the police within 24 hours of their arrival, and which used to be valid throughout the duration of foreigners’ stay, has been curtailed to a 7-day validity period (Huang, 2019). This means that foreigners need to go through the same procedure practically every week, with significant costs in time and money to fulfill the procedure. Huang (2019: 4) recently drew attention to how such “volatile regulations” and harsh enforcement have been used as a means of regulating and “disciplining” Africans in Guangzhou through indiscriminate stop and search, random and spontaneous visa checks at public places, and frequent drug raids. The imposition of heavy fines became a “lucrative business” for police officers. Also, a negative media campaign represents Africans as unruly and dangerous, while pressures from the top echelon of the Chinese police and monetary incentives interweave with the racialized targeting of Black people (Huang, 2019). African migrants in Guangzhou have learned to live under the constant threat of deportation.

The threat to expel and deport irregular migrants is not unique to China. Galvin (2015: 1) states that migrant expulsion is an increasingly common feature of immigration systems worldwide, with significant changes occurring in “the nature, scope and use of deportation or forced repatriation as a state practice.” Nyers (2003) argues that states’ obsession with managing and controlling migration with stricter border policies has created an “abject diaspora” or “deportspora.” Those falling in the category of deportspora are vulnerable to forced removal owing to the state’s framing

of their presence as dangerous and threatening of the host nation's values and public order.

Previous studies on deportability – or the possibility of being removed – and deportation of Africans mainly examine their experiences in Europe and North America (De Genova, 2002; Carling, 2004; Willen, 2007; Kleist, 2018), especially the case of sex workers deported from European countries (Plambech, 2018). While a few studies exist on deportation in Africa and Central Asia (Galvin, 2015; Schuster and Majidi, 2015), there is a need to understand how African migrants in East Asia experience and navigate the risk of removal and actual deportation. Exploring these issues within East Asia as they affect African migrants is essential, primarily because of how the flows of Africans have intensified in a country like China in the past two decades.

I examine the gap in Sino-African migration scholarship by exploring the lifeworlds of Nigerian migrants concerning their experiences of deportability and deportation in China. I show how the state and everyday practices of control against *sanfei* or “triple illegals” shape the everyday life of Nigerians. I argue that Nigerians in China fall into the category of deportable diasporas, a condition shaped in significant ways not only by their insecure or irregular status but by the social reality of constant threat to be deported that characterizes their whole existence. In advancing this position, I present deportability and deportation as a social reality where undocumented status, overstaying, and running (in the literal sense) collide with the nation-state's governmentality over undocumented migrants.

METHODOLOGY

The article combines data generated from two of my previous studies: I conducted the first among Nigerians residing in Guangzhou (2017), while the second involved Nigerians deported from China (2020–2021). As part of my doctoral research, I interviewed 69 participants during two separate visits to Guangzhou in 2017, including 52 Nigerians. The research relied on an ethnographic method whereby I interacted with Nigerians in markets, shops, homes, bars, and places of worship to understand how they settle in Guangzhou city. The length of the interviews varied, depending on the time and openness of each participant to speak, with a minimum duration of 12 minutes, a maximum of 370 minutes, and an average of 67 minutes. The participants included mainly Nigerian men – some had newly arrived while others had lived in the Chinese city for a long time – from community leaders to businesspeople. Their backgrounds were diverse in terms of age group, ethnicity, travel experience, and duration of stay. They fell mostly in the middle-age category (31–50 years), were predominantly men (58% of whom were married), were involved in a wide range of occupations, and occupied different positions in the community. I could recruit only a few women, which is partly due to the male-dominated character of the Nigerian community. The men were mostly engaged in businesses related to

the thriving commodity economy. Also, there were more Igbo participants from South-eastern Nigeria.

The majority had secondary education, and prior to departing from China, many of them engaged in trade-related activities. In terms of travel experience, most of the participants were first-time travelers. Those with previous travel experience had traveled within the African continent. Only a few of them had spent under one year in Guangzhou: about 40% had been in China for one to five years, 29% had spent six to 10 years in China, and 18% had been there for over 15 years in 2017. A dominant theme that recurred throughout the data was the issue of undocumentedness and how it shapes the everyday life of Nigerian migrants, notably as it exposed them to deportability threats and deportation. My positionality as a Nigerian researcher working with Nigerian migrants in Guangzhou has been discussed in-depth elsewhere (Adebayo and Njoku, 2022).

The second research involved a “multi-local fieldwork” in which I interviewed 27 Nigerians between September 2020 and March 2021. Multi-local fieldwork involves linking several local spaces as a connected field over a period (Wulff, 2002). Thus, this study comprised face-to-face interviews in Nigerian cities (Lagos, Ibadan, and Nnewi) and two virtual interviews with Nigerian community leaders in Guangzhou. A total of 22 participants were men deported from China. The larger context of the study was to examine how the deportation shaped the transnational livelihood, masculinity, and family dynamics of Nigerians who used to reside in China. Following the approach of Miller (2012) to conducting life stories, participants freely discussed their experiences and how they navigated undocumentedness, the circumstances of their arrest, experiences while in detention, and eventual deportation from China. I relied on networks of Nigerians in Guangzhou to locate some Nigerian deportees in Lagos and applied the snowballing technique to connect with others. I also recruited a Nigerian deportee whom I met in Guangzhou in 2017 as a research assistant in Ibadan between 2020 and 2021. His involvement facilitated access to other Nigerian deportees in Ibadan and Lagos, mostly people he knew when he resided in Guangzhou as an undocumented migrant for about eight years.

Of the 22 deportee men interviewed, 14 identified as Igbo while the rest were Yoruba. In terms of age, 10 fell in the middle-age group, three were elderly (50+), and the rest were young (30 years and under). Around 16 were married and close to half had traveled abroad prior to going to China. The earliest year of arrival in China they reported was 2005 but up to two of them came as late as 2016. The minimum duration of stay prior to deportation was a year, but one participant had lived in China for 13 years before he was deported. All the participants were involved in trade or business-related activities, except a few who reported carpentry, travel agency, driving, or betting shop operator as their jobs. Two reported that they were unemployed. Among the rest of the participants, two were wives of deportee men living in Nigeria; two were community leaders who had lived in China for over 14 years, while the last person was a visa agent who help prospective migrants to process

visas and assist those trying to return there after deportation to prepare the necessary documents.

I conducted all the interviews in English and pidgin English, both of which are commonly used in Nigeria. I transcribed the English-language interviews verbatim and translated the pidgin ones directly to standardized English for analysis purposes. I also took extensive field notes, which were processed along with the interviews during analysis. Unlike the first study, interview guides in the second study contained questions designed to elicit data on the participants' experiences of deportability and deportation. Participants shared stories of how they navigated various situations and escaped being deported while living in China, and described the circumstances and their actual experiences of deportation.

The two data points based on ethnographic processes enabled me to elicit information from Nigerians facing deportability threats in China and those who had experienced deportation and were residing in Nigeria. The data provided a more holistic picture than would have been possible with data based on the experiences of those in China or Nigeria alone. In the next sections, where I turn to the social reality of deportation in the Nigerian migrant community in Guangzhou, I created pseudonyms for participants.

SOCIAL REALITY OF DEPORTATION AND NIGERIAN “DEPORTSPORA” IN GUANGZHOU

Deportation has played an essential role in the Nigerian community's emergence, structuring, and unmaking in China, although this role is rarely acknowledged. Haugen (2019) and Adebayo (2022a) are the few exceptions in this regard. Both researchers, working specifically in the Nigerian community and exploring the historical process of its formation, allude to how some of the early Nigerian arrivals in mainland China had been deported, initially to Hong Kong from countries like Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea before turning to mainland China. Nigerians went to these East Asian countries to offer their labor in factories and were later deported to Hong Kong, where they lived until the news of opportunities in mainland China led to their departure for Shenzhen and Guangzhou (Haugen, 2019; Adebayo, 2022a). One could say that the journey to mainland China partly began with a deportation-inspired congregation of Nigerians from elsewhere – Hong Kong. Nonetheless, while recognizing the connection between deportation and the arrival of Nigerians in China, deportation has, more generally, revealed itself as a reality to reckon with in structuring the Nigerian community in Guangzhou. Before I analyze the details of this assertion, I discuss how experiences of deportability are linked to the regulation and illegalization of migrants, and the context of undocumentedness. This is then followed by a discussion of the materiality through which Nigerian migrants experience it.

Regulate and manage: Illegalization and ordering of migrant community

As the population of Nigerians swelled in Guangzhou, they became targets of blame and stereotype (Pang et al., 2013; Adebayo, 2022a). There is also a widely-shared view that the local authorities are against public gathering or assembly – the exact model of sociation common with Nigerians in the city. Whether in the market areas along Guangyuan Xi Lu, places of worship, or in Nanhai, where a growing number had taken up residence, Nigerians gather in groups to chat, catch up, or share drinks with music, sometimes blasting from loudspeakers. Additionally, Africans, mainly Nigerians, are accused of drug peddling, fraud, and corruption of Chinese girls (Lan, 2017b; Adebayo, 2022a). Deportation emerged as an instrument of control and depopulation to address these social vices.

During the Beijing Summer Olympics (2008) and the Asian Games (2010), the Chinese authorities deployed deportation to regulate the presence of African migrants. They used it to manage who could be seen in public and who could not. Apart from the undocumented, deportability threats were ever-present to help invisibilize the unwanted. During that period, “if someone has paper and you do not know where/how to walk, the person’s paper will be destroyed or terminated” (Bolaji/Male/LG/2020). To address the drug trade problem, in which foreigners and Chinese locals actively participated, a significant issue that peaked with the Dragon Hotel incident of 2013, the authorities intensified raids on Black African foreigners, with Nigerians being the primary target.

With the Entry and Exit Law of 2013 in place, a Nigerian community leader named Ben (GZ/2017), viewed the law “... as a punitive measure to depopulate Nigerians, to ask them just to go.” As an instrument in the host society’s performance of governmentality, the intensification of raids aimed at deporting Black foreigners helped the Guangzhou authority to spatially re-order the city (Wilczak, 2018). It also contributed to the trans-local dispersals that led to the concentration of Nigerians in ghettoized communities in Nanhai.

Apart from its use in regulating foreigners’ presence, the authorities used deportation to moderate the relationship between the state and migrant community leadership. For example, in the early 2000s, a head of the Nigerian community in Guangzhou, was deported for immigration offences. Before that deportation, he was previously deported for overstaying his visa but had managed to return to China before the statutorily permitted duration to be with his family – including his Chinese wife. However, the subtext of his forced removal was that he had advocated for the removal of overstay fines. The erstwhile community leader criticized the fine as exploitative and deliberately targeting Nigerians because the police have come to depend on the income (also see Huang, 2019). His hard-line position led to the re-visitation of his history and eventual deportation (Ben/Male/Community Leader/GZ/2017).

Still, on the use of deportation to manage illegalized migrants, the state practice of removing unwanted foreigners was humanized to establish a regime

of “voluntary” exit called “amnesty.” The amnesty was brokered by the Nigerian community leadership with the backing of the Chinese local authority and supported by the Nigerian embassy in China. It essentially provides an opportunity for the easy exit for overstayers by canceling imprisonment time and imposing a reduced fine. Community heads talked about the amnesty program as a significant achievement that legitimized their continuing existence. However, as an initiative aimed at reducing the population of undocumented Nigerians in the city, amnesty ensures that “these people are deported without necessarily paying that huge amount of fine ... and provided they can give details of their stay in China” (Falusi/Male/Nigerian Consulate/GZ/2017). Moreover, some community members perceived amnesty as an opportunity for the Chinese authorities to apprehend “persons of interest” – individuals who have records of criminality or have been under watch. Consequently, the amnesty arrangement could be interpreted as part of China’s governmentality aimed at reducing the population of “unwanted” immigrants while also supporting a system of entrapment and surveillance of foreigners.

Undocumentedness, overstaying, and deportability

De Genova (2002: 438) has famously observed that “it is deportability, and not deportation per se, that has historically rendered undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity.” In the simplest stipulation, deportability refers to “the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state” (De Genova, 2002: 439). Undocumented migrants face deportability the most, owing to their permanent condition of instability by not being in possession of valid documents in a host country and the vulnerabilities this condition exposes them to. It is important to note, however, that, for some Nigerians traveling between China and Nigeria, the deportability experience starts at the point of departure, continues while in transit, and worsens at the destination upon the expiration of visas.

Chad (Male/LG/2017) faced deportability threats before his journey began. At the international airport in Lagos, he faced questions about why his Chinese visa was issued in Zambia. As a first-time traveler, a status that airport officials in Lagos could “smell,” he was interrogated and pressured to explain how he acquired a Zambia-issued Chinese visa. Eventually, he paid US\$300 in bribes before boarding the plane. When he arrived in Hong Kong, from where he planned to enter mainland China, he faced the same problem. In Hong Kong, he could not defend the document he carried. Thus, an airport official escorted him to a flight that would return him to Nigeria. On the way to the plane, he confessed to the airport staff that he had obtained the document through an agent and was on his way to start a professional football career in China. The staff later freed him and helped him purchase a boat ticket to mainland China. Chad was metaphorically “deported” at departure and during transit but managed to reach Guangzhou. However, not everyone manages to reach their destination. Harry (Male/LG/2021) reported that he was deported en

route after the immigration staff in Hong Kong told him that the system had flagged his passport.

Upon arriving in China, Nigerian migrants face deportability when they become undocumented and illegalized due to visa expiry. Those with expired visas expressed their situation with the analogy of “death.” The Igbo Nigerians typically say, “it died,” but the Yoruba Nigerians say, “pali ti ku,” that is, “paper (has) died.” Most Nigerians in Guangzhou, where almost all my research participants resided, entered China on a 30-day Business Visa (see also Haugen, 2012). Once this document expires, some migrants attempt to renew it, but they can only do so for a brief period. Others abandon their documents without trying at all. Regardless, the two categories of migrants are unified in their eventual desire to stay put and overstay.

To overstay, participants engage in sense-making by processing and trying to understand their situation in the city, enabling them to ease into their imminent status as undocumented migrants. Some may compare the cost of maintaining a stay against the cost of not doing so. Upon arrival, having a “legal” stay is desired, but some quickly learn about the cost implications, which forced them to reassess their options. Overstaying becomes a rational decision, not just a coping strategy (see also Lan, 2017b). “I allowed my visa [to expire] because coming back then [to Nigeria] was too difficult for me because my business was not much that flourishing” (Smith/Male/LG/2021). A deportee who resides in Ibadan, Nigeria, said:

I decided from the outset [to overstay] because the money I would use to extend my visa was too much; it was too much to do a student visa. Then, I thought that if it [the visa] would collapse, let it collapse. And that God will protect us. (Abayo/Male/IB/ 2020).

Moreover, some decided to overstay in consultation with family members in Nigeria. When China adopted tougher measures, Bunmi (Male/LG/2020) contacted those at home and shared his plan to return but was discouraged from doing it. His girlfriend at the time, now his wife and mother of three, admonished, “that the people still in the place did not have two heads.” She encouraged him to stay put instead and avoid going to unsafe and unnecessary places. Similarly, Bunmi’s uncle told him to stay put although he had shared his plan to travel to another country when he returns to Nigeria. His uncle said he could return, if:

... [I] had a place, that I would be staying [upon returning] ... and don’t I know that it will be like a shame to me that I went to China and did not come with anything tangible ... All the people that knew I traveled in the church. (Bunmi/Male/LG/2020).

Upon becoming overstayers, they experience deportability fears, often rendering them immobile (Haugen, 2012; Adebayo, 2022b). Migrants intending to participate

in the economy that Africans in Guangzhou created must be relatively free to travel in the city and to other trading nodes in Guangdong and beyond. However, “without your visa, there are some places you can go, and there are places you can’t go” (Benard/Male/GZ/2017). Also, “if you don’t have documents, you have to hide from the police” (Sulei/Male/GZ/2017). The immobility resulting from these situations can be temporary or prolonged. Temporary types can occur because of the usual or routine evasion of the police or immigration officers. Prolonged immobility can result from intense policing that makes the public space unsafe for the undocumented.

A case of prolonged immobility was reported to have occurred in 2013, during a high-profile drug-related raid at the Lihua Hotel in Yuexiu district (also called the Dragon Hotel) that led to the arrest of 168 suspects, the majority being from Nigeria (see Adebayo, 2022a). At the time, many undocumented Nigerians hid from the police for a long time. Those going out acquired information about when and how to move and learned the routine of police patrols. While outside the comfort of apartments, they must freeze in place temporarily when they learn of police patrols in their vicinity, freezing long enough until it is safe to move about again. Sometimes, however, immigration officers operate outside the known routine by setting up raids when migrants were not expecting it. Nelson (Male/GZ/2017) narrated an encounter of this nature while waiting and hiding from the police at an apartment in Nanhai:

I was there, and my friend told me that today is a working day for the Chinese [police] that I should wait till 1:30 pm ... So, I was in the house with them. Small-time, we heard a noise, people were running around the corner, so the guy now opened his window and looked down. He saw that many police surrounded the environment. So, those policemen were busy, breaking [in], checking, checking one house. After 30 minutes, we thought they had left because we opened the window again and checked if they were still around ... Within a little time, they entered that compound again – the one they were checking before, the one I was in. So, they started breaking the doors. The building was five stories.

Whereas the quote above exposed the tensions and fears linked to deportability, a more critical issue is that the lives of undocumented Nigerians become uniquely unpredictable. Faced with deportability, they effectively substitute order and predictability for disorder and unpredictability. They risk sudden arrest and deportation where all of one’s savings and possessions could be lost without any possibility of recovering them. “Everything is unaware; it is sudden; it just happens” (Chisom/Male/LG/2021). A female migrant (Alice/Female/GZ/2017) captured the reality of this suddenness and the possible consequences in the following quote:

Visa issue can give somebody a high BP ... No matter how much you make, no matter how much you have, that visa issue is a problem because you can pack

the money in a house and just for one day, they will come and carry you and go, and all the money is lost. It is gone. At least, if you have your visa, even if they take you to the station, you have a hope of coming back and also claim your things, you understand? But when you don't have a visa, they will take you to Nigeria, and everything you have in the house is gone.

Because of this unpredictability, some carry all their cash wherever they go. As many undocumented Nigerians are unbanked, they live on the move. Living life on the move could mean carrying one's money everywhere or living as though one may be arrested anytime and deported. As one deportee Nigerian (Eke/Male/LG/2021) told me:

Because of those paper issues, you don't really keep money at home. So you'll always have your money with you so that even if it happens at your residence, you still have your money with you.

Another Nigerian deportee (Chisom/Male/LG/2021) whom I met and interviewed at his Lagos apartment corroborated the above:

There's one thing we do in China when you are going from your house in the morning: you will assume that you may not come back to that again ... So, every day is a blessing, it is grace because as you're coming out of that house on the staircase, you could be rounded up, when you're in the bus you could be arrested, when you're in the market you could be apprehended, so you're prepared for the worst every day.

Furthermore, there are Nigerians who, despite lacking documentation, manage to create a semblance of stability by renting shops. However, their lives remain firmly held back because of their deportability. This category of Nigerian migrants rents shops through informal arrangements with local Chinese intermediaries. Still, their presence in the market is fragile and unstable (see Adebayo, 2022b). According to Smith (Male/GZ/2017), “Anything can happen, anytime!” Smith sells clothes and other fashion accessories in the shop he owned with a partner. However, Smith does not feel safe, being always on the lookout for the police. On one occasion, he directed me to look at a shop under lock. That shop, he said, belongs to a friend who was arrested and deported about five months ago because of “illegal” residency. The friend had lived in China for about seven years before being deported.

Curiously, deportability is not the sole preserve of undocumented Nigerians. Nigerians residing “legally” in China under seemingly “legitimate” visa arrangements also experience deportability fears. Consider, for instance, the case of Olu (Male/GZ/2017), who holds a student visa. Olu has been a student in China perpetually because he could not secure a long-term visa. To maintain a stay, he moves between

universities all over China to enroll as a student. While spending most of his time in Guangzhou and visiting his school occasionally, he is never sure if his visa will be renewed. Olu told me:

You might be denied ... [there is] the fear that probably they won't grant you another one. Other than that, life continues. When you get it done, you say, "Thank God! I am renewed," and you continue with your life.

Finally, living through the possibility of deportation exposes some to vulnerability. For instance, among those working in precarious informal jobs, as restaurant attendants or goods packaging, the threat of deportation is subtly deployed to keep undocumented Nigerian workers in line. Ahmed (Male/GZ/2017) worked as a help in a restaurant owned jointly by a Nigerian man and his Chinese wife. Once when the husband was away in Nigeria, his wife refused to pay his salary. When he demanded payment, she told him, "This is China." Ahmed regarded the assertion as a subtle threat. In interpreting "This is China" as a deportability threat, one should not miss the parallel of the assertion with the brutally crude and unfriendly condition of city life in Africa. "This is China" likely parallels "This is Lagos" where brute unforgivingness of city life can consume the most vulnerable (Agbiboa, 2016).

The materiality of deportability: Running and the social life of "canvas"

Deportability mediates the everyday life of Nigerian migrants through how it is reckoned as a phenomenon to be feared. In this section, I develop a portrait of deportability using the act of running with "canvas" as an aspect of the materiality of navigating deportation in Guangzhou city. Having a status that puts one in the position of always being alert to run involves paying attention to one's environment and sorting faces in the crowd, in the market, on the streets, and on public transport. Immigration officers could be anywhere, and one must always be ready to run. "If they come now, as I am talking to you now ... I will fly and not run because I don't want to go back to hell fire in Nigeria without money" (Buchi/Male/GZ/2017). That is, "Being a Nigerian, one will understand what I mean; running faster than my shadow, running faster than Ben Johnson, as we may say it in Nigeria" (Chisom/Male/LG/2021).

For many of those whose lives are conditioned by deportability, running is about bailing oneself with one's legs. Undocumented Nigerian men and women, young and old, pegged their survival against their ability to run and evade arrest. In the words of Alice (Female/GZ/2017), who had an 11-year-old son in 2017 and sold food around markets along Guanyuan Xi Lu, running is a social constant:

When our "customers come," our brothers [laughs], we call them our customers or our brothers, that is immigration, when they come, everybody will be running helter-skelter. That is how we have been living.

Describing her experience with a son in hand, she explained thus:

I'm not the only one with a baby; others too have babies; sometimes they have caught them, and it is a must that they must go [be deported]. It is just that sometimes when they come around, I leave my business and start running up and down to look for him [her son]. So, if I get him, I will carry him, look for somewhere, and hide.

Similarly, one participant in their 50s who had traveled to China as an older person, met with me in a Lagos market, narrates that:

When you are in China, you need to put age by one side. China is like a war front. You need to package yourself very well; you leave age by the side because you know the reasons you are there: for you to survive. (Enny/Male/LG/2021).

Thus, running is framed as a response to navigating the war-like environment of Guangzhou city life. To survive this war environment, one must be conscious of one's deportability and always be prepared to act.

To run and survive deportability, however, some participants rely on the materiality and functionality of “canvas.” Canvas refers to any running shoes that are soft on the feet and flexible enough to allow the wearer to move swiftly and take flight or run comfortably. Being able to run and having the right shoe to do it is essential, as some Nigerians perceive that the Chinese immigration authorities have professional runners working for them (Chisom/Male/LG/2021). John (Male/LG/2021), who told me that “I am with my canvas even till the day I returned to Nigeria,” perceived that canvas is crucial to escaping, even though one can be apprehended. He explained:

If you see them first ahead of you, you will move, not that you will now be running like a person running 1,000 miles, no. It will be in a coded way [swiftly] ... So, you will see many of our people; they'll normally put on canvas, when they come to China, you will see many of them wearing canvas, except those that have genuine papers, resident visas or those that marry the Chinese, or those that come to buy goods ... I was with my canvas weathering those things because sometimes, we used to meet them at the markets where we buy clothes.

Similarly acknowledging canvas, Chisom (Male/LG/2021) added:

Wherever we see they are working or operating, you are already moving with your canvas ... ready to run because they will pursue you ... If it's not your

day, they will catch you unaware, and when they catch you, your fate is going to the detention center.

To push deportation forward through running and escaping is considered a victory. In the view of some participants, the canvas or running shoes emerge as a symbolic object having a capacity to determine one's prospect of remaining in China. In one of the stories shared by participants, one narrative stands apart in this respect precisely because the participant attributed both his escapes and eventual deportation to his canvas. Before his arrest, he described two of his former successes due to using canvas to succeed:

On two occasions, one-on-one, I dodged them; they were pursuing me. God just gave me the space to turn back ... and ran away with speed ... So, the second one, ... I came to buy material, I bought it, they packed it inside my bag, I paid them. Coming out with the goods into the street ... [and] as I was walking, I saw the policeman at the opposite sides, one-on-one. He asked me for my passport. So, what I did was that I dropped the goods immediately and turned back with speed. I always go with canvas ... The day they arrested me ... I was with a shoe [regular shoes]. I was not putting [on] canvas, so that was why I could not run very well that day. (Enny/Male/LG/2021).

From the preceding, the “death” of visas is a precursor to deportability. While the fear remains a constant, and the possibility of eventual deportation was accepted as a certainty, they nonetheless embrace running as a social act in which canvas plays a vital part. In addition, the persistence of deportability and deportation as a social reality shapes migrants' social relations and associational life. I analyze this dimension next.

Living within the bounds of deportability and deportation

Deportation is a social reality among Nigerians. As such, they live within the bounds of its challenges, including everyday deportability threats. One of the ways to appreciate this observation is to zoom in on how migrants interface with deportation-related information and mitigate the impact of deportation through specific community practices.

Nigerian migrants form a complex web of interdependences around information sharing. Undocumented Nigerians rely on community intelligence gathering and information circulation. This community intelligence draws heavily on joint monitoring and information sharing. Before leaving home, an undocumented migrant can call people he knew were already on the street to know how to move. “We also have general communication, and if you move out, you can call a brother you have there and ask, ‘How far?’” (Stanley/Male/GZ/2017). When the state introduces new measures that could lead to deportation, those who encounter them inform others through community channels. For example, Nnamdi (Male/GZ/2017) “works” in the

airport as a hustler without valid documents. Because of his situation, he learned to pay attention to his surroundings and developed skills to identify immigration officers in the crowd. Most importantly, when he learns new information that could impact deportation, he shares such information with co-nationals.

Moreover, migrants and their community associations participate in fundraising on behalf of those arrested and awaiting deportation. Individual members and community heads with strong networks dedicate time to this activity. Also, community association executives function as intermediaries and negotiate with the police regarding arrested co-nationals. They usually are the first responders who visit the police station or detention center to assess the situation on the ground and determine the basis of detention and the needs of the detained. Local authorities typically recognize these intermediaries who may visit police stations to negotiate releases.

Relatedly, the migrant community mobilizes to raise funds to alleviate the economic, social, and mental burdens of deportation. Describing his fundraising activities for those imprisoned and awaiting deportation, a community leader said, “Most times, what I did was to go around, carrying offering plate for them among the community people to contribute to send them home” (Ben/Male/Community Leader/GZ/2017). Funds can go into purchasing tickets and paying mandatory overstay fines. However, such community support lightens not only the economic burdens of unprepared and forced removal; it lightens the weight of the social burden, especially in alleviating the fear of returning home as people, whom Carling (2004) called “empty-handed returnees.” They lift this burden by using part of the community-donated funds to buy gifts for the members awaiting deportation.

Furthermore, in living within the bounds of existence produced by the reality of deportation, Nigerian migrants participate in a “farewell ritual.” This involves meeting up with home-bound co-nationals at the departure terminal of the Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport to send them home. Documented and undocumented migrants participate in this ritual, even though the danger of deportability remains high for those with expired documents. The meet-up is where community members present community-sourced gifts to prospective deportees. Because those arrested and processed for deportation rarely get the opportunity to pack their belongings, the meet-up also serves as a handover point of personal belongings that friends packaged on behalf of the migrant facing deportation. Those who have goods stored away with plans to sell in Nigeria as part of routine transnational trade but are prevented from doing so because of their arrest also benefit from the “farewell ritual.” Conversely, a person considered a “bad friend” can have his belongings sold off and not paid.

DISCUSSION

This article has so far attempted to fill a critical space in Sino-African migration literature by exploring the experiences of deportability and deportation in the everyday lives of Nigerians and their roles in community social relations and

associational life in China. More precisely, it established deportation as a social reality connected to the emergence of the Nigerian community in mainland China, as well as how fears related to possible removal intensify at the destination following visa expiration. Inside Guangzhou, undocumentedness contributes to the decision to overstay, sometimes in consultation with family members in Nigeria. The presence of deportability fears renders their lives unpredictable, exposes them to vulnerability, and makes their presence fragile.

Despite their fragile and unstable state, running and using canvas, as subjectively interpreted, become a means of resisting and suspending deportation. This shows evidence of the interwoven nature of “canvas” (shoes) in use and the subjective meaning attached to it by their migrant wearers. While evocative of Appadurai’s (1988) “social life of things” on the move, the reliance on “canvas” as an object of both mobility and evasion in Nigerian migrants’ imaginary and social practice of navigation accentuates a linkage between deportation research and “object biography.” Popularized in museum and heritage studies (Schamberger et al., 2008) but gaining traction in the aftermath of recurrent fatal boat mishaps and dangerous journeying among African irregular migrants heading to Europe (Horsti, 2019; Şanlı, 2022), “object biography” in the context of Sino-Nigerian/African migration calls attention to the theoretical promises of things and objects around which migrants live with and build their lifeworlds.

Moreover, deportation as a state practice functioned as a tool of controlling, managing, and depopulating unwanted African foreigners, with a community leader clashing with and losing to the governmentality. Having embraced and evolved different means to interface with these situations, deportation and deportability emerge as an elemental form of social life in the Nigerian community in Guangzhou. This view further supports the idea that a Nigerian “deportspora” community exists in China.

A trend of thought in deportation studies is the perspective that deportation is a process that begins before forced removal and endures after the removal (Drotbohm and Hasselberg, 2015; Galvin, 2015; Khosravi, 2018). However, the extent to which deportability may be similarly imagined is unclear. Examining the experiences of Nigerians along the Sino-African migration corridor provides an opportunity to view deportability in this exact manner. Concretely, the explored situation revealed the possibility of deportability as being unbounded from the nation-state where migrants reside at a specific time, pointing out that it could begin at departure and continue while in transit. This finding is significant because it shows how deportation studies themselves may potentially navigate the problem of methodological nationalism, which has plagued migration research as an academic field and social sciences in general (Wimmer and Schiller, 2003).

Moreover, the study shows that deportation, viewed as part of the “state’s arsenal of control” (Bloch and Schuster, 2005: 508) and used to expel foreigners considered unwanted (Drotbohm and Hasselberg, 2015), is an important phenomenon to

consider in understanding the making and unmaking of African communities in China. Deportation is revealed as critical in the governmentality linked to the regulation and management of the African population, further confirming the views of other scholars who have studied African presence and their clearing from Guangzhou (Lan, 2017a, 2017b; Wilczak, 2018; Huang, 2019). The seeming normalcy of deportability and deportation among Nigerians also reveals significant similarities in other Global South migration corridors where these realities are experienced as being “simultaneously disruptive and mundane” (Galvin, 2015: 2).

Beyond the normalcy of deportability and deportation that individual migrants experience, the normalization of this experience and practice should be woven into understanding the established migrant community structure and its ordering within a host society. More than its use in ordering individual migrants, deportation has been deployed in China to alter the functioning and stability of a migrant community through its instrumentalization in targeting “troublesome” community leaders, including heads of the well-organized migrant community. However, by living within the bounds of life set by deportability and deportation and responding to them, including through quotidian acts of resistance, Nigerians in China experience and respond to these realities as a contested realm (Sutton and Vigneswaran, 2011). For instance, where unpredictability and suddenness of deportation lead to loss of belonging, as documented among deportees in diverse settings (Ratia and Notermans, 2012; Khosravi, 2018), the Nigerian community evolved to mitigate losses to individual deportees. Fundraising and farewell rituals turn individual and often lonely removal into a community experience. They also use gift-giving during airport meet-ups to counter empty-handed return.

Understanding the Nigerian “deportspora” in China has contributed to contemporary deportation literature on two fronts, at least. The first pushes the concept of deportability and unbound it from the confines of a destination’s nation-state. The second advances the perspective that deportability and deportation in the Sino-African context are a community experience, not just that of individuals. Deportation scholarship will benefit significantly from understanding the community context. For instance, we may explore how the observed embeddedness of deportation in the community process can be explained by variations in community social relations and patterns of associational life in different migration contexts. Further research into this question and other related ones will likely generate productive answers.

CONCLUSION

Deportability and deportation shape community life in the Nigerian community in Guangzhou. The realities of undocumentedness and overstaying, the social act of running, and the host society's instrumentalization of deportation to regulate, manage, or order the migrant community reveal the existence of a Nigerian "deportspora" in China. The import of this form of social formation makes deportability and deportation a fundamental part of social life in the African migrant community in the Chinese city. The article has opened a new space of inquiry in Afro-Chinese migrations where the reverse flows from China through deportation have not received as much attention as the inflow of Africans into Chinese cities. Future studies incorporating the views of African and Chinese government authorities and officials would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Africans experience deportation from China.

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