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From Mobility to Belonging: Social Integration of Zhuang Ethnic Minorities in an Urban Chinese Context

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social integration of the Zhuang ethnic minority floating population in Guangzhou, focusing on how individual factors and broader structural conditions shape migration motivations, survival strategies, and well-being outcomes. It addresses a gap in understanding why Zhuang floating migrants move to Guangzhou and how they adapt and develop a sense of belonging in the city. A mixed-method approach was applied. Semi-structured interviews with 25 Zhuang floating migrants in Panyu District explored their migration decisions, survival strategies, and integration experiences. A survey of 260 Zhuang floating migrants from a larger minority sample of 475 was analysed using a regression-based social integration index covering choice, survival, and well-being. Key variables include education, age, and household registration type. Ordinary least squares regression was used to test the expected positive effects of human capital and the negative effects of institutional barriers on integration outcomes. Higher education level and older age significantly enhance social integration across all dimensions, helping Zhuang floating migrants secure better work, develop skills, and experience greater life satisfaction. An agricultural household registration exerts a negative influence, especially on well-being, due to restricted access to public services and social benefits. Qualitative findings confirm that floating migrants are pushed by hometown hardships and pulled by urban opportunities and that integration evolves through education, skills, experience, networks, and supportive policies. This study offers the first comprehensive analysis of Zhuang migrant integration in a major city and introduces a tailored integration index. It shows that strengthening education, skills, and inclusive policies is essential for improving well-being and promoting equitable urban integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The high urbanisation rate in China is characterised by massive movements of ethnic minority in rural areas to cities. A good example of this trend is the city of Guangzhou, one of the major metropolises of southern China. The floating population of Guangzhou is recorded at 9.37 million people (out of 18.73 million residents in total), and approximately 827,000 of them are floating migrants belonging to ethnic minorities [1]. Guangzhou is selected as the target location for this study as it has the highest number of floating migrants in China [1]. The Zhuang, China's largest ethnic minority, constitute the biggest group of ethnic minority floating migrants in Guangzhou, accounting for approximately 40.9% of the city's floating ethnic minority population [1]. This significant occurrence is indicative of larger trends of urban-rural mobility of minorities, as a result of the quest to seek improved livelihoods and opportunities in the urban setting.

Traditional migration theories include the push-pull theory, which assumes that migration is caused by pressing factors in the origin area and attractions in the destination [1]. Economic reasons, such as escaping poverty and seeking wage increases, have long been treated as major causes of mobility [2]. Recent applications of push-pull reasoning further suggest that destination selection can depend on both sufficient incentives and necessary conditions, rather than on a simple ranking of preferences [3]. Nonetheless, the lived experiences of migrant minorities indicate that decisions involve more intricate influences than economics alone. In Guangzhou, the settlement geography of floating ethnic minorities is not determined only by aggregate economic performance. To illustrate, large minority migrant communities concentrate in Panyu District despite its lower economic performance relative to some central districts [4]. This indicates social networks, cultural familiarity, and informal job opportunities also influence migration destinations, not earnings opportunities only.

The industrial pattern in Guangzhou is another example that demonstrates how minority migrants are challenged in the structure. The major industries that are prevalent in the city, including finance, technology, and advanced manufacturing, are well-paid industries that require well-educated people. Having an average formal education compared to the urban hukou, Zhuang migrants are deliberately left out of these top

industries [1]. They are, instead, focusing on secondary jobs (construction, manufacturing) and tertiary jobs (commerce, logistics, low-end services), which have limited mobility and poor incomes [5, 6]. This is an important attempt to drive the minority migrants into the precarious segment of employment, especially due to human capital deficits and credentialing-induced barriers, which retain them in vulnerable socioeconomic positions.

In addition, institutional barriers are also important in hindering complete integration. The household registration (hukou) system of the Chinese system discriminates against rural and urban status and restricts access of migrants to urban services. The majority of Zhuang floating migrants have rural hukou and cannot access non-rural social welfare benefits, children's education, health, and official housing [6]. Empirical research suggests that floating ethnic minorities experience multidimensional levels of barriers to integration, low earnings, absence of social and health insurance, not being able to adapt socially or culturally, difficulties in religious and dietary adjustment, and insufficient educational opportunities among the migrant children [7]. These problems have been observed within such communities as the Hui and Uyghur that frequently face discrimination and marginalisation [6, 7]. The Zhuang experience might be mature that cannot be talked about in the open, but their high population in urban areas such as Guangzhou points to an impending reality that needs to be comprehended and dealt with their integration issues.

In spite of the unremitting rural-urban movement of minorities, there is an evident research gap on the familial migration decision-making and livelihoods perpetuation of ethnic minority migrants to the city, especially the Zhuang [8]. So-called blind migration, the migration of migrants without any definite plans or assistance, remains ongoing in China. The absence of a clear understanding of why Zhuang floating migrants go to places such as Guangzhou and how they can survive and adjust in such places, the policy makers may end up misplacing their resources, hence missing the potential of using these migrants. Poor knowledge may translate to poor policies, management and squandering of urban diversity and opportunities by both the migrants and host cities. In addition, in case of a lack of integration, such conditions can eventually only increase social inequalities and inter-ethnic tensions [1].

It is true that at present, many of the state-driven integration initiatives (most of them) are still one-size-fits-all and do not consider the spatial and developmental inequalities existing between regions of China, not to mention cultural and socioeconomic differences between the ethnic groups [1, 9]. An example is the rural territories with minority populations, such as Guangxi (Zhuang homeland), which are less educated and less advanced in infrastructure, and in many cases, they fail to compensate in case of migration to big cities [9]. Incidentally, the absence of specific integration steps aimed at integrating migrants into cities thereof compromises the survival capacities and welfare of migrants. Not only does this undermine personal migrant performance, but it also creates systemic issues regarding the aspirations of the Chinese population to be ethnically united, have harmony in urban space, and social stability [10, 11]. The focus of the particular experience of Zhuang floating migrants in Guangzhou is an academic and practical necessity, thus capable of informing more equal urban policy; it can also be utilised to aid social cohesion within the increasingly diverse field of urban China.

In a nutshell, this research will explore the migration reasons, integration, and well-being of Zhuang ethnic minority migrants in Guangzhou. The non-exploratory group targeting such a high number of people will serve to shed light on how mobility can result in a feeling (or lack) of belonging in the urban Chinese setting. The theoretical framework that has been used to guide the study is presented in the following sections, accompanied by a review of the literature and hypotheses related to the study, as well as the methodology, results and a discussion of the implications for theory and policy.

1.1 Theoretical framework and key variables

The conceptual framework of this research is given by the Social Integration Theory. In traditional sociological meaning, social integration can be defined as the process of interaction and integration of people of various backgrounds into a community of people holding together. The initial researchers, such as Park [12] and Park and Burgess [13], considered integration as the interdependence and mutual penetration of different classes that resulted in common experiences and a shared common culture [11]. The implication of this myth was a slow interweaving in contact and adjustment. The views of the mid-20th century, including multiculturalism theories, extended the concept of integration to enable plural identities, which implies that the minorities are not required to deny their cultural attributes but can still play a leading part in the society in which they live [14]. These conceptions were further elaborated in the late 20 th and early 21 st century in segmented integration theory, emphasising the fact that various migrant groups adopt different integration pathways based on their resources (human capital, social capital) and reception context (institutional openness, discrimination) [14].

In the situation of China, the philosophies of social integration promote adaptation to each other and ethnic peace [15, 16]. Chinese scholarship and policy do not believe in the total assimilation of culture, but according to the theory, there should be two-way accommodation: migrants and the host communities adapt to each other to achieve stability and unity [15]. The process of social integration in this case is conceptualised as being a multidimensional aspect that includes economic incorporation, sociocultural adjustment, and psychological connection. The positive results of the integration are also shown by the economic independence of migrants, along with their feeling of belonging and acceptance by the urban community.

The conceptualisation of social integration of Zhuang migrants in this study is a dynamic process according to which people can gradually enter the social, economic, and cultural space of a city and endeavour to maintain their traditional values and ethnic identity [17]. The process of integration is not regarded as a one-dimensional assimilation (which would destroy the uniqueness), but as a balance between preserving the cultural background and being a citizen of the major city. This approach goes hand in hand with multicultural integration models, which embrace cultural continuity and inclusion [18]. In the case of Zhuang migrants, integration is a process of constant psychosocial bargain between the demands of choice, survival, and wellbeing along the line of migration.

Three key theoretical dimensions (or variables) of social integration were defined for migrant minorities:

Choice: This dimension refers to the degree of perceived agency and opportunity that migrants have in sustaining mobility and shaping their settlement trajectory. In this study, it is operationalised through economic capacity, perceived job

security, and household dependency burdens, which together indicate whether migration is experienced as a proactive strategy or as a constrained necessity.

Survival: This dimension captures migrants' capacity to secure stable living conditions and meet everyday needs in the city. It reflects access to housing and services, skills development, and the resources required to remain in the destination and reduce vulnerability.

Wellbeing: This dimension reflects subjective inclusion and longer-term belonging. It is expressed through social interaction and acceptance, psychological security, and future intentions to remain or return, which together indicate whether migrants interpret urban life as meaningful and sustainable.

The above three dimensions are consistent with the notion that integration is a complex concept. Choice is associated with pre-integration reasons (why and how migration occurs), Survival with socio-economic integration (including in the day-to-day processes of the urban systems), and Wellbeing with subjective integration (feeling at home in the city). It is worth noting that the dimensions are mutually dependent, in that initial decisions may have an impact on the prospect of survival, and long-term well-being mainly depends on the survival outcome.

Through this framework, this research is in a better position to determine the effects that certain individual traits and structural conditions have on integration. Specifically, this research will analyse the interaction of personal characteristics such as education, age and gender, and institutional ones such as the hukou status with the above dimensions:

Education is an improvement of skills and knowledge, which may increase the ability of the migrants to secure employment (survival) and flexibility in urban living (choice and wellbeing). The educational attainment at the higher level can also help to adapt to the culture and be informed so that the integration would be enhanced [14, 18]. The hypothesis is that education has a positive impact on all dimensions of integration.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *The more the Zhuang migrants have higher education, the greater the social integration results (choice, survival, and well-being)*.

Ageing floating migrants tend to possess more working years and life experience, social networks and may spend more years in the city, and experience may be beneficial in their integration [11, 16]. But the young floating migrants may become acculturated more easily. Balance Field data revealed that age is positively associated with integration.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *The older (maturity/experience) Zhuang floating migrants, the more the social integration (across dimensions).*

The agricultural (rural) hukou of floating migrants prevents them, whereas non-agricultural (urban) hukou are less likely to be marginalised by most urban structures and facilities [6, 7]. It is foreseen that having a rural hukou will hinder incorporation to the point of wellbeing delivery because of the systemic hindrances.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *Aggressor: Agricultural (rural) hukou, as opposed to urban hukou, is a factor that is less likely to result in social integration, especially on the well-being dimension of social integration*.

Gender, marital status, and the distance of the migration are other factors that are taken into account during the analysis. Previous literature provides conflicting anticipations: some reports indicate that married floating migrants could integrate, or integrate more, socially (because the marriage makes them stable), and females and males would integrate differently (some research states that migrant women can build strong community ties, which help in the process, whereas in other studies they are vulnerable) [16]. Other factors that can affect integration through integration include migration distance (interprovincial or intra-provincial), and time in the city due to the duration of exposure and the proximity of ties with places of origin. These variables will be explored empirically but not formally.

It is through these associations that the Social Integration Theory was applied to a particular aspect, the Zhuang in Guangzhou, which associates the micro-level elements with the macro-level process of integration. This strategy is reminiscent of the segmented integration theory that highlights the outcome of integration as the product of an agency-structure interaction [16, 19]. In this paradigm, the view of personal agency would be education, skills and choices, and structural context would be hukou policies and labour market conditions.

Finally, this theoretical framing recognises that Zhuang floating migrants are active agents who aim to pursue improved opportunities of the urban system (mobility to belonging), but also perceives the limitations these people encounter in the urban system. Social integration, therefore, does not just occur automatically when one gets in the city, but it occurs through the process of constant negotiation of the initiatives of the floating migrants (to integrate and make their lives better) and the responsiveness of the urban milieu (inclusive or restrictive institutions and attitudes).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Migration drivers among ethnic minorities: Push and pull factors

Migration dynamics in rural-urban areas are often characterised by the use of a push-pull factor. Examples of push factors are poor conditions in the home country (e.g., poverty, inability to secure jobs, ineffective infrastructure, etc.), which force people to leave, whereas attractive factors in the destination country (e.g., job opportunities, improved services) are considered pull factors which drive people to migrate. Recent research implies that in the case of ethnic minorities in the country of origin, the push reasons to migrate are commonly affected by structural disadvantages in the native areas, as opposed to the pull reasons [19, 20]. That is, a good portion of the minority migrants remain behind since they are fleeing miseries back home, and not getting lured by the brilliant conditions in the city.

Historically, ethnic minority regions of China (including some areas of Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou (Zhuang), etc.) have been underdeveloped in terms of weak industrialisation, inadequate education and medical services, and geographic distance. The initial conditions of structural disadvantage have significant migration pressures [20]. As an illustration, it is observed that the highest rates of out-migration of minorities are observed in counties with few non-farm jobs and low education levels. On the same note, in Vietnam, it was found that ethnic minorities in the rural mountainous regions move to cities or upland economic areas mainly to avoid poverty in their areas of origin and land scarcity rather than to seek particular attractions in the urban areas [17]. One group of scholars investigated the ethnic minority young people living

in the Central Highlands in Vietnam, where education level largely influenced migration motivation (no choice at home) and education level [20]. Push factors may also be environmental stresses; pollution, land degradation, are examples of problems that cause rural families to move in pursuit of a healthier environment [21, 22].

The evidence of these outcomes is that migration among most minorities is not only a choice but a strategic one, a response to the challenging economic conditions at home and not necessarily voluntary in search of urban opportunities. The choice to migrate (Choice) must be usually based on. In the village where one of the interviewees of Zhuang lived, as he noted, there were hardly any jobs; he had no other option but to go out and make some money. This is in line with the rest of the literature: areas of origin that fail to support livelihood necessitate the enticement of migrating as a survival mechanism [23].

The same trend is reflected in comparative cases in the world. The mobility across tribal populations in India has traditionally been low, although following the 2000s, there has been an out-migration of people from villages because of low opportunities in villages. A single study of a tribal community of Tripuri in Tripura found out that on migration, the income increased, but the floating migrants also experienced instability in employment and disadvantages among schooling children, suggesting that it is the push factors (lack of jobs and education locally) that drove them out of the community, but then the floating migrants would encounter challenges in integration in the city [24]. Lack of local opportunities (even as urban demands (jobs, education) also drive these processes) is similarly a source of internal migration between the indigenous groups from rural to the cities in Malaysia [23, 25]. In South Africa, the underdeveloped former homelands migrate into urban areas in search of employment. [26] observe that poverty in the homeland area drives people out, and once at the receiving end, they face barriers to integration, such as access to housing and services.

Thailand and Southeast Asia. In Thailand and cross-border minor migration, push processes are universal. According to studies on the migration of hill tribe minorities and the migrants of nearby countries in Thailand, the push factors are determined by the abject poverty, a lack of land and security in the native lands [22]. Cities may have low wages, but as a contrast to almost zero chances at home, they are decent.

Overall, in different settings, the concept of escape, as a significant theme of ethnic minorities' migration, is noted to be present [11, 27]. Urban glamour does not have much attraction to migrants, and the lack of certain things in their homelands (jobs, stability, prospects) drives them. According to this literature, the first places of appreciation to comprehend the results of integration are that migrants who left their homeland in desperation might enter the city with lower resources and a greater urgency of survival.

Listing these observations, the research project will assume that the decision of the Zhuang migrants to migrate to Guangzhou is largely driven by the push factors such as burdensome financial demands and decreasing livelihood opportunities in Guangxi (the home province). This will be proved in their stories and in the portrait of the sample (e.g., most possess rural origins and provide dependents). This will be analysed in the qualitative findings. Also, the literature suggests that successful integration can be conditional upon the capacity of migrants to compensate for the shortfalls that they bring with them to their home (low human capital, etc.), which can be connected to the interest in education and other variables in integration outcomes.

2.2 Integration outcomes and determinants

Although decisions of migration pre-condition the situation, there are other aspects of the integration of floating migrants into the city of destination. Recent studies have also highlighted the fact that not all forms of integration are automatic and are predisposed or predetermined by different circumstances:

Human capital is repeatedly mentioned as a factor of integration. Skilled and better-educated floating migrants can find more appealing jobs, can better adjust to the culture, and receive information, which helps them to get integrated more easily [24, 28]. A literature review conducted by Lai et al. [29] revealed that low education has a critical impact on the ability of floating migrants to integrate into urban areas since it constrains the migrants to informal jobs and lowers their ability to navigate urban organisations. On the contrary, recent research demonstrates that minority migrants who obtained at least a higher education are more integrated, they earn higher, live better, and report more satisfaction in life in comparison to those with minimal education [30]. The education also increases awareness of the right and access to services, increasing the ability of migrants to use the available resources of the state [30]. Thereby, it is anticipated that education has been of valuable support to the Zhuang migrants, and this renders the program a government initiative which introduces cost reduction in terms of integration. The combination of this literature and the data suggests that the process of integration is not a solitary conflict, but the institutional openness leads to better results among migrants: in cases when cities take inclusive practices, migrant results become better [25] To be an adequate driver of the study (H1) helping Zhuang migrants to do better in terms of their survival (finding better jobs) and wellbeing (increasing their income and gaining confidence) [28, 31].

Age and experience may also play a role in integration, whereby older floating migrants (or those who have been living longer in the city) gain knowledge in urban systems and end up widening their social networks with time. Research into migrant health and migrant integration in China states that migrants become more assimilated with time after experiencing some problems at the beginning. Migrants who are older or migrated earlier tend to show higher integration indicators [31, 32]. As an example, a survey established that the longer the migrant is old, the greater the improvement in the integration score, which is probably because of higher experience in living in the city [32]. This is in line with the hypothesis (H2): age (proxy experience) will positively correlate with integration. In fact, regression analysis is used to see whether old Zhuang migrants possess greater scores in terms of choice and survival, possibly because of skills accumulated and linkages in the host countries. (Strictly speaking, the distinction can be gradual; it does not mean that youth are incapable of a learning experience, but that experience will give them a certain edge).

Structural determinants of integration are often discussed as institutional and policy factors. In China, these are strongly shaped by the hukou system. Many studies describe the rural and urban hukou division as producing a two-tier citizenship structure, in which rural migrants are not treated as full urban residents [33]. Hukou status is closely linked to access to

schooling, medical services, affordable housing, and formal employment [34]. Migrants without local urban hukou often face exclusion from basic services or higher access costs, which weakens integration. Recent national evidence also indicates that inequalities in health rights accessibility are associated with lower levels of urban integration among minority rural migrants [23]. In this study, household registration type is included as a key explanatory variable. Hypothesis 3 (H3) expects that institutional restrictions to full urban inclusion will be negatively associated with agricultural hukou status, particularly through well-being outcomes.

Policy support programs can also have an effect on integration besides hukou. China has local initiatives in some of its cities, such as the migration skills training of migrants, migrant children's education, or even community centres to support social inclusion. Literature assessing these is rather limited, but it has been proposed that positive policies and acceptance in the community enhance integration [18, 26]. As an example, Luo et al. [24] maintain that when migrant workers are assisted in reaching urban social organisations and social services, the latter act faster, supporting the integration of migrant workers into the mainstream society. The qualitative results of the government programs of Guangzhou will be observed, such as the labour export services connecting workers in the rural areas with jobs in the city.

Another factor that has been found in the studies is social capital and networks. Jobs and emotional support can be easily offered to floating migrants who have strong ties to their community (i.e., clan networks or associations in the city), thus facilitating the integration process [29]. The shock of the urban transition can be mitigated with co-ethnic networks, which offer information about housing to ethnic minorities, job connections and a sense of belonging. Nonetheless, extreme dependence on ethnic enclaves may as well restrict wider integration, so long as the floating migrants are socially isolated by the host mainstream [14]. Bonding with the fellow migrants (e.g., hometown associations) is typical of the Chinese context; however, the introduction of ties (bridging ties) with the local urban residents is essential to the long-term inclusion [34]. The statistics note that Zhuang migrants mostly interact with other Zhuang or other migrants, which assists in some ways, but does not enhance their stronger assimilation in Guangzhou society [35]. This can be aligned with the results of studies, which claim that the social capital of bonding (connection within the migrant community) is high, and the social capital of bridging (connection to local people) is comparatively low among many migrant groups in China [9]. Social interactions indicators (e.g., main friends circle) were also added to the descriptive analysis to pick up this dynamic, although the main hypotheses are directed to the more quantifiable aspects of education, age and hukou. Recent evidence also shows that social networking sites can support acculturation by helping migrants maintain ties and access information and support in the destination [36].

In light of the above, it is formally stated that the hypotheses to be tested with the quantitative data are:

H1: Educational level relates positively to the social integration outcomes (choice, survival and wellbeing). The Zhuang floating migrants who are well-educated will record better scores on indices of integration when compared to those with lesser education.

H2: Social integration does not have a negative relationship with age. The level of integration amongst older Zhuang migrants (who perhaps possess more experience in their work/life) or those who have lived longer in urban areas will be higher compared to younger migrants.

H3: The hukou status influences the integration of hukou holders significantly: namely, rural (agricultural) hukou status is correlated with decreased integration, particularly, the well-being dimension. Those migrants who had local urban hukou (against none in the sample) would be more integrated.

Both theory and prior empirical evidence guide these hypotheses. The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates the framework linking these factors to integration dimensions.

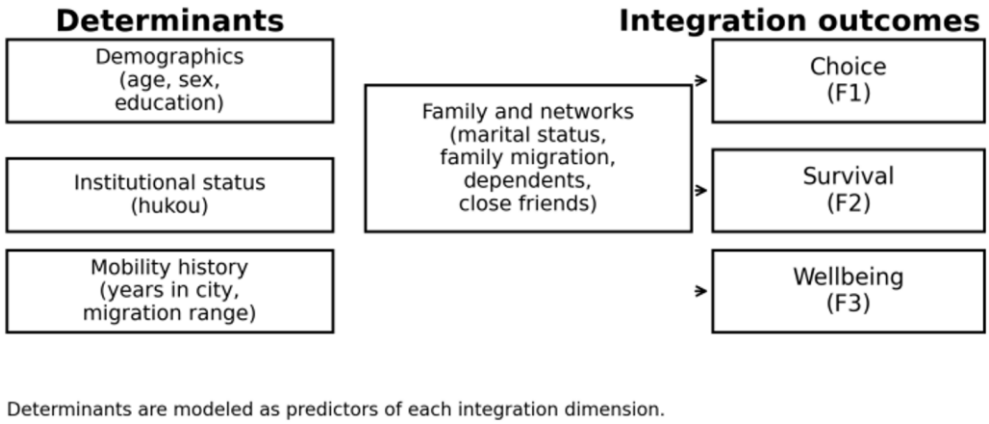

Figure 1. Conceptual model linking integration determinants to the choice, survival, and well-being dimensions of social integration

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design and approach

This study used a mixed-methods design with both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the social integration of Zhuang migrants in a holistic manner. As a qualitative approach, one was able to explore personal experiences, motivations, and adaptive strategies of migrants; in a quantitative approach, relevant evidence was given on the factors contributing to the outcome of integration in a measurable way.

Semi-structured and face-to-face in-depth qualitative research with Zhuang migrants was used in order to explore lived experiences. The proposed qualitative exploration is based on phenomenological and ethnographic schools and orientations and seeks to adopt the point of view of migration and the integration process as perceived by the migrants

themselves. The qualitative data assist in explaining why and how some aspects are important (e.g., why the education provided to a certain migrant led to his/her upward mobility, or why having hukou status leads to some stress in everyday life).

A survey instrument was developed by us in order to gather data to build a Social Integration Index with the three dimensions (choice, survival, and well-being). The survey has used demographics and indicators that are relevant to each dimension (described below). On this basis, statistical testing (descriptive statistics and regression modelling) of the hypotheses (H1-H3) was provided. The given positivist dimension enables us to extrapolate the patterns and determine the relevance of associations among the variables, such as education and integration outcomes.

The triangulation of both the qualitative and quantitative evidence makes the study more reliable and detailed in the results; the qualitative information assists in the interpretation of the quantitative evidence, and the quantitative evidence helps to measure the commonness and scale of the observed effects on the results of interviews.

3.2 Research context and site

Within Guangzhou, this research focuses on the Panyu District. Panyu hosts multiple manufacturing, logistics, and service clusters and has become a key settlement area for floating migrants, including ethnic minority migrants, through a combination of labour demand and migrant networks [37]. However, preference for Panyu is not only economic. As noted above, proximity to co-ethnic communities and informal recruitment channels can make particular districts attractive even when aggregate economic indicators are lower than in central areas [4].

Guangzhou, and, especially, Panyu allowed observing both denoting and connotative dynamics of the push and pull dynamics. The types of jobs that Zhuang floating migrants (who may have middle school education or even less) are able to receive are the types of jobs that can be found at Panyu in factories, construction sites, and service areas [9]. Meanwhile, Panyu possesses the presence of active migrant community organisations and labour recruitment programs, which is why they make it a microcosm to examine the pathways of integration. During the fieldwork, migrant neighbourhoods, markets, and training centres around the district were visited to recruit participants and observe daily interactions.

3.3 Sampling and participants

Potential migrants, in this study, are those who intend to migrate to urban centres for work and household advancement. The target population, therefore, includes adults with working capacity, with ages typically ranging from 20 to 39, and with education levels spanning primary schooling to college training [38].

To reach respondents, researchers relied on contacts from local communities in Panyu and on assistance from ethnic minority organisations and ethnic employment communities. During recruitment, researchers also relied on referrals and snowballing among Zhuang-speaking residents, and a Zhuang dialect version of the interview prompts was used to support participation for those who were more comfortable in the minority language.

The quantitative survey employed semi-structured questions and was administered face-to-face. From a broader field survey of ethnic minority floating migrants, 260 Zhuang respondents were selected for the present analysis. The sample profile is broadly consistent with major demographic characteristics of migrant workers in Guangdong, such as a concentration among young adults and a predominance of lower and middle levels of formal schooling [39]. This correspondence supports the plausibility of the sample for the study purpose, but it does not remove the limitations associated with non-probability recruitment and district-specific fieldwork. The findings should therefore be interpreted as evidence about patterns within the studied community, rather than as population estimates for all Zhuang migrants.

3.4 Data collection

The interviews were conducted throughout 25 days during July of 2024 (one interview per day on average). The interviews were approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, where an interview protocol was used to discuss some vital aspects:

Reasons why people left Guangxi (or other areas of their home), and decided to go to Guangzhou; whether they were affected by friends/family networks; expectations when migrating.

Employment history in Guangzhou (type of jobs, how obtained), Skip and Spend, housing status, possible social services access (medical care, insurance, children in school, etc.), any discrimination and trouble in everyday life (language, cultural problems) or not.

A sense of belonging or not belonging in Guangzhou; social network (with the locals or mainly fellow migrants); community or religious participation; psychological wellbeing (stress, satisfaction, future intentions, whether to settle or to go home again).

The members have been advised to share their own experiences and thoughts. The interviews were recorded on audio with permission and transcribed. Their transcripts (in Chinese) were subsequently translated into English, which was to be analysed as and where necessary. During the process, the researcher considered the principle of confidentiality and comfort, such as when interviewing the female participants; some of the interviews were carried out by a female research assistant, to foster trust on matters of sensitivity.

The survey instrument was created in such a way that it could quantitatively gauge integration on the three dimensions:

Indicators of choice dimension: The income monthly (as an indicator of opportunity to improve the economy) was included, working stability (present employment and the probability of obtaining a job, measured by a Likert scale on the experiences of ease of getting a job), and family dependents (how many children and elderly dependents they are supporting, measured by a Likert scale of ease of getting a job). Respondents were requested to specify the number of children and elderly family members whom the migrant pays financially; for example, the average number in the sample was approximately 2.14 children and 1.11 aged dependents [40].

Housing type (attended to private rental, factory dormitory, employer-provided, etc.), attendance at any vocational training (yes/no), monthly living expenses, and number of

items enrolled in under the social insurance (i.e., pension, health insurance, unemployment insurance, etc.). These translate into the way the migrants are coping with their livelihoods. As an example, the majority of Zhuang migrants in the sample are in rented rooms in urban villages (mean of a common housing type code = -4 with 1 denoting employer dorm, 5 denoting commercial apartment, and the average = 4.0 showing private rentals) [39]. Another parameter measured was the involvement of any social security; the level of engagement was also low, as the average participation is only below one type of insurance per individual [41].

Social interaction patterns (or whether their core social network is populated by fellow Zhuang/townsfolk or a more mixed group; arguably, frequency of socialising), intention to stay long-term in Guangzhou (binary indicator, e.g., Will you be living in Guangzhou, the foreseeable future?) and local acceptance (measured on a scale). As an example, it is discovered that a significant share of Zhuang migrants is willing to stay in Guangzhou (the average intention score was more than one on a 0 to 1 measure, i.e. majority of them were willing to stay) and they tend to be somehow accepted by the natives [28], even though their close friends are mostly fellow migrants (they were more likely to be of the same hometown).

Independent/control variables were also collected in terms of demographic variables (education level, age, sex, marital status) and migration background (hukou type, migration distance passed as intra- and inter-province, years in Guangzhou).

Obtaining the survey data was done through structured questionnaires, where the study participants were approached by trained interviewers (in Mandarin; where necessary, clarifications in Zhuang were made). Since some migrants have literacy limits, the interviewer would read the questions and the answers were taken. They were not forced to participate, and respondents volunteered.

3.5 Data analysis

Transcripts of the interviews were assessed by the thematic analysis, which was supported by the theoretical dimensions of choice, survival, and well-being. Some deductive coding was conducted (applying the framework to find out migration motive segments, survival strategy, and experiences of integration) and inductive coding (letting new themes emerge in the data). As an illustration, the sub-themes such as financial burden to family, skill upgrading and institutional support came out under the overarching theme of salvation strategies. And under wellbeing, there were such sub-themes as sense of progress, cultural belonging. The assistance of NVivo software was utilised in coding. Coded themes were compared between various interviewees, and common patterns and divergences were identified. Illustrative representative quotes were taken. Triangulation among researchers was to be conducted by ensuring that a second coder triangulated theme-identification of transcripts on a sample basis, any disagreements were discussed and resolved, and this further enhanced the reliability of the qualitative interpretations.

Stata 18 was used to analyse the survey data. First, three composite indices were constructed to represent the choice, survival, and well-being dimensions of social integration. Each dimension was built from a small set of theoretically informed items. For example, the choice index combined monthly income, perceived job security, and household dependency burden (number of children and older dependents), with the dependency burden recoded so that higher index values indicate fewer constraints. The survival index incorporated housing type, vocational training participation, monthly living expenses, and participation in social insurance. The well-being index captured social interaction patterns, perceived acceptance, and future intentions to settle or return. Before aggregation, items were recoded so that higher values consistently indicate more favourable integration conditions and then normalised to a common metric to avoid scale effects. Dimension indices were computed as unweighted composites and then normalised. For regression analysis, each index was standardised to facilitate coefficient interpretation.

Subsequently, multivariate regression was conducted as each of the integration dimension indices consisted of a dependent variable. The independent variables included education (years of schooling or level in ordinal form, years), sex (male = 1 vs non-male = 0), age (years), Hukou type (agricultural = 1 vs non-agricultural = 0), migration range (cross-province = 1 vs within province = 0), family migration (migrated with family = 1 vs alone = 0), marital status (married = 1 vs otherwise = 0), when in Guangzhou (in years of experience, was a continuous variable). This model specification has been defined in line with the past research on the determinants of migrant integration [42] and makes it possible to test H1-H3. The regression variables used in multivariate models are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Regression variables in multivariate models

Variable Type	Variable Name	Coding / Measurement
Dependent Variables	F1 Choice Index F2 Survival Index F3 Wellbeing Index	Choice index (F1): monthly income, job stability, dependency burden (children and aged dependents, reverse-coded). Survival index (F2): housing type, vocational training, living expenses, social insurance participation, service access. Wellbeing index (F3): social interaction patterns, perceived acceptance, psychological security, settlement intention. Items were recoded so higher values indicate stronger integration, normalised to a common scale, aggregated into dimension indices, and standardised (mean = 0, SD = 1) for regression.
Independent Variables	Education	Years of schooling or ordinal levels
	Sex	Male = 1, Female = 0
	Age	Years
	Hukou Type	Agricultural = 1, Non-agricultural = 0
	Migration Range	Cross-province = 1, Within province = 0
	Family Migration	Migrated with family = 1, Alone = 0
	Marital Status	Married = 1, Otherwise = 0
	Years in Guangzhou	Continuous variable

Conventional diagnostic tests were performed to assess the variance inflation factors (VIFs) to research multicollinearity (VIFs <2, which indicates that no serious multicollinearity existed); and robust standard errors were applied to explain any heteroscedasticity. R-squared was used to determine model fit.

3.6 Reliability and validity considerations

In the qualitative part, credibility was promoted through establishing rapport with the participants (e.g., speaking their dialect, maintaining anonymity) in order to make them open up and provide real-life experiences. It further triangulated some of the factual assertions (e.g., policy information) with the official sources to confirm the accounts of participants. Thick description in findings guarantees transferability because it gives an understanding of the results by providing the context to understand them.

Further, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values ranging from 0.60 to 0.72 across the three dimensions and a total index alpha of 0.78, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Kaiser Meyer Olkin measures and Bartlett tests indicated that the item sets were suitable for component extraction. The indices were then standardised (mean = 0, SD = 1) for regression analysis.

Triangulation is also applied by the use of qualitative and quantitative methods to provide findings validation. An example is that when the regression has indicated education as a significant predictor of wellbeing, counter-evidence can be found in interviews through the migrants attributing the improvement in their lives in the city to the acquisition of new skills or knowledge. This validation methodology is made up of mixed methods, making the study conclusions stronger.

The research ethics board of the university granted ethical approval. The purpose of the study and rights of all study participants were explained to them, and oral consent (interviews) or written consent (survey) was secured. The data was saved in a secure place and was utilised in research only.

The results are provided in the following section, and the first qualitative data is given through the general understanding of why they migrated and why they have to survive as migrants, then the quantitative data of the factors affecting the results of the integration is discussed based on descriptive statistics of the characteristics of the sample of Zhuang migrants.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Migration motivations and facilitators (qualitative findings)

Core Economic Motives and Aspirations: Interviews established that the major driver of the push factor of the Zhuang floating migrants was economic strain back home in conjunction with the attraction of the labour market in Guangzhou. A large majority (20 of 25 interviewed) of the interviewees mentioned income and employment opportunities as their first motivation toward migrating. Some of them had agrarian origins in Guangxi, where the farm revenue was low; hence, there were no non-farm jobs available. To these floating migrants, Guangzhou was a location where they could earn a living. In addition to subsistence, though, a spirit of ambition began to appear: migrants regard the city as a place of personal development and career rise, not necessarily making money. According to one 24-year-old female, she said:

"I never had the opportunity to become more than a farmer or do any odd jobs in my hometown. On arriving in Guangzhou, I was employed as a parcel courier. However, I observed a friend having an opportunity to acquire computer literacy and advance into an office position. That was my inspiration, I would like to walk in her footsteps. That's my goal and motivation." (Case 3, Female, from Guizhou).

This quotation explains why, in addition to the initial economic reason, migrants pursue their career improvement and more ambitious life ambitions once they are exposed to the opportunities of the city (self-realisation). The variety of the economy of Guangzhou presents opportunities for eliminating manual work and the emergence of skilled workers. In fact, a few interviewees expressed that they developed new challenges (e.g. acquiring basic IT skills, not making a living in the factory, and building a small business) that were not only in the financial area but also in the psychological one, satisfaction with progress. The observation implies that pull factors such as professional development opportunities have a significant role in terms of the continued decision by the migrants to remain in the city. The levels of integration also increase as the floating migrants feel more confident not only to survive but to achieve urbanisation goals in the long term.

Another facilitator that was often cited was the encouragement of the local government programs in ensuring that migration is a viable and less risky decision. Around one out of five among the interviewees had obtained employment or training under an organised labour import program. As an instance, a Guangxi lady aged 27 years told:

"I have gotten to know about my present factory employment with the help of the labour export office of my country. They essentially linked us up to employers in the city of Guangzhou. It saved me much hassle in search of employment. The fact that the government was supporting such programs made me realise that going to Guangzhou was a better choice because I would be safer and more secure." (Case 7, Female, from Guangxi).

Besides assisting the floating migrants to get houses immediately they arrived, such institutional support instilled psychological confidence in the migrants. The inclusion of the official channels made it less uncertain and created confidence that they were not going to be abused. Others also said that training programs or recruitment fairs were set up by migrants. The stories above demonstrate that proactive measures (e.g., labour matching, skills workshops, educational aspects of the law) act as facilitators of integration, which essentially eases the process of landing in the city. This is what comparative literature implies: when it is the case that destination cities provide systemic assistance to floating migrants, the migrants can become more competent in their abilities to integrate by feeling more secure and part of the community [23]. Government interventions became both a safeguarding tool (protecting migrants against the most atrocious offences) and an empowering tool (providing a path to further opportunity) in the case [43].

When considered collectively, the qualitative materials on motivations indicate a two-dimensional discourse: The Zhuang migrants are both pressured by what is happening in their homes and driven by the hopes of an actually better future, and the efficient integration becomes achievable by the

fact that the latter becomes actually fulfilled in terms of the promises and the support by the institutions in the metropolis.

4.2 Family obligations and hometown constraints

The migration choice of the Zhuang people is strongly entrenched in two mutually supporting push factors, i.e., family monetary strain and hometown structural limitation. These were common themes of the interviews.

The majority of Zhuang migrants have high family orientation cultures, with one of the values being to support their extended family. This pattern is consistent with research on left-behind children in rural China, which highlights persistent educational and caregiving barriers that households attempt to mitigate through migration strategies [44]. The sample size (64 per cent) was married, and a large number had children or ageing parents who relied on them. One of the main drives was the economic need to support the family. A young mother explained:

"I could not find any employment back home. The income that my husband earned through farming was not sufficient to support the entire family. There are two little children and his old parents to be considered. We arrived in Guangzhou with one aim in order to get more; however, now we deliver food orders in the city with our own hands." (Case 1, Female, from Gansu).

Another 30-year-old man told such a story:

"I am the only son. The medical costs of my parents are high, and they are ageing. I am in construction during the day and driving ride-share at night... every single dollar I make benefits them (them)." (Case 23, Male, from Guangdong).

These testimonials are important in highlighting that migration is a household strategy of making a living and not an individual pursuit. Zhuang floating migrants are obliged to address their families out of poverty or finance the healthcare and educational expenses of their relatives [43]. The responsibility to care for the aged or the child lies with the family members in rural minority regions that have little or no public welfare. Migration is a resolution to these demands; not to migrate can be to default in his duty as a son/daughter or parent. Therefore, earning money on behalf of the family was not the only economic reason but a moral requirement quoted by interviewees. This type of family-focused push factor has been observed in other literature (e.g., the rural migrants in China in general, family demands are more important than individual ones), and it is especially severe in the case of the minority migrants who come from poor areas where many generations of people depend on migrant remittances [26]. The implication is that migrants come to the city with serious financial pressure, and it may affect their attitude to work and integration (usually, generating income is the highest priority).

The second push factor is that in the community of origin, the hometown Predicament, there is the unavailability of viable opportunities. Most Zhuang are either village or small town inhabitants of Guangxi (and some of Guizhou or Yunnan). The picture that interviewees developed about these places was rather similar: they were underdeveloped economies where subsistence agriculture is prevalent, there are hardly any industries or companies, the infrastructure is lacking, and public services are scarce. One male migrant lamented:

"My home town has very few jobs other than farming. There are very few factories or business ventures where the local youths are employed. You can have a desire to learn something, and you have no place to apply it. There was no option but to relocate to Guangzhou to get a job." (Case 12, Male, from Guangxi).

Another high school graduate explained that even the factory jobs that paid low wages could not be attained in his hometown:

"I do not have anything other than a primary school education, and I am not skilled. In my home country, I could not get good jobs. In my area, factories were few, and whatever opportunity that came would get filled by locals who had contacts... I could not get any chances." (Case 10, Male, from Guangdong).

These testimonies advocate the fact that a single economic system in the rural minority areas, most of the time, mono-crop farming or extracting industries do not create job opportunities among the youth [45]. The level of education and training at local levels is restricted (considering the fact that Case 10 points out that they lack skills and do not have a location to learn them), which makes the problem even worse, and the youths have idle days or do the work that thematises them further. This has seen migration as the only avenue through which one can escape stagnation. The phrases heard many times by the interviewees were, no, but to go out, as their choice to migrate. This is indicative of structural push: even the ones that may have wanted to remain near home were forced to move because there were no opportunities and services (e.g., some claimed that there were no hospitals, and that also caused them to be in a city to get better healthcare access to their family).

In general, these push factors, such as economic responsibility towards the family and the absence of local employment, establish a significant pressure pushing Zhuang to Guangzhou. However, most notably, they predetermine the scenario of integration: migrants come under pressure to make money fast, with the background of low levels of development of human capital. This implies that they tend to get into low-paying jobs within the urban area and are forced to adapt a rural lifestyle to an urban one within a very short period. This interaction preconditions the integration challenges that are reported in the future. In one word, as one of the participants explained, "we come because we must care about the loved ones and we cannot care because we just cannot support our villages." The literature agrees that such floating migrants do not come to the city as motivated by the urban allure but are forced by the rural challenges, which may shape their city experiences [2].

Before examining the hypothesis tests, a descriptive profile of the Zhuang floating population was presented in the sample, which provides context for their integration status.

The Zhuang migrants are predominantly young, with a mean age of about 28 years, and the largest age cohort is in their early 20s (20 to 24 years, making up 36.6%). The sample is female-majority (55% female vs 45% male), indicating significant female participation in migration. This slight female skew aligns with trends of increasing female rural-urban migration in China, as women often take service jobs in cities. A strong majority (around 74%) are in the 20 to 39 age range, consistent with official data on the youthfulness of migrants.

Nearly two-thirds (73.8%) of the Zhuang migrants are married, while about 23.8% are unmarried (the remainder divorced or widowed). This high marriage rate suggests many are migrating as couples or family units rather than single individuals. Indeed, family households predominate:

approximately 73% reported living in family-based arrangements (with spouse and/or children), whereas 27% live in shared or collective setups. The average migrant supports about 1.105 elderly and 2.141 children back home (often these are parents and children left behind), highlighting the earlier point about heavy family obligations.

Educational attainment is low overall. Over one-third (34.6%) of Zhuang migrants in the sample are effectively illiterate or did not finish primary school, and an additional ~35.3% have only a middle school (junior high) education. About 12.6% reached high school, and only 7.5% have any higher education (junior college or above). This distribution starkly contrasts with that of urban natives in Guangzhou and underscores a human capital gap. Such low education levels limit the types of jobs available to these migrants and pose integration challenges (e.g., difficulty navigating bureaucratic procedures, inability to speak Mandarin fluently in some cases). It also justifies the focus on education as a determinant in the regression analysis, since variation in education (though limited at the high end) could significantly stratify integration outcomes.

An overwhelming 93% hold agricultural hukou (rural household registration) and correspondingly about 87.3% migrated from outside Guangdong Province (primarily Guangxi, and some from neighbouring Yunnan or Guizhou). The remaining ~12.7% moved from within Guangdong (likely Zhuang from Guangxi who had already relocated to nearby Guangdong locations, or Zhuang minorities native to Guangdong's rural areas). Most floating migrants originate from South China (58%) and Southwest China (27%) regions: essentially reflecting Guangxi's location and some spillover from Yunnan/Guizhou. This confirms that the sample largely comprises cross-provincial migrants adjusting to a new province and often a different linguistic environment (Cantonese in Guangzhou versus Zhuang or Southwestern Mandarin back home).

Consistent with their education, Zhuang migrants predominantly work in blue-collar and service jobs. In the sample, about 44.8% are employed in secondary industries (manufacturing, construction) and 51.5% in tertiary sectors (wholesale/retail trade, hospitality, logistics, domestic work). Very few hold white-collar positions; only 14.8% reported being in professional/technical roles, and a mere 1.1% work as civil servants. The largest specific occupational categories were commercial/service workers (~30%) and production/transportation labour (~26%). Additionally, a number are in informal employment, such as food delivery couriers, ride-share drivers, street vendors: these were captured qualitatively, even if not fully, in the formal survey categories. Such jobs are typically low-paying and unstable, reflecting limited upward mobility so far.

The income distribution is skewed towards low earnings. Over 38% earn below RMB 3,200 per month (roughly USD $450), and about 50% earn RMB 3,201 to 6,400 ($450–$900). Only ~12% earn above RMB 6,400 (>$900). For context, these figures cluster around or below the official average income levels for urban Guangzhou, indicating that most Zhuang migrants occupy the lower rungs of the urban economy. Their monthly expenditures average around RMB 2,998, with a notable pattern that food expenses exceed housing costs on average: many live in inexpensive shared accommodations, but food and daily necessities still take up a large portion of their budget, leaving little disposable income or savings.

The vast majority of the respondents live in rented private housing, typically in Guangzhou's "urban villages" or factory dormitories. The average housing situation code (4.038 on a 1 to 5 scale) corresponds to renting a room or apartment in an urban village or peri-urban area. Only a handful have employer-provided dormitory housing or have managed to purchase a home. Housing quality varies, but many described cramped conditions, sharing with other migrants to save on rent. Such living environments, while economical, can limit migrants' interaction with mainstream urban residents (they often cluster in migrant communities) and affect their comfort and sense of belonging.

Socially, Zhuang floating migrants tend to rely on ethnic or hometown networks. Many reported that their close friends in Guangzhou are "fellow townspeople" (often meaning another Zhuang from Guangxi). This reliance provides emotional support and practical help (e.g., sharing job leads). On the positive side, 58% expressed an intention to remain long-term in Guangzhou (either settling permanently or at least for many more years) as opposed to planning to leave soon. Moreover, respondents generally feel accepted by residents at least to a basic degree: the average self-rated acceptance was above the midpoint. This suggests that outright discrimination may not be commonly felt, though subtle exclusion could still exist. Notably, formal civic participation (such as community meetings or voting in local elections) is essentially nil for migrants without local hukou; none of the respondents was involved in urban governance processes. Their social integration thus happens informally through work and community networks rather than institutional civic inclusion.

In summary, the descriptive profile portrays Zhuang migrants in Guangzhou as a young, family-driven, low-income, and low-educated group, predominantly employed in labour-intensive sectors and living on the margins of the urban economy. They have strong ties to their ethnic community and demonstrate resilience and willingness to integrate (as indicated by intentions to stay and perceptions of acceptance), yet they face clear structural disadvantages. These characteristics provide a backdrop for interpreting the subsequent analytical results. The migrants' limited education and rural hukou status, in particular, stand out as potential barriers to full integration, whereas their youth and intent to stay could be assets (implying potential to learn and adapt over time). The next part of the results will quantify how these factors actually correlate with integration outcomes in the data.

4.3 Current state of social integration

The data obtained in the surveys were used to calculate the scores of each dimension of social integration (choice, survival, wellbeing) of each respondent. It is based on those descriptive statistics (mean values of key indicators) that summarise the general integration position of the Zhuang migrants and give us an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of their integration relative to each other.

General Characteristics (Context for Integration): The profile of the 260 Zhuang respondents indicates a young workforce with modest formal schooling. Most respondents have completed lower secondary schooling or below, and the average age is in the late twenties. Women constitute a slight majority. Most respondents are married and hold agricultural hukou. A large share migrated with family members, and the mean length of residence in Guangzhou is under four years. The sample also includes a sizeable proportion of cross-

province migrants from Guangxi.

Such general characteristics create a difficult position of integration: low education level and rural hukou can be a barrier to economic and social integration, whereas youth and family presence could be more helpful in creating better adaptation by providing support and an extended future time perspective in the urban area.

The distribution of monthly earnings suggests generally limited economic discretion, with most respondents concentrated in the lower income brackets and only a minority reporting higher earnings. Perceived job security is moderate, and many respondents report that household dependency obligations influence migration decisions and constrain flexibility. These patterns indicate that, for many Zhuang migrants, mobility is shaped by a combination of opportunity seeking and necessity-driven constraints rather than unconstrained choice.

Homes are mostly occupied by rented private constructions, with the evidence that the average housing code is 4.038 (4 being the case of the homestead, which are privately rented houses or shops in an urban village or others). This implies that they are sheltered, but it is usually unofficial or employer-anticipated shelter. It also, in most cases, suggests overcrowding, since most rent one room, or even share an apartment, to reduce expenses.

Little participation in any kind of skills training or adult education is very low, with an average of only 0.312 (1 would indicate that they participated in all training, that is, took part in at least one training). This implies that only a small proportion of the migrants (31 per cent) have attended any vocational training programs. Most people have not been given such a chance (or time) to upgrade skills using formal means. This may be because of long working hours, information unavailability or a cost factor. The dismal training adoption rates are evidence of the fact that there is a need to enhance their human capital after migration.

The mean monthly migrant expenditure is Y=2. 998. In this, the statistics show that the average housing costs are less than food costs. Qualitatively, most of the migrants said that they use a significant share of their income to buy food (particularly when they engage in manual labour, which demands hearty meals) and to maintain a very low cost of getting a place (which is achieved by inhabiting less expensive quarters). The Food > housing statistic could also indicate that food > housing among many people who share their housing costs with multiple people. It implies strict budgetary control in terms of which even fundamental needs use the majority of the income, leaving little for savings.

Social Security defines participation in traded social security (pension, medical insurance, and unemployment insurance) as less than desirable; the mean number of types of insurance that migrants subscribe to is 0.802 (out of the five most common types, presumably). Most of them probably have basic medical insurance or none at all. This is due to low enrolment because of the hukou restriction and the type of employment that they are engaged with (most of them are informal or temporary workers, therefore, employers may not enrol them on social insurance, and they cannot easily enrol themselves on the city on their own). It is their safety net is not as strong; in case of illness, injury, or old age, they will not have much support in the city, which may be an impediment to integration and wellbeing in the long term.

All in all, the dimension of survival implies Zhuang migrants living by their wits (sheltering themselves and making ends meet) but with minimal margins. Instead, they survive by living frugally (frugal housing, spending little outside necessity, etc.), and work hard, instead of the supposedly better abilities (acquired by only a small number of people receiving training) or institutional assistance (poor social insurance formulations). Such an unstable mode of survival is a source of stress and vulnerability, and it encourages the significance of factors such as income and education, in the event that they might positively influence this aspect.

Zhuang floating migrants socialise mostly with townspeople (tongxiang) or with their co-ethnic counterparts. This dependence in ethnic networks is qualitatively based and in agreement with numerous migrants seeking solace in people who are in the same language/culture. Although this offers some sense of cohesiveness in the community, it can restrict assimilation with the rest of the society. On the good side, the networks can serve as a support mechanism in order to counter the feeling of loneliness.

Zhuang migrants show a great intention to stay long-term in Guangzhou. The mean intentions to stay were 1.189 on a scale (where 1 equals intends to stay, 0 equals intends to leave). The implication of this is that a large proportion of people view Guangzhou as their new residential place in the foreseeable future. This kind of intention can be viewed as a proxy of potential for integration; migrants who intend to remain tend to invest more in relationships with locals and integrate culturally. It is found in the statistics, hope or devotion to city life in several of the Zhuang.

Migrants in general feel accepted by the inhabitants of the cities. Although this is subjective, the overall picture seen was that local acceptance is a general or moderate (not full assimilation, but not outright rejection) one. Not many interviewees related any cases of discrimination; the majority have experienced that as long as they are diligent and obey the regulations, they get treated decently or at least tolerated by residents. This relatively favourable understanding of acknowledgement is vital to the well-being; psychological incorporation would be greatly debilitated by a sense of not being wanted. Apparently, Zhuang migrants are less apparent, and as a result, they do not experience as severely the dictates of prejudice in Guangzhou as do other minorities (they tend to speak Mandarin, and they are physically indistinguishable to the Han majority, unlike other minorities). Nevertheless, it is also a possibility that has little contact with locals (since they resided in migrant circles), so they have not experienced a lot of friction, which is a two-edged sword to integration.

Overall, Zhuang migrants are characterised by the desire to assimilate, as they have plans to stay longer in the country and seek to acquire a certain degree of social fundability, but are still mostly situated within their ethnic enclaves and not extremely connected with formal urban structures. They are becoming more social towards themselves than to the host community, although there is a willingness to be more of a part of the city based on the appropriate opportunities. This suggests possible policy implications (i.e., community mixing, inclusive community services) that are likely to result in a wider social integration process other than the migrant sub-community.

The Zhuang floating population of Guangzhou is young and family-oriented, with economically active, vulnerable and low-income statuses. They, too, are moderately optimistic and determined to settle, to support themselves by the aid of ethnic networks, and are confronted with evident cracks in the

proficiency and institutional assimilation. These results precondition the following inferential analysis, during which the stimulating effect of such factors as education, age, and hukou status on the outcome of integration (choice, survival, wellbeing). In the following section, the results of the regression analysis will be provided to test the hypotheses, and Table 2 will provide the summary of the statistical estimates.

4.4 Determinants of Social Integration: Regression Analysis

Multivariate regressions were conducted to test Hypotheses 1 to 3, with the standardised integration indices serving as dependent variables. Results of three OLS regression equations are reported in Table 2: (1) factors influencing the choice dimension (F1), (2) factors influencing survival (F2), and (3) factors influencing wellbeing (F3). Standardised coefficients are presented with robust standard errors in parentheses and levels of statistical significance indicated.

Education is a good positive predictor of integration in all dimensions, which confirms H1. It has very strong coefficients: b = 0.179, 0.0673 and 0.0778 (all $p < 0.01$). These coefficients suggest that the score will rise by 0.179 with a one-unit rise in education level (which is approximated around one education category, e.g., one between primary and middle school, or one between middle and high school), as well as 0.067 with survival and 0.078 with wellbeing. Substantively, more educated Zhuang migrants fit the adjustment to the new environment, as they find more stable or gratifying employment (elevations in choice scores), a better living place and involvement in training or insurance (vitality), and say they are more satisfied with life and more accepting (wellbeing). According to a high-school-educated migrant, they may obtain a clerical or supervisory position instead of just manual labor and earn a better wage and more economical situation leading to the enhancement of their sense of confidence and social status. This is consistent with the qualitative data: more educated people tended to use their skills (such as speaking Mandarin, having a basic knowledge of computers) to advance in their careers and find their way in the urban system more conveniently. Results obtained here highlight the fact that human capital plays a vital role in integration, it contributes to economic mobility and cultural/psychological adaptation, which is consistent with the position of integration theory and previous research (e.g., higher education is positively associated with the provision of better services and, consequently, integration) [46]. Previous studies recognise in the Choice dimension that Education (0.179) is the factor that may have the most significant effect on migrants to make beneficial decisions and utilise opportunities in migration.

Table 2. Multivariate regression results for the social integration indices (OLS with robust standard errors)

Predictor Variable	(1) Choice (F1)	(2) Survival (F2)	(3) Wellbeing (F3)
education	0.179***	0.0673***	0.0778***
	(0.0165)	(0.0088)	(0.0083)
sex (male=1)	-0.0113	0.0154	-0.0221
	(0.0342)	(0.0183)	(0.0174)
age (years)	0.0231***	0.00592***	0.00431**
	(0.0039)	(0.0021)	(0.0020)
hukou: rural (1) vs urban (0)	-0.0569	0.0251	-0.0735**
	(0.0739)	(0.0392)	(0.0373)
migration range (cross-province=1)	0.0200	0.00886	0.00934
	(0.0152)	(0.0081)	(0.0077)
family migration (with family=1)	-0.0184	-0.0166	-0.0176
	(0.0708)	(0.0377)	(0.0359)
marital status (married=1)	0.0153	-0.0419	-0.00857
	(0.0638)	(0.0335)	(0.0317)
duration in GZ (years)	0.00604	0.00539	0.00106
	(0.0070)	(0.0037)	(0.0035)
Constant	-0.673***	-0.0586	0.196**
	(0.179)	(0.0945)	(0.0903)
Model Fit:			
R^2	0.630	0.453	0.453
Adjusted R^2	0.617	0.433	0.434

Note: Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. Dependent variables are standardised indices (mean = 0, SD = 1). * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Age has a positive association with the survival and well-being dimensions. This suggests that, within this sample, older migrants may have accumulated practical coping capacities and social resources that support day-to-day adaptation. However, the effect sizes are modest, and integration remains shaped by structural factors. In particular, years in Guangzhou are not statistically significant in the regression results, which indicates that duration in the destination does not automatically translate into higher integration without supportive institutional conditions.

The type of household registration affects in a great way, especially on wellbeing, which is a confirmation of H3. Agricultural (rural) hukou (coded 1) is related to a -0.0735 drop in Wellbeing index ($p < 0.05$). That is, the well-being of rural-hukou migrants (adjusting for other factors) is much lower than that of urban hukou migrants. This confirms the hypothesis that hukou preferential treatment by institutions compromises the quality of life and belonging of migrants. The negative value of the estimated coefficient of hukou on wellbeing probably indicates that the population cannot send their children to good schools, are unsuitable to use some social services, or are simply the victims of being a floating population, all of which will hamper life satisfaction [34, 23]. Interestingly, the effect of hukou on Choice and Survival, though negative (-0.0569 on Choice and 0.0251 on Survival, respectively) were not significant. This implies that the hukou restrictions are especially observed to have subjective and long-term integration (well-being) measures other than instant

employment or survival rates. One of the explanations: rural-hukou migrants are still able to work and earn money (therefore their Choice and Survival may be controlled by personal efforts), yet they do not reach a wellbeing ceiling when they cannot obtain an urban hukou, as they will always feel somewhat insecure or out of place in the city. The result is consistent with national findings that indicate that hukou status is well connected to the social entitlement of migrants and their level of integration satisfaction [46]. As an example, a study established that rural migrants who had an urban hukou record high happiness and inclusion. The findings support the need to reform hukou, or implement policies that would enhance more equal accessibility to migrants, which would make the well-being of the latter significant.

It was not true that gender (sex) was an important factor in any given dimension. The correlation coefficients between male (1) and female (2) were close to and insignificant (i.e. -0.0113 on Choice). This implies that in the sample, the male and female Zhuang floating migrants assimilate equally under the condition that other factors remain constant. It is an intriguing finding, because some people could assume that there should be some differences (e.g., women may encounter various social issues more than men or men could get a job more easily). However, this is consistent with some more recent findings, making the assumption that young female floating migrants in China are just as, or more, active in adapting as their male counterparts [33, 34]. No serious gender differences were found in the qualitative information; everybody was working (often it was a couple of people migrating). Women in service work (such as retail or housework) may even have more daily local contact than men on a construction site, but the scale is unbiased as to the result. Therefore, the indicator of success in terms of integration of being a male or a female does not matter in this context.

There were no significant direct effects of marital status or migrating with family. The feature of being married, or having a family with him, had a small negative but no significant impact on survival and well-being. This is slightly unexpected; a viewer would imagine that being with other people (spouse, children) would enhance wellbeing (by providing emotional support) or not to survive (because of additional costs). This finding indicates that family presence does not have a notable impact that may counterbalance, or perhaps married and unmarried migrants have different advantages/disadvantages. A married migrant, as an example, may have more emotional support (good on the wellbeing front), but also more mouths to feed (bad on the survival economics front). These variables, in any case, did not prove to be key predictors when other factors like education, age, etc., were taken into consideration. It could also happen that nearly every migrant in the sample is bringing their family with them or the people at home to fill their support, and thus the difference is not stark, resulting in a difference in outcomes.

Migration distance (range) and years in Guangzhou (duration) were also not important. No significant difference was found between an out-of-province or a within-province migrant in terms of integration scores without being separated on other factors. This is to show that cultural distance (going too far and home) is irrelevant once out of the city, a Zhuang of Guangxi and a Zhuang of an area minority in Guangdong assimilated similarly. It may be due to the reality that the environment in Guangzhou is also new to any rural migrant, no matter what province or due to the high concentration of out-of-province floating migrants in supportive co-ethnic groups (reducing the distance effect). Age, somehow significant in duration of Guangzhou, exhibited a positive yet not significant relationship with survival ($p = 0.15$). More years are perhaps needed to navigate services, but the relative years of duration (mean -4years) and variability did not allow us to detect the effects. Other studies usually find that years of residence enhance integration, and the non-significance of this study could be due to multicollinearity with age or a long period.

Altogether, the regression findings substantiate the main assumptions: education and age make a significant positive contribution to integration, and rural hukou status reduces the realisation of full integration (in particular wellbeing). These results are conceptually consistent, human capital and experience provide migrants with power (in line with the assumptions of integration theory on individual resources [47]), and institutional exclusion exploration through hukou is in line with a segmented assimilation theory according to which structural barriers develop a hindered integration mechanism [48]. In addition, the large R^2 values (0.63) for Choice and (~0.45) for Survival and Wellbeing imply that the model can explain a significant amount of variation, particularly for the Choice dimension. This implies that the fact that some people within this group would differ in terms of their integration levels may be explained by the high percentage of those measures and not anomalies.

Policy-wise, such quantitative findings reveal what can be done: increasing migrant education and migration skills (via training) would directly enhance every aspect of integration [49], and easing the hukou regulations or offering urban social benefits to floating migrants would lead to a significant increase in their well-being [50]. The positive age effect also means that, over time, migrants would have the (natural) effect of becoming better integrated, and thus a way to co-opt this positive effect would be to ensure that migrants can spend more time in the city and fall into an assimilated stage.

With these quantitative relationships established, their implication could be discussed in the following section, to refer them back to theory and compare with other studies. Qualitative evidence will be included to explain these statistical results, e.g., the story of how education assisted a certain person to assimilate or how a hukou deprivation negatively affected wellbeing of a person, to paint a full picture of the findings.

5. DISCUSSION

This research study depicts a story of the Zhuang ethnic floating migrants struggling to shape mobility to belonging in both the opportunity and constraint conditions. Within this discourse, the findings will be explained according to the theoretical framework and literature, and expound on the outcomes of this analysis in terms of the way migrants integrate into urban China.

5.1 Human capital as a catalyst for integration

A vivid theme that comes out must be the primacy of human capital (education/skills) in facilitating successful integration. Education was identified as being the strongest enabling factor in all dimensions of the completeness of integrating cultural dimensions, which supports a body of literature that cultural dimension follows human capital as an economic integration

enabler, adapting to foreign cultures, and embedding exploratory psychosocial factors [51]. Migrants whose education was moderate or higher capitalized on that and used it to secure better employment and accessing urban systems as well as effective communication hence making their lives so easier in Guangzhou. This is in line with the global literature: Howell [51] observes that education in many ways predicts the socio-economic incorporation of ethnic minorities. The Zhuang migrant in the example, who had a high school education, had more chances of ending hard labour on something to a supervisory position or acquiring new skills on the job, and it was thus proactive integration, which is an aspiration process instead of simple coping.

In particular, one of the interviewees (Case 5) was in possession of a certificate of a technical school; he was able to get a job as an electrician in property management company, as it paid more and presented him with a certain level of stability as opposed to construction work, which many of his peers do. He further said that he could read and complete the forms at government offices independently out of his education unlike his less-educated friends. His experience is one of the examples that show that education cannot only improve income but access to services and a feeling of independence within the city [52]. This is well supported by Iqbal et al. [53], who discovered that increased educational capital among migrants enhanced the process of acquiring health entitlement. Concisely, it seems that education is the golden key that opens numerous doors of integration: formal job, utilization of state services and evidence-based decision making.

This highlights one of the critical implications, which are as follows: investments in migrant education and training have the potential to produce high returns in terms of integration outcomes. Ready-to-access language and skills training to migrants (ex, Mandarin language courses to non-Mandarin floating migrants, training on marketable skills) would have a significant beneficial impact on the integration of migrants, as are the H1 and the literature on migrant integration more broadly based on the strengthening of human capital. The city governments and NGOs should therefore consider growing the adult education programs specifically for the migrant workers, not only in technical skills, but also in urban literacy (how to use the urban services, legal rights), which can hasten their social inclusion. Some activities have already been established within Guangzhou (e.g., evening schools with migrants), but the fact that it is only found out of the total population of the city that only about 31 per cent of floating migrants had received any form of vocational training implies there is a need to intensify these activities.

5.2 Age and experience: Gradual pathways to belonging

The age effect on integration that is positive brings out the cumulative value of experience and social networks. The latter were also older Zhuang migrants, who were more likely to adapt to the city, which aligns with the hypothesis that people may integrate gradually over a period, as time progresses [54]. With time, migrants get to understand urban ways, establish social networks and develop methods of survival and progress. This is in line with the more traditional assimilation theory [55] that asserted that the longer the migration duration, the more the integration, and also with more current studies that demonstrate second-generation migrants or those that migrated in large periods had better outcomes than recent ones [39].

This is backed by the qualitative accounts. Newcomers tended to tell about the earlier culture shock and mistakes (e.g., being scammed by an employer or paying an excessive price of a rent because of ignorance), thus those who had been in Guangzhou a bit longer, say 5 to 6 years, knew how to play the game. As an example, Case 14 (Male, age 35) indicated:

"I did not know how to obtain a health card in my first year; I was scared to enter the large hospitals at all. Now I am aware of the processes and even assist new people in my village to attend the clinic. This aspect of peer-mentoring is fascinating-floating migrants who have been in the country help introduce the new ones, thereby facilitating their integration, thus enhancing the overall integration of the entire community."

The positive age effect, therefore, partially reflects the accumulation of social capital: aged migrants possessed broader networks, with some local acquaintances, and they more frequently spoke a little Cantonese (local dialect) as compared to the youngest people, enabling them to interact daily.

It is observed that higher education is positively associated with each dimension of integration, particularly with choice and wellbeing, which is consistent with the role of human capital in enabling mobility and facilitating adaptation. Age also shows a positive association with the survival and well-being dimensions, suggesting that older migrants may accumulate coping capacities and social resources over time. However, the coefficient for years in Guangzhou is not statistically significant in the models. This suggests that duration alone does not guarantee integration in the absence of institutional inclusion, and it may also reflect limited variation in length of stay within this district-based sample. By contrast, national evidence indicates that migration duration can be positively related to integration when rights accessibility improves [23]. The difference reinforces the importance of local institutional and labour market conditions in shaping whether time in the city translates into belonging.

5.3 Structural barriers: The weight of household registration

Hukou status is not statistically significant for the choice and survival indices, but it is negative and significant for wellbeing. This pattern suggests that migrants can secure work and basic living arrangements through market channels, yet welfare entitlements and social recognition linked to hukou remain salient for perceived security and belonging. Perhaps the most imperative discovery as far as policy is concerned is that the hukou system has a formidable restrictive impact on wellbeing. Although migrants make adjustments and do not overlook the need to adapt to the new environment, one of the obstacles to their extensive engagement in urban life remains an institutional challenge, such as rural hukou status [19]. These highlights show that the position of integration theory underlines that the result of integration is not exclusively shaped by individual agency, but rather by its inclusion policy and institutionalisation [8]. The rural-hukou citizens were always found to be insecure about the future, unlike their urban-hukou counterparts. Indicatively, a significant number of people are concerned about health expenses due to the absence of healthcare insurance in the city. One of the women (Case 9) explained that she does not want to see the doctor due to chronic pain since she has to make out-of-pocket payments that would adversely impact her well-being. Another case

(Case 17) brought to focus on anxiety about the education of her children:

"I have a son who is school-going age, but since I am not a local, I cannot afford to take him to a local school and pay high fees, or I would have to take my son back to Guangxi. That keeps me up at night."

These are not stresses that are inflicted on them, but rather because of their structure.

The antagonistic effect of hukou on well-being is similar to that of other researchers who reported that rural floating migrants were more likely to experience depression because they lack access to urban social support. It implies that despite their assimilation, intrusion, or penetration into the economy or social sphere, as long as a migrant is looked at as an outsider by an institution, a limit will be put on his or her belongingness and safety. This would be a strong argument and a smattering in favour of hukou reform: increasing access by migrants to urban publics, and ultimately, access to urban citizenship (urban hukou), would offer large returns regarding their ultimate life satisfaction and integration [18]. China is trying to implement point systems or partial access by migrants to some cities; the findings suggest that an effective set of measures might help close the wellbeing gap.

Interestingly enough, hukou did not have an extreme influence on the choice or survival indexes on the data, in such a way that migrants may find employment and earn despite the hukou restrictions, but rather it is the quality of integration (do I feel at home, feel safe, satisfied) which is compromised [25]. It echoes the concept of integration beyond the economic, as most migrants are economically integrated (they are productive contributors to the city economy), but socially, it can be said that integration falls behind [32]. This is the case with Zhuang: positions in Guangzhou are being filled and they adjust culturally to some extent, but they are still excluded by the institutions (no urban hukou) meaning they will still remain at the periphery of the goodies and influence of the urban society.

As such, it is important to fill this structural gap. Some of the policies may consist of: providing migrant workers with access to social insurance (portable or national social insurance, which does not require them to be hukou holders in a local region), enabling children of migrant workers easier access to local schools (this has been attempted in Guangzhou with competition being high), and housing options with low costs to migrant families. These would alleviate the adverse effect of hukou on wellbeing. Conclusively, complete integration will probably involve the elimination of the two-tier citizen system which many authors have seen and many more are starting to agree with even in the policy discourse in China (e.g., the central government talks of new-type urbanization, the core of which is hukou reform in the small-tier cities).

5.4 Active agency amid systemic limitations

Putting these arguments together, the work identifies Zhuang migrants as the agents in the space of human capital and institutional environments [55]. They are agentic in their need to seek a better opportunity (e.g. migrate to Guangzhou, train, change jobs in order to improve it) and to forge community (be able to use networks, show readiness to remain, become integrated). An example is that some of them took things into their own hands, such as learning some Cantonese language, joining a neighbourhood church or ethnic group or even opening small businesses after several years of saving up- all indications of immigrants attempting to establish themselves in a cocoon in the city. Nevertheless, their paths are obviously influenced, and even restricted by structural factors like the hukou system, the labour market needed by the urban economy and low-skilled labour, and services provided [56].

These results therefore represent the dynamism between agency and structure in floating migrants integration as postulated by the scholars of segmented assimilation [16]. Zhuang who are migrants are not mere urbanization victims; they simply use whatever they possess (education, youth, cultural adaptability) to better their life. However, they will never be able to integrate with the native urbanites unless they are included structurally (treated as full urbanites). This interaction is reflected in how migrants tend to strategize on this basis: many choose to work out the current adversities on the chance that one day they will find some stability, in effect, gambling that eventually, either their own development or the actions of their policy makers will bring them to a more equal position. According to one migrant, he was able to make peace with being an outsider today so that one day his offspring can be an insider. This is the feeling of a stereotypical first-generation Christian being forced to give up so the second generation can possess an urban hukou and a superior life, which is even being seen within migrant groups all over the world (the archetypal first generation/second generation integration delay).

5.5 Comparison with other ethnic minorities and regions

The case of Zhuang can be placed in the wider context of the integration of ethnic minority in China. However, since the Zhuang is the largest minority group, and there is some cultural overlap with the Han (e.g., many of the Zhuang know Mandarin and can not be easily identified), they may be less likely to have more cultural barriers than other minorities, such as the Uyghur or Tibetan, which have more significant differences in language, religious orientations, or other phenotypes [57]. In the introduction, it was mentioned that Hui and Uyghur are often mentioned to have greater acute discrimination [8]. Comparative research on Chinese Muslim communities in Southeast Asia further illustrates how mobility and belonging can be shaped by the interaction of migration, religious identity, and cultural capital [58, 59]. Nevertheless, the key point highlighted in the case of Zhuang is that even when a minority group is relatively assimilable, structural problems such as hukou and a lack of education can present a considerable obstacle to integration. Conversely, it may also happen that other minorities of smaller sizes (e.g. Tujia or Miao migrants) may also effectively assimilate culturally and yet face the same institutional challenges.

In relative terms, some studies of Tibetan migrants within Beijing/Chengdu discovered that education and possessing bilingual skills were essential to their integration, yet cultural unfamiliarity and bias remained other challenges in their study [16]. In Guangzhou, Zhuang does not appear to make an explicit cultural bias (none of the respondents mentioned having been harassed or ostracised because they were Zhuang; a lot of locals might not even know that someone is Zhuang without asking them a question). This implies that the issue of Guangzhou is not one of discrimination against ethnic backgrounds but rather concerning the socio-economic acceptance of every migrant. It is a fact that Guangzhou has a

long history of assimilating internal migrants, and it is quite tolerant. The findings probably extend to Han rural migrants also about the impact of education, age, and hukou. Another peculiar feature of minorities, such as Zhuang, perhaps, is a high dependence on co-ethnic networks (as it reaches a critical mass in Guangzhou, 40.9% of minority migrants) that is a two-sided phenomenon: on the one hand, it allows them to obtain support, but on the other hand, it can build an enclave [60].

The following patterns are similar to other countries: human capital and language proficiency facilitate integration (as observed in immigrant groups in Europe and North America, education level is a leading predictor of immigrant economic efficiency), and institutional barriers (such as immigration status of immigrants, similar to hukou of Chinese internal migrants) frustrate full integration [50]. Among them, a distinction is that policy treats internal migrants differently in China, although they are citizens of the same country; this is in some ways distinctive to the hukou system. In most nations, immigrants are able to become citizens over a period of time and experience full rights, and on the other hand China migrants may spend several decades in a city and still be denied benefits of local citizens. The consequences of that policy design on subjective integration.

5.6 Implications for policy and theory

Theoretically, the study brings a subtle case to the body of literature regarding internal migration and integration in the fast urbanising societies. It shows that institutional policies (which are macro-level features) as well as education (which is a micro-level factor) have a persistent effect in configuring the paths of integration [47]. It further points out that it is important to see integration in a multi-dimensional way: a migrant may be integrated in one dimension (economically active, socially networked) but not in the others (politically/institutionally marginalised). This proposes an integration agenda beyond mere indicators such as income or language proficiency, legal and psychological ones, and that is what the choice survival wellbeing regime has endeavoured to reflect.

In the case of policy, they have given rise to several implications:

Invest in Migrant Human Capital: As mentioned, by making it easier to educate and train immigrant workers, this is likely to move towards economic and social integration of the immigrants. One of the ways through which the government could enhance the skills of migrants, perhaps via collaboration with employers, is to offer free and subsidized evening classes, skill certification courses, and Mandarin language courses (to persons in non-Mandarin speaking regions) [38]. Social Integration Index can be used as an intervention to monitor to determine whether integration scores increase as a result of such interventions.

The negative impact of hukou on wellbeing has something to say that there is a need to move towards reforming hukou expeditiously, at least in big cities where there is high migration. Providing the migrants with wider access to the public schools, the public hospitals and social housing (without the need to receive a local hukou) may be expanded in Guangzhou in the meantime. There have already been measures (e.g. Guangzhou is making migrations of migrants to health insurance a less burdensome step), but according to the data, on the one hand, there are a lot of Zhuang respondents who report not being insured (n = 65). The process of reducing the discrimination between local and migrant residents in terms of providing services would also enhance the social cohesion as well as achieving the desired goal of new urbanization that according to China the provision of migrants with equal services.

Since most Zhuang depend on their individual communities, the city authorities and civil society could use such networks to provide integrated activities. As an example, bridging social capital can be built through sponsoring minority cultural associations, which contain events with residents, and is part of it. Because Zhuang migrants perceive themselves as generally accepted and socialise primarily within their community, programs that facilitate inter-group contact (the contact theory developed by Allport may be an appropriate solution) in neighbourhoods or the functional environment may have additional integration. It is possible that Guangzhou can host the culture of Zhuang in community parties, where Zhuang migrants feel proud, and locals get exposed to the minority culture, making them understand each other.

Our results that people often stay and that age/ experience facilitates integration imply that policies which ensure that migrants settle (e.g. allowing them to rent more easily, eventually purchase their own homes, or at least have security of tenure in those urban villages being redeveloped) will prompt them to invest in integration. When migrants have a vision of the future for themselves and their children in the city, they will tend to identify with the city and participate in city life (though some of the older ones in the study did so by making efforts to assist the newcomers, etc.). Therefore, shifting the paradigm of looking at migrants as a temporary workforce and more as a new permanent citizen in the city will lead to positive enhancements in the city in the form of increased social stability and human capital potential [31].

To sum up, the process of mobility to belonging of Zhuang migrants is an achievable process rather than a process that is automatic. Many people are making big steps thanks to education and personal desire; they are not the blind flows that go nowhere, but a conscious person working towards a better life [35]. Nonetheless, policy needs to be supportive in transmitting their migration to full social belonging. By tackling institutional inequalities and investing in the growth of the migrants, Guangzhou and similar cities can both mobilise the potential of the migrant communities to become a valuable resource in the urban society, and also embrace the spirit of ethnic solidarity and mutual prosperity that defines the spirit of China.

6. CONCLUSION

The current paper has analysed the social incorporation of the Zhuang floating population in Guangzhou through the prism of combined forces (choice factors driving migration), survival (urban livelihood), and well-being (social and personal fulfilment). Drawing on Social Integration Theory, the convergent mixed-method analysis finds that these migrants should be empowered and structural barriers removed to ensure effective integration.

It is determined that education and age (experience) are good drivers of integration. More experienced and educated Zhuang migrants cope with urban life better; they find better jobs, become acculturated, and their level of life satisfaction increases. On the other hand, the status of an agricultural hukou (rural status) is a major structural barrier that

undermines the well-being of the migrant since it reduces the possibility of accessing the urban public services, as well as creates a feeling of marginalisation. These findings highlight the notion that integration is a multidimensional process: personal human resources and resilience help migrants to progress, but institutional inclusion is essential to maintain their wellbeing and the ability to become a proper member of the city-life [40].

On the whole, the results emphasise that a two-fold strategy of investing in people and institutional reform is the key to the successful assimilation of Zhuang (and other) migrants in urban China. Policies that can improve the skills and education of migrants, and their long-term settlement (e.g. family reunification, housing stability) and the provision of urban social welfare to them, will not only help in increasing the quality of life of migrants, but also enhance social cohesion. The context of Guangzhou, where Zhuang migrants represent a large number of the working population and the local community, encourages them to integrate, which is part of the inclusive development agenda in the city [5].

To sum up, the concept of making mobility belong is possible in situations where personal aspirations encounter enabling structures. Zhuang migrants in Guangzhou have been struggling to make a future through efforts as workers, educationalists and community-builders, agency levels are high and show outstanding agency under trial. By transforming urban policies to appreciate their contributions (such as by relaxing hukou, granting them equal access to education and health services, etc.), such migrants may experience sustainable wellbeing and urban citizenship. Not only does it help the migrants personally, but it also serves the grander goals of China as a whole to achieve peaceful urbanisation and ethnic unity: an urban community in which newcomers, irrespective of place of origin, can indeed make the city their home.

The research input into migration theory is the empirical validation of the human capital-human institutional interaction in an integration outcome. It also provides a feasible formula of the Social Integration Index that could be adopted by city administrators to track integration levels of the migrants in various aspects. To policymakers, the same has been made clear; to bridge the integration gap, it is necessary to do both sides of the equation, empower migrants (by educating and training them, by raising their rights awareness) and eliminate policy barriers (by reforming hukou and providing inclusive services). Such a move will serve to transform the colossal internal migration in China into an engine of smooth urbanisation, where not mobility, but a channel of common prosperity and belonging among all city dwellers.

This research has several limitations. First, the survey is based on district-level fieldwork and non-probability recruitment, including referrals, which may bias the sample toward more socially connected migrants. The findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than representative population estimates for all Zhuang migrants in Guangzhou or in China. Second, the quantitative indices simplify integration into three composite dimensions. While the items were selected to reflect theoretically relevant aspects of choice, survival, and well-being, the indices cannot capture the full complexity of identity negotiation, discrimination experiences, and institutional interactions. Future research could expand measurement, test alternative weighting schemes, and compare multiple destination cities to strengthen generalizability.

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