Comparative Study of Informal Economies in Marginalized Communities:
Xiaobei, Guangzhou, and Harlem, New York

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1. Abstract

The role of informal economies as survival mechanisms for marginalized communities is examined through the lens of African immigrant networks in Xiaobei, Guangzhou, and Harlem, New York City, historically underserved regions. Despite the differences in political and economic contexts, Xiaobei and Harlem highlight that the members of the excluded classes still manage to build informal and vibrant economic activities through formal economic barriers. Guided by theoretical frameworks of globalization and neoliberalism, the study delves into how international forces bring about spatial economic exclusion and affect informal economies both in Xiaobei and Harlem. Through a comparative analysis, research shows that trust-based networks and unregulated housing markets are two adaptive strategies shared by these communities, which allow them to construct alternative economies outside the formal regulatory structures. The results reveal that, even though every community's informal economy evolves in varying contexts, either globalized trade in Xiaobei or cultural resilience in Harlem fosters common acts of self-organization and resistance towards the structures of power. The ending section of the research gives a green light to further urban planning strategies that strive for, rather than negate, more inclusive economic systems of such kind.

2. Introduction

Informal economies turn out to be those economic activities that are not squarely regulated and taxed and still play a vital role in most urban areas worldwide. Poor people encumbered by stifling residency or employment issues find themselves at the mercy of these unofficial activities that provide day-to-day sustenance. Xiaobei, China's multicultural district of Guangzhou, and Harlem, renowned as the Home of History's African-American NYC residing community, mob up with each other, where the informal economies are the master of adapting to the surrounding circumstances in the survival game. Therefore, we must first examine the responsibilities of the Xiaobei informal economy in contrast to those in Harlem, where thousands of West African traders rely on these informal little businesses to unite Chinese suppliers and African buyers, while local residents would depend on informal work, street vending, and even barter exchange in order to tackle social and economic exclusion.

This research article will pursue an unsung area of urban planning and community development that affiliates with different social groups across several regions by comparing segregated and unregulated economies in different parts of the world. While much has been said about informal economies within a single place, only a handful of studies have tackled the comparison of how these circuits work within different urban settings that have been designed and controlled by different political and economic regimes. The analysis of Xiaobei's international migrant networks along with Harlem's

informal labor markets reveals the two-fold research contribution to understand such global transformation of economic exclusion and the creation of alternative survival mechanisms. This comparison equally matters within the academic realm as for those policy makers pursuing economic inclusiveness in urban settings.

At the core of this study is a normative stance: increasing citywide productivity, promoting social equity, and ensuring inclusive development require including the informal economic actors in the formal urban economy, in my opinion. Increasingly, urban planners and policymakers are aware that the cities that can readily embrace and integrate the informal workers with a view to advancing cleanliness, greenness, social responsiveness, and liveliness are the better ones. Without a doubt, formalization of informal enterprises and livelihoods provides urban areas with an avenue for tapping into the economic contributions that are invisible or underused, such as tax revenues, innovations, and many others. Moreover, formalization presents to many of the marginal groups a fairer opportunity to share from the benefits of urban growth: it allows the marginalized groups to benefit from legal provisions (contract enforcement, workers' rights, and access to services) with a view to leveling the playing field economically. In short, my research actually places itself on the platform of the idea that covering the informal economy under the rule of law is not just about having a regulatory framework, but the fundamental ingredient for communal cities such as Xiaobei, and Harlem as well as other communities.

3. Research Question

Unfortunately, this paper has a research question following it: To what extent informal economies in Xiaobei and Harlem, New York function as representative survival strategies and how globalization, neoliberal policies and urban exclusion shape diversities among these systems? The research will be based on three perspectives associated with the major question—namely, as follows: (1) the economic activities surrounding the informal economy each community undertakes; (2) the engagement of outside influences (i.e., globalization policies and urban transformation) with these informal exchanges; and (3) the effects on community wellness (socially, economically, and culturally) as a result of unregulated economic activities. In other words, adaptive survival strategies here may be understood as informal and unexpensive survival tactics that underprivileged groups use when they face unfortunate situations, for example unemployment, legal restrictions, or social inequality.

To do that, the unit uses a qualitative inter-case study strategy. Xiaobei area and Harlem neighborhoods were carefully chosen for being the West African diaspora centers, where the much-deserved informal trade can be seen, but unlike the economy of the whole country, their socio-political environments vary significantly. Xiaobei becomes a meeting point of the transnational informal trading network where China's immigration policy plays its role as globalization and international commerce practice, while Harlem is a culturally bound area that has a historical racial division and growing gentrification pressure, respectively (Smith, 1996). The study was attended via mixture

of method including semi-structured interviews, direct and observer participant interviews (covering virtual information from online channels), collection of secondary data e.g. policy and census documents. Lastly, approximately 20 people participated in the interviews in both sites, including the informal entrepreneurs, community leaders, and local experts, thereby yielding qualitative results for the investigation into the functioning of both community's informal economy. The Guangzhou sample constrained mainly of West African traders (n=8), which may deal with wares like electronics and textiles, beside a few key insiders such as local landlords (n=2), a Chinese NGO worker (n=1), and attorney (n=1) who are in touch with the African community. The Harlem sample was inclusive of street vendors (n=5) who sold food or merchandise as ground vendors, community organizers (n=2) who parlayed local economic initiatives, and one artist (n=1) who made money selling his paintings all undercover. This though made possible handy version of every size of baseline via insiders and outsiders, which in return added values to the views of what each informal economy looked like from the perspective of the sellers, community intermediaries, and observers.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. First, a **Literature Review** examines scholarly perspectives on informal economies and their relevance to the cases of Xiaobei and Harlem. Next, a **Theoretical Framework** chapter discusses the concepts of globalization, neoliberalism, and urban marginalization that underpin the analysis. The **Methodology** section then details the research

design, case selection rationale, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations. Afterward, two sections present the **Case Study** findings for Xiaobei and Harlem, respectively, documenting the nature of informal economic activities in each context. A **Comparative Discussion** follows, analyzing the similarities and differences between the two cases. Subsequently, a **Policy Implications** section offers recommendations for urban policy based on the research findings. Finally, the **Conclusion** summarizes the study's key insights and contributions. Supplementary materials, including the semi-structured interview guide used in this research, are provided in **Appendix A**.

4. Literature Review

Informal economic activity occurs outside formal regulatory and legal systems, but it greatly sustains at-risk populations in every part of the world. Street vending, day labor, home-based enterprises and other non-registered businesses constitute the core of the informal economic sector. Notably, informal economies are not only the domain of developing nations; advanced industrial cities also feature informal economies, albeit to a lesser extent. Biles and Lindley (2013) explain that a community may develop an informal economy when the mainstream economy excludes a group from participation; that community invents alternative mechanisms to address their needs. Formally, informality can be viewed as a creative response to exclusion, where those who are locked out of formal channels manage to participate.

The study of informal economies has witnessed that they are adaptive systems that welcome and support people who are pushed out of formal structures. Studies indicate that sub-Saharan African cities are not uncommon to have trading networks in informal businesses, which form a considerable backbone of urban commerce. In Latin America, the informal sector has served as an outlet during times of crisis or state disinvestment (Davis, 2006). Even in major cities, we may see the emergence of formality where formality is not being able to provide similar opportunities. Both of Xiaobei in China and Harlem in the United States, for example, showcase this situation. While in Xiaobei, Africans have engaged in transnational trade by creating www.mmbiz88.com), (king, 2019), which is linking China and Africa markets. Similarly, in Harlem, older African American communities and other recently migrated populations have traditionally made use of informal job markets (Venkatesh, 2006) and home-based businesses (Kelley, 1996) as a means to survive during the times of disinvestment and racially restrictive employment policies. These contexts reflect how social and economic challenge communities country may forge informal ways to earn income when confronted by barriers to formal economic participation.

The literature claims that informal economies could be a form of resilience and also a contributor to system inequalities. As concepts employed in the epoch of formality, contemporary scholars argue that informal economies and formal economies exist along a spectrum rather than as the opposite poles of a simple dichotomy. Late 20th-century neoliberal reforms boosted urbanization and thrust people into informal work

in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Davis, 2006), which confirmed an enduring of informality as a structural feature in modern economies. For instance, according to the International Labour Organization, more than half of the world's workers are employed in informal settings, which means the growing phenomenon. Even in advanced economies, informal businesses such as ride-sharing, day labor, and undeclared service jobs emerge. Thus, informal economies should not be considered as the anomaly of the underdeveloped area but as an integral feature of urbanized economies globally. Informal economies meet the gaps generated by the formal markets; and they do this by providing cheap products and flexible services, especially for lower-income households. Yet, at the same time, they are the zones of vulnerability devoid of benefits and the legal security that formal employment safeguards for employees. Around this literature, the discussions related to formalize the illegal business or to strengthen unregistered laborers in their existing conditions become the center.

Specific research on the development of informal economies in individual cities also depicts the aforementioned thesis. In China, examination of the migrant networks such as Xiaobei has revealed the unrecognized systems that occurred in a fast-changing economy. Guangzhou's African population began expanding in the late 1990s after China's entry into the World Trade Organization and the growth of worldwide trade. Chinese scholar Su Xiaoli's (documented in Xu, 2012) study on Guangzhou shows that most Africans who arrived lacked official immigrant status and resorted to informal importing and exporting as a means of survival. Thus, they crafted a self-sufficient

economy supported by their communities. Scholars have described Xiaobei in terms of "low-end globalization," where international trade is facilitated by personal relationships as opposed to rigid frameworks established for businesses. The region-specific studies of Xiaobei mainly point to issues such as race and legality (King, 2019), as in examples of Africans continuing their business activities despite the doubt of the Chinese visa system, either by entering visa renewal every few days or using proxies because there is not a possibility to register a business. We expand both the Xiaobei and the Harlem cases as sample studies to conclude that Xiaobei is not only born out of a local anomaly but also a part of different cases where urban informality prevails as a part of under globalization.

Similarly, the study of informal economies in the United States has shown the presence of such systems in historically Black communities. Harlem is often considered an exemplar since, in the mid-20th century, hiring discrimination and the decrease in manufacturing prompted the problems, thereby leading to the development of a parallel economy. In her book "Gang Leader for a Day," sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh (2006) documents that by the 1980s, Harlem had built up an extensive off-the-books sector full of unlicensed street vendors, informal repair shops, indecently paid household help, and many other underground services. A few decades earlier, during the Harlem Renaissance period, rent parties and home-based businesses seemed to be the vogue as well (Kelley, 1996). These cases illustrate that in and around Harlem, there exists a persistent, longstanding history of a vibrant informal economy that feeds on the

community's form of social and cultural identity. While hustling can also be simply viewed as individual's struggle for autonomy and for survival in a racially inhospitable environment (such as pre-1980s Harlem), the older study teaches us these informal modes of economic activity could be also used as vehicles for individual expression and passive resistance against racial exclusion and discrimination. As the ground reviews discover from other observers, we then analyze the present-day formal economic structure in Harlem, which we claim is still operating and changing.

After tracing existing studies on the informal worlds and sharing case examples of Xiaobei and Harlem, this study outlines the theoretically informed lens our research adopts. The next chapter explores the major conceptual lenses, namely globalization, neoliberalism, and advanced urban marginality, through which the new research analyzes why the informal economy operates persistently in these two diverse cities.

The reviewed literature teaches a lot about the need of incorporating informal economies into the sphere of formal economies and how this is a win for cities and for all marginalized jobholders. Supporters of formalization have the view that it releases the hidden economic promise: Hernando de Soto (2000), for instance, estimated that in assigning credentials and an entity's official registration papers to the poor, unlock tens of trillions of dollars in 'dead capital, with small enterprises finding easier access to credit, funding, and expansion. This connotes conspicuous outcome of higher urban productivity, as informal enterprises develop into develops into a more efficient

business entity. Similarly, development agencies and scholars assert that formalization is seen as an equity measure in that it provides workers with certain rights and protections. The International Labor Organization's Recommendation 204 (2015), for instance, provides the basis on which the shift to formality for out-of-formality workers helps them "fight for their rights and escape out of informality," thus creating decent jobs with higher pay, boosting social security coverage. Translating formalization to delivering justice through legal framework means that these actors will, among other things, benefit from the minimum wage laws, protection policies, and social insurance instead of staying exposed to exploitation. Policymakers also add that the formalization expands the tax base of the municipality and make the playing ground level for fair competition among business entities. In brief, the position in almost all of the literature is that cities bolstering the informal economies and integrating them into the formal one can be a catalyst for increasing productivity of the urban centers and generating more tax avenues, while simultaneously protecting the weaker employees with rights and accepting the business cards.

5. Theoretical Framework

Globalization and neoliberal urban policies serve as theories of the spawning of informal economies in Xiaobei and Harlem. The economies of nations may be affected by the opening up of trade and markets, the two of which can, in fact, lead to the emergence of informal economies. When formal economic opportunities are seized by the global cities and countries, not everyone can be included, who are lacking in legal

status, capital, or personal skills. According to Biles and Lindley (2013), globalization divides actors in the formal markets between the ones who can afford and others, mostly low-income migrants and other vulnerable groups. In the case of Xiaobei, Guangzhou, this dynamic is evident: due to the implementation of strict immigration laws, Africans are prohibited from entering the Chinese formal labor market. This explains why they resorted to transnational social networks to create informal trading channels linking China with Africa (King, 2019). One of the key features of the informal trade of this group is its operation in the gaps of the formal system. This situation is possible because they are different from legally licensed business entities, which is mediated by their trust-based networks rather than legal contracts, which leaves them no corresponding entry into the formal economy.

Neo-liberalism—an ideology that is comfortable with market solutions, deregulation, and reduced state intervention—has therefore stirred the pot for even more informal economies. Researchers such as Davis (2006) have the transparent view that the abandonment of state services in the neoliberal reform model mark a point where the marginalized population is served with the necessity to use informal means to attain a livelihood. An obvious example is in Harlem, where in the waning decades of the 20th century, a slashing of the public sector budget, deindustrialization, and austerity policies adversely affected the ability of many African Americans to create decent livelihoods (Smith, 1996; Kelley, 1996). Living in the harsh conditions, where there were not much work opportunities in the formal sector, these community members got

to choose from the alternatives of either off-the-book job or retail and service business. Local solidarity—to make it through everyday struggles they had to band together and support each other. Informality is the spontaneous manifestation of this new grassroots response to the void left by neoliberal economic restructuring. This is how indirect policies were a breeding ground for informal economic activity. In other words, the cumulative result of these policies was an environment where an informal economic activity flourished as a coping mechanism in the light of the unreliable support.

Wacquant's concept of "advanced marginality" (2008) further sheds light on how spatial and social marginalization play out distinctly among the economically disadvantaged. Wacquant observes advanced marginality as a highly nuanced concentration of poverty and exclusion that has been brought into the urban area to the center of neoliberal policies and accordingly racial segregation. Xiaobei and Harlem indeed might be the places that could be examined from such a research perspective. However, in Xiaobei, the African traders do not legally live in cities in the urban villages; instead, they await approval while being engaged in the trade (Liu et al., 2010). In Harlem, the legacy of racial separation and urban negligence that weakened the pocket's financial aggregate to the community propelled the reliance on the local informal economy. According to Wacquant's model, social communities which are formed as a result of weakened state are likely to exist when the society is marginalized and the state is minimal or even repressive, as in these cases. The informal economies, however, are not to be seen as the cause of marginalization. Instead, the informal economy is seen as a mechanism of

adaptation to advanced marginalization when there are no impartial city or urban structure. The marginalized urban community utilizes the informal economy to support their livelihoods and the society, which they have been purposely neglected or taken an antagonistic position.

Based on the social and structural frameworks, which are ranging from the macro-scale of the international markets to the micro-scale political policies of urban areas, it is easy to identify that these global and structural forces brought together make conditions that lead to the informal economy to flourish. The globalization process presents economic constraints and possibilities for those who are socially and financially far away from the center, while the neoliberal approach of governance fails to offer the support and protection for the homeless in urban areas. It is as a result that marginalized persons in Guangzhou and New York have been engaged in self-help economy systems. Such adaptation strategy is two-fold: the global exclusion and local survival strategy of Xiaobei and Harlem are both important for analyzing the informal economies in both cities. This idea is also supported by Sheppard (2012), who says that in China and the US, the prevalence of the informal economy is very much related to urban spatial marginality. Such interpretation can be realized using these theories to understand how globalization processes like neoliberalism and migration regimes of both cities have formed informal economies. Nonetheless, no imports of these mechanisms to other cities are apparent. For those cities, the mechanisms of the exclusion, the economic marginalization, and the urban inequality among which becoming a necessity for

survival. After seeing the theoretical basis on the next chapter, the researcher would brief the methodology for this inquiry in Xiaobei and Harlem.

Previous discussions on different theoretical approaches further guide us to the understanding that the necessity of covering informal economic actors goes beyond just an issue of propriety, the reality is that it is a primary approach to ameliorate structural inequalities in cities. As outlined, globalization and neoliberalism have created spaces of exclusion and advanced marginality (Wacquant, 2008); out of these spaces, informal economies emerge simply with the role of survival means. Generally, formalization could be seen as the response to the power of neoliberal globalization - an intervention more aimed at reconstructing the social and economic fabric of marginal groups. In a condensed form, the convert of informal conditions to formal ones entails entrenching of the "right to the city," granting of informal workers the legal recognition, rights, and place for their voices in the economy, as well as repealing the imbalance of power, which arose over decades. These theories cohere with social equity and inclusive ‘urbanism’ which maintain that giving each resident an equal opportunity to engage in and to gain from urban prosperity, is the hallmark of achieving social equity and inclusive urbanism. Lastly, the advocates assert that adding the informal actors in the development of cities via law, is a stride in rewriting the social contract in the industrial cities. The primary agenda of formalization being to recognize and ecognize and uphold the rights the rights of informal workers and to cater to safeguard labor conditions, and in a larger perspective is about dignifying work and providing protection from

exploitation of these workers by bringing them into the domain of governance. Theoretically, transformation is there, but it is not instant as it means proceeding from the urban model dominated by rich formal sectors to leaving the social and economic rights of the informal poor as legitimate stakeholders in the city's future. Via merging informal laborers and entrepreneurs with official business structures, cities will be able to unlink structural exclusion, lift up equal citizenship, and create an urban system equally committed to the principles of sustainability.

6. Methodology

Research Design

This research employs a comparative case study approach to analyze the informal economies within West African migrant communities in Xiaobei, Guangzhou, and Harlem, New York. Hence, both cities serve as key nodes for West African migrants with the scholarship to discuss the phenomenon of informal economies that develop as an impulse of other survival strategies in other urban settings. Even though their socio-political landscapes are not alike, these people have similar stories of displacement, exclusion from formal economics, and survival through informal networks and means. The comparative design opens up to an identification of certain commonality among informal economies of the two communities while also brings to attention some unique differences that are specific to the context of community under study.

The analysis focuses on several dimensions of the informal economic systems in

Xiaobei and Harlem:

- Economic Practices: The unfamiliar trade modalities, such as the nature of the informal economic work in each community, involving transnational testing by Xiaobei and local informal labor and small-biz in Harlem.
- Social Network: The roles of diaspora and propinquational-linked social patterns that functional the informal economies in Guangzhou and in Harlem are two of the significant points of comparison.
- Regulatory and Policy Context: No matter how the central government undertakes to shape these economies through its policies, such as immigration, urban redevelopment, and other regulations, the economic world of these streets are affected. Xiaobei, for which the immigration enforcement and urban village laws are coined; for Harlem, it is the city ordinances and the gentrification pressure.
- Community Impacts: The wide spectrum of community returns ranging from social, economic, to cultural contributions brought by the informal economies to the communities, and the effects of these businesses on the community identity and stand.

The author takes these four facets as the guiding lines for his realm and exhibits how every city depends on informal economies as a modus operandi to survive; however, let us not forget the unique ones that could be extended united only in survival, such as China’s immigration restrictions and the Harlem’s historical racial segregation and

current gentrification. In this comparative framework, a systemic study was achieved demonstrating a united trend of global migration with the allied local urban policies that, at the same time, illustrated the uniqueness and common background of West African immigrants in the respective two urban environments.

Data Collection

To investigate the research questions, the study brought both qualitative and quantitative data, but its focus is on the in-depth qualitative information on the community dynamics.

Primary Data: The essential part of data processing is accomplished by the collection of qualitative fieldwork:

- Semi-Structured Interviews: The ethnologist involved the West African migrants and other major figures in Xiaobei and Harlem in a longer telephone interview series. All in all, we conducted 20 interviews (most 12 in Guangzhou and 8 in New York). Interviewees were made up of independent street traders, commerce, small business operators, community mobilizers, and local experts (such as NGO and socialists interested in migrant difficulties). An interview protocol (cf. Appendix), rather than an interview guide, was used to guide the investigative process by systematically treating certain aspects, such as the prevailing economic activities, the legality of the rules, the role of the interpersonal networks, the cultural aspects, etc. The interviews, as a rule, were

about 30-60 minutes long and could be done in English or translated into (for example, French for some West African migrants). Due to practical difficulties, video calls and messaging were enforced in some cases and primarily for participants from Guangzhou. Everybody received consent, so many conversations were recorded and transcripts were made for analysis.

- Participant and Direct Observation: The study also found information from such visibility of informal economic activities as: evidence reports and interviews. The investigator concentrated on the participating in street markets across neighborhoods and community gatherings in Harlem that might have involved similar informal exchanges - such as street vending and basically unlicensed services - and could observe interactions between the vendor, customer, and authorities. In case of Guangzhou, direct on-site observation was more difficult given access restrictions, while the researcher performed virtual ethnography by watching YouTube videos, reading social media, and blogs dealing with different aspects of the life in Xiaobei's African enclave. By using online means of observation, a clearer portray of the spaces by which informational commerce is facilitated, for example, shops that are found in factories and street scenes taking place in the “urban village,” was created. Another example of how online observations can be supplemented by local-colleagues collaboration was provided: in Guangzhou, local partners disseminated pictures and descriptions of Xiaobei’s informal markets. All in all, the mixture of observational methodology provided context information

that transcripts alone were not capable of obtaining.

- Focus Groups and Community Meetings: In every community, a researcher was present at small community meetings whenever it was attainable. Recently, a community workshop that looked into the local entrepreneurship in Harlem was viewed, which had explorations in insights pertinent to informal business category. In Guangzhou, a group discussion was conducted (with help from the community head) where many of African traders had a mini focus group tackling together the problem of incongruence. These data helped to corroborate participants' statements with which they agreed or disagreed, and this verification was done through the community of community members and informal sector members in order to see how financial practices operated.

Secondary Data: The supplementary data can be the second collection of secondary resources.

- Document Analysis: A broader narrative based on city policy reports published by NGOs and news articles was also used to put the cases mentioned in their contexts. In Xiaobei, notices on immigration and urban village were perused, both Chinese government and international organizations on the African migration to China were mentioned, while in Harlem, New York City municipal plans on street vendors, racial and impressionistic data on the neighborhood, and non-profits' statements on community development were examined. Academic research on both locations (however, the prior studies

mentioned in the Literature Review are already presented). I did the same in both cities.

- Statistical Data: Even though I utilized the qualitative method, some numeric information that helps to contextualize the impact and scale of the informal economies were referenced. For instance, census and survey data were consulted to determine the number of people of African diaspora in Guangzhou or the unemployment rates in the marginalized areas, and other social-economic metrics. This data underscores the crisis that poverty or lack of formal employment creates as the reasons for informal work. Another part of the gathered information provides a size of informal sector in both cities by estimates (the number of not registered businesses, volume of informal trade, etc.).

During data collection, I employed an stakeholder engagement strategy to gain access and demonstrate trustworthiness of our solution. Harlems and the related community organizations, such as the Harlem Business Alliance or local neighborhood groups, aided the researcher in getting in contact with different informal economy entrepreneurs who agreed to be interviewed. Through these organizations, we were informed about the community's local efforts to create support for small businesses and atmosphere of comfort toward local commerce. Xiaobei's stakeholders, like the Guangzhou African Community Network and NGOs responsible for working with migrants, were engaged. They played the role of network creators that helped me to meet all the potential

respondents and also – they are known, so they contributed in presenting my research in a trustworthy manner. So as to do this properly, both community gatekeepers approach and conducting the study purpose through visit explained were the key points for success, which is of great importance for gathering local information on such sensitive areas as informal and digital economy.

Data Analysis

All qualitative data (the case study papers, interview reports, and data/materials) for thematic analysis were applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in order to map recurrent patterns and insights. Such as, after transcribing, each transcript and observation report was firstly read multiple times, and secondly, open coding was manually done to the margins. It implicated the use of code words that symbolized such issues as “trust networks,” “regulatory evasion,”, “survival strategies,” gentrification pressures,” and “transnational linkages.”. Integering these codes, I have grouped data into larger themes so to adapt the codes into the analysis categories of this study, which are economic practices, social networks, policy/regulation impacts, and the social outcomes respectively. Such as, “community social support” for individual mentions of all groups such as helping each other and forming associations, “adaptive tactics to enforcement” for individual mentions of hiding from police or adapting locations for business or part of the business.

At this stage, data source triangulation strategy delayed between the interview findings

and other sources, such as in-hall visits, observation notes, and document analysis. Because case study-based research is not restricted to one area or method umbilical cord, the author decided to connect the results by contrasting the contributions and limitations of the different sources, the so-called data adherents. As seen earlier in the discussion, however, analyzed different sets of data, such as interviews, documents, etc., in both case studies, Xiaobei and Tianhe for the sake of illustrating the differences in the results for either case.

The most difficult part of doing the research was the analysis itself, which involved making the observational notes or historical articles into a matrix with the Chinese and American communities divided into categories such as social, cultural, and spatial. By analyzing side by side the notes about Xiaobei and Harlem, it was possible to, in an extent, compare their socio-economic worlds, which is the result of comparative thematic analysis. Findings from this comparative thematic analysis will be used in the Comparative Discussion chapter.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the making up of the research participant group of most people in migration process, the study observed the tight ethics. All participants who took part in the interview process were informed of the design of the research and the exact manner in which information is transformed into knowledge. Herewith, the consent was gotten not only orally, but also through the sign or voice record of an agreement letter that

encloses objectives of the research and the risk of the participants. The confidentiality of the participants was increased as their names and identifiers (e.g. Trader A in Xiaobei) were masked in their work that the researcher had talked to ten people who they are not that comfortable discussing that. Details that could potentially make a person identifiable were altered in order to treat these people, especially the ones whose stories feature in sensitive areas.

As for the second research impulse, to guarantee the non-disclosure of the information, data was stored securely. The audio and the transcriptions were saved in protected system on the researcher's device through a password, analyze field notes and delete the data after field work is complete. To confidentiality in writing the case findings, the data was presented on a summarized or highly generalized form (by mentioning "several respondents claimed the same practice" instead of several similar arguments, but from one voice) or avoid quotations unless their unique elements of insight and can be safely utilized observation.

The fieldwork across culture that this research is concerned about also requires cultural sensitivity. The researcher has taken measures to be aware of local values both in Guangzhou and in the majority of the African diaspora communities around the world, including in Xiaobei. In Harlem, the mindset of the community towards external researchers is the main part of the matter. For instance, the researcher having been involved in unique and informal discussion with the residents and community members

in order to show the sincerity of the research beyond just the information acquisition. Even though in Guangzhou understanding the language and culture of African migrants by then became essential, and the translator was used when necessary, as the person who paid attention to learned greetings and culture of the peoples in order to win the rapport.

The last point that was covered in the study is the restriction, which is in situationality for the research. In Xiaobei, the legal restrictions on foreigners and the semi-clandestine nature of the society made direct observation practically impossible, which meant that the research had to rely more on participant reporting and secondary sources. While it was easier to achieve a reasonable level of access to the fieldwork research done in Harlem, it is also highly likely that there would have been sampling bias whereby the people who would have been keen to narrate their experiences in informal sector might just be the people who have high community ties (through networking with their organizations), thereby leaving out the other participants who might be more isolated to share. However, qualitative techniques of research make findings to be interpretive and not inter-contextual. The study doesn't actually tap into the whole quantitative picture of each informal economy. Conditions in both neighborhoods are dynamic; the fact that immigration is ongoing in China and gentrification in New York is proof that this study is spontaneous. However, the strengths of the methodology were pretty clear. The first fact to explore is that methodology firmly trusted information. The methodology with the research design/type, and data collection technique established the foundation of this thesis. This brings us to the last chapter of the thesis, which is the

part where I will be delving into detailed present case study results starting with Xiaobei, Guangzhou, and closing the chapter with Harlem, New York.

7. Case Studies

Xiaobei, Guangzhou

The informal economy in Xiaobei has become one of the critical lifeline sources for the African immigrants' communities. Over the last two decades, thousands of migrants from West Africa (and other regions of Africa) have started to live in the Xiaobei area of Guangzhou, where they operate in what can be termed as the margins of China's formal economy. Because of increasingly positive immigration policies and business registration procedures, some foreigners can obtain formal employment or establish companies. Nevertheless, the vast majority directly engaging in a network of informal trading activities, which link Guangzhou to the markets all across Africa. According to King (2019), African traders in Xiaobei act as travelling merchants, conducting transnational networks of business – importing from China textiles, electronic materials, and other displays to sell in Nigeria and Ghana and exporting African goods (such as local delicacies and handcrafted items) to China in niche markets. Such business dealings are unregulated by officials, and most traders either cannot get a business permit or a long-term visa due to the Chinese restrictive immigration policy. This is why informal economic activities are maintained via a social network among the African immigrants; this is basically why trust-based systems are the bases for the

financial services instead of the formal financial systems.

The peculiar trait of Xiaobei's informal economy is the use of informal housing markets. Liu et al. (2010) demonstrate that Africans often live in informal "urban villages" areas and work in unregulated environments, where landlords propose temporary, cheap rooms and find no contracts nor approval from the government. The informal housing arrangement permits migrants to remain in Guangzhou regardless of the lack of legal residency permits. People often live in the same space they work in: many traders turn their apartments into apartments shops or store rooms, and sleeping quarters serve as business transaction venues (Xu, 2012). The coexistence of living and commercial space is a testimony that migrants shape the cities according to their desires; a semi-autonomous enclave of economic action is singularly revealed. The informal rental market, while supplying affordable shelter and business premises, is in reality a legal grey area. Immigrants often depend on interpersonal relations with the local Chinese landlords who are willing to lend to them without the mandatory documentation. This mutual consent is comprehensive; landlords receive rent that is higher, and traders get a place of doing business. Nevertheless, this relationship remains undefeated due to a negative lack of legal protection.

Social networks and community institutions also have a role in both keeping Xiaobei’s informal economy alive and enabling it to grow. They help sustain it in ways too subtle to see but just as important. Weaving together the African diaspora in Guangzhou when

seeking help, completing transactions, and sharing news and events in cafes, bars, churches, and clubs were self-help groups at work. Interviewing these Xiaobei migrants revealed that the local church frequently visited by West African migrants plays the dual role of an informal networking hub. New arrivals can thus tap into these sources to be introduced to potential business partners who know the customer or to be informed of the procedures for navigating customs regulations after conversations with fellow parish members after the service. Likewise, ethnic associations – to mention a case, have a Ghanaian business association or a Nigerian traders' union – perform mediating functions. These agreements add sometimes, to resolving disputes, enforcing trust in transactions, and to avoid this "whispering" through the community when they go out of business; to checkmate the spread of distrust through the community. These grassroots networks create confidence not only among traders but also bring a measure of predictability for what is often a very volatile and frequently chaotic environment of informal trading. Broadly stated, members of the community come up with their own institutions far and away from the courts to help them regulate and facilitate trade: the common understanding reached in a church community or an association study group may have the same power as a formally outlined boundary in legal matters.

Working in a legal grey zone, Xiaobei's informal entrepreneurs still have their own challenges. One of the problems comes from the periodic crackdowns of the Chinese authorities, which is a consistent disturbance. Federal and local officials however sometimes apply border control measures, sometimes even combining with urban

redevelopment initiatives all of which are designed to change impromptu networks in this way. Informants confirmed in this regard such as the case of visa raids and anal inspections resulting in the closures on the shops. It was an intensified police effort that led to the arrest of many Africans for violation of visa in the year 2014, making the entire community panicked. One possible consequence is that of people being forcibly turned out of their illegal apartments by landlords. The dealers have consequently been highly mobile, vigilant, and spontaneous. Some stock small numbers of items and only at certain times during the day of the week. This is done to distribute the risks of holding excess amount of stock across the multiple stores at the different places of the city. Others cultivate relationships with local officials or Chinese business partners as protection – exchanging friendly gestures or pay off to gain an edge against the law. Nevertheless, the Xiaobei community lives under constant threat from the authorities even as traders congregate in the areas that the police have dispersed, pointing to the enduring loyalty and adaptability of the migrant community.

In current fact, the African traders also make use of similar qualities to fluctuate the changing restrictions climate by finding other routes, other homes, and sometimes by going “underground” like a moving storm when the surveillance is raised to prevent to have their financial activities persist. Interviews with Xiaobei entrepreneurs borne out the various adaptive strategies. One dealer from Nigeria describes how his ware is distributed among multiple undisclosed spots to sell other places and seldom substitutes its location to avoid capture by authorities. Others write about how he built a good

relationship with a local Chinese store owner who usually uses to inform him ahead of inspections. These narratives are to demonstrate the process where the Africans are able to creatively confront the environmental anxiety and still ensure their perseverance. In conclusion, the Xiaobei example not only is illustrative of immigrants but also showcases informal sectors, specifically, tearing down the walls that push immigrants away. Xiaobei's African enclave is known for its economically performative culture that is always on the move and dependent on social circles and entrepreneurship. It offers an avenue to migrants to make a living abroad and get money to their families at home and produce high unhappiness issues with the law. The case is that the whole captured idea is about the adaptation: migrants leveraging globalization networks from slums, utilizing urban spaces in fascinating ways, and founding substitute identities (like the communal/civilian dispute settlement network) which will help to survive abroad despite the exclusion of the political sphere.

Harlem, New York

The street economy of Harlem started centuries ago but continues to be molded by today’s complications. Individuals' underground economic activities flourish and change as a response to racial and economic disparities. During the 1900s, the African American working class in Harlem often found themselves marginalized in the formal job sector and remained in drastically unequal business situations (Kelley, 1996). Most likely, economic woes were the result of deindustrialization and capital flight, which was typical of New York City by the middle of the 20th century. These issues increased

unemployment and eventually amplified poverty in the area. Formally, these informal economic undertakings created monumental lifelines (Venkatesh, 2006). The communities turned to the available means in order to generate workplaces and exchange various goods and services that were not channelled through official systems. Activities such as arrangements to sell food, articles of clothing, and household goods on the streets; paying for childcare and haircuts in cash; using private home kitchens for catering and cleaning; engaging in informal taxi services through “gypsy” cabs that predated the ridesharing apps; and operating a number of other micro businesses on an informal basis became common. While this system worked for the poor Harlemites to help their family out during the period when institutions couldn't serve their purpose.

During the past decades, an integrated support system among the residents of Harlem around the underground economy has been developed. It is the social networks – family ties, friendly relationships, church congregations, and hometown acquaintances – which provide a backbone of this informal activity. Despite the relationship between the West African traders in Xiaobei who use the liking of members in the diaspora for networking and the linkage of our Harlem residents who rely on reciprocity among themselves in relationships and their culture. Venkatesh (2006) argues that informal contracts related to the labor market, from car repairs to housekeeping, and many other dealings were made with the use of community relations and word-of-mouth referral system in Harlem. By way of example, someone needing work might try to fill their needs for other odd jobs through their church group or extended family network. These

connections enable people to locate tasks that fill their needs even if the job listing is out there, and furthermore, those businesses are also doing their best to cover businesses wide. Proficiency of the drawn-up reputation among members of the community can serve as currencies to punish people through the community gossip for people who don't conform to community rules, for example, mischief pertaining to either the customer service or not-paying the employees. This community suppresses to some extent the behavior typically expected from regulatory and economic systems.

From informal evidence, Harlem socially spaces informal economies, which were built upon the traditional easily accessible central location and historical survival methods. The recent years' evidence suggests that Harlem's informal economy is affected by modern developments but the community remains intact. Many informal entrepreneurs are using the open air markets as well as technology in creative and engaging ways nowadays. For example, in this study, it was observed that humble vendors would communicate about the volume of foot traffic or the low level of market demands on given street corners, thus, this system was adopting the situation of night markets. On the contrary, well-established places such as the barber shop or beauty salons running off the record also are unequally possess information banks. The customers pass information about who is hiring for temporary work or which landlord will rent a flat without their apartment credit histories, thus assisting greater operations in informal sector. The fact that the resilience for change shows adaptability within the Harlem informal economy reveals that it isn't constant and traditional, but rather it fits flexibly

with technology and urban conditions while at the same time preserves the communal support. One food vendor owner I met and talked with said that they coordinate strategically across the vendors with a group text message just to make sure that they don’t come together on the same block, which would both decimate the customers and challenge the authorities of the competitors. Likewise, I sat down with a seasoned barber in Harlem and he mentioned that his barbershop was not only an unofficial job haven: 'another fair share of time we are not simply dealing with hair but rather utilizing such informal connections to help circulate opportunities within the community.

Revitalization and renaissance of Harlem today have been met with a profound external threat: gentrification and urban redevelopment actions. For about a decade, Harlem has gone through large-scale demographic as well as economic transformations, with the middle class and large companies moving into the area. As gentrification takes hold, housing becomes pricier for both property owners and for new businesses. A number of new commercial developments have emerged as property prices have increased, but some older local operations have been unable to meet the resulting demand, leading to the closure of a few long-term small businesses. Vendors and shoppers who had used to function with relatively unreasonable markets on certain streets are constrained to either these sites which look clean to appeal to new inhabitants and tourists or are to be monitored closely. The danger of eviction is very real: as the rents rise, families who had been struggling to sustain their business endeavors and to headquarters from home are being removed from the neighborhood. Neil Smith (1996) documents how

gentrification leads to through “revitalization” but mainly affect informal businesses and the people gentrifiers from the marginalized groups. The process is here realized and fulsil grazing by gentrifiers was reducing the opportunities locally for socially deprived groups.

However, people who remain in Harlem have superb facilities and this is because they have been clever to combat ethnic cleansing. A lot of the owners of street-level businesses have banded up to push authorities to contemplate granting them their due—by organizing street vendors associations mainly to lobby the city for their treatment. Others have gone on to provide services selectively, catering to the interests of the new clientele; for instance, a few long-history street traders have launched artisanal items or diversity cuisine, which certainly attracts to tourists and new residents alike yet at the same time keeping an informal operation setting. There are also cases where informal cooperatives are formed whereby multiple workers can team up to lease the fixed assets and have a share on a full-time basis wherein the quarters are used for part-time, hence this allows them to remain in their area. These adaptations illustrate the point that over a long period of economic reorganization in the environment, the usual function of the Harlem’s informal economy, which is providing a source for accessible livelihood and preserving community ties, still remains.

No matter the obstacles faced, the informal economy remains an indispensable function of Harlem’s essence. It not only grants economic chances for some that would not

otherwise exist but also protects cultural autonomy in the face of rampant financial exclusion. The unregulated businesses in both Harlem and Xiaobei reflect the two extremes of the pull-and-push model: appearing out of necessity and due to the lack of choices. They grant individuals the ability to live in the city with limited legal means, negotiate the gap between the rising costs of living and the dwindling formal opportunity, while in doing so protecting the most fundamental bonds of the community. Inform street markets, which continue to exist as do stand-alone service providers (like unlicensed taxi drivers or home daycare operators), and the appearance of new kinds of informal business (like standing street corners or social media-based small businesses), all indicate that a community faces the option of either surviving on its own or getting out.

These dynamics were clear to see in the field observations conducted in both cities. In Xiaobei, the sun's rays hit the streets filled with small shops and stalls displaying signs in English, French, and Arabic, as well as Chinese. Often you will find impromptu West African restaurants in the inner courtyards of apartment buildings tucked away from the main streets. The rhythmic police patrol presence releasing a limited rattling regime on the basis of bylaws cannot deter the ongoing business fight—buyers make bargainers, the goods tumble into suitcases in a fit of export craze, and gargantuan multilingual polyphonies of Mandarin, English, French, and Hausa fill the air. The informal economy of Harlem takes a place of honor in the mosaic of urban life tightening onto the city: street corners – selling everything from locally coined food to secondhand

clothes; and in parks, the weekend marketplaces co-exist with nature rehabilitation. The stoops and barbershops function both for business deals and social relations. These scenes underline that the informal economy itself is not a concept at an abstract level but rather people's practical lives, which shape the daily rhymes and cultural environment of respective communities.

The Harlem case represents the continuous persistence of informal economic practices in an area of frequent dislocation and transformation. The Harlem informal economy reflects more than adaptability; it seems to be in endless evolution, always discovering new tools and facing new problems, but it remains fundamentally founded on the community-based institution of exchange and mutual development. The comparisons made between Xiaobei, an internationalized community, and Harlem, a historically marginalized urban neighborhood, point to similarities in informal economies and thus serve as a preamble to a closer look at their commonalities and uniqueness within such areas.

In conclusion, the cases of Xiaobei and Harlem vividly illustrate both the opportunities of informal economies and the benefits of formalizing of these economies bounteously engagement for efficiency, equity, and prosperity. Although the part of Xiaobei, Guangzhou, where the informal trade networks run mainly by African migrants, tells how informal trading networks do inject a significant expect of entrepreneurial soul into the city - connecting Chinese manufacturers to African markets - the level of

external monitoring is pretty weak. Forming these traders with legal privileges, for instance, by giving them clear paths for license or visa procurements, can accelerate the GDP and the tax basis of Guangzhou by legitimizing the international cross-border trade that reaches almost every part of the globe. Additionally, things got more balanced as migrant entrepreneurs will no longer be stuck in the situation where they lack the protection of the law and cannot find an angle or society where they can at least enjoy the minimum of justice rather being exposed to danger. Additionally, in Harlem, New York, the legalization and formalization of the diverse range of businesses in this neighborhood, ranging from street vendors, home entrepreneurs, to odd-job networks, would assist longtime as well as new community members, and thus the amalgamation of the neighborhood will become more genuine. Steps such as forming people's licensing authority, street vendor's designated supervision and proper training and financial aid for micro-enterprises could improve the life of the informal employees in the Harlemites and thus give them a voice and an opportunity to settle their rank with the mainstream traders. Inclusion of informal economy in the formal structure of the system calls for proper planning, and the retention of the minority into the city's economy, aligned more with sustainability and social equity. Thus, Xiaobei and Harlem examples support the main thesis that collaborative cities should acknowledge informal jobs and industries that contribute to the urban system not by erasing them but by assisting them, leading to the development of vibrant and just cities.

8. Comparative Discussion

To begin with, despite the contextual differences between Guangzhou and New York, the evaluations belonging to the case studies show the similarity in how the informal economy combats in two kinds of environments. Xiaobei and Harlem are, in fact, the economic backbone of the informal economy; and it is the highly developed social networks that make this possible. These trust-based frameworks can be drawn either on shared ethnicity and migrant status in Xiaobei or in enduring neighborhood and family ties in Harlem, but they finally constitute the crucial heritage of informal trade (Venkatesh, 2006). The two communities depend on the personal relations with each other to collect the deals, solve disputes, and obtain support. What can be seen is that African traders are surely relying on diaspora trust networks to have an extended credit and arrangement of logistics across borders in Xiaobei; also, the same applies to Harlem, where many informal traders find clients or jobs due to word of mouth recommendations and connections in the community. The fact that social capital underpins in every way the same general principle, that where formal institutions are not present or responsive enough, the marginalized build those apprehended and mutual-help mechanisms therefore seems appropriate. To put informality these two approaches, there is not just an isolated complex of haggling, floating on the tides of a disorganized ecosystem, but rather an ecosystem built on the fabric of common collective norms and relationships.

Apart from that, as intended, each of the two informal economies has its unique characteristics based on historic and certain socio-political environments being rife with

instances of discrimination, they are also not entirely independent. The Xiaobei informal economy, being significantly affected by transnational forces and transnationalism, is far more based on transnational economic activities. The two countries practice international commercial relations mostly through online trade platforms, foreign migrant entrepreneurship working alongside transnational traders, as well as the constant negotiation of immigration laws. Xiaobei's unofficial circulation channels bearing witness to the unintentional effects of globalization from below if only the official channels are blocked. To contrast, it is Harlem's domestic factors such as the shadow of racial segregation, urban capital erosion, and gentrification, which shape its informal economy. The informal employment and diversion of labor in Harlem are predominantly local, interacting with the needs of the community. They reflect the legacy of a long-standing fight against the society that marginalizes racial economics. Xiaobei's informal economy is created by the intersection of rural-urban migration and commercialization meeting Chinese boundaries. In Harlem, poverty and the external world meeting point of one of the richest town in the world. This is a consequence that both are formations created out of exclusion. Nevertheless, in the former one, the acute pressure is on the outside (global trade), while in the latter one, the central regional level is on the inside (local survival).

Besides that, there is another difference in the roles being played by current external pressures and other future trajectories of these informal systems. In Xiaobei, the other strong external resort is government enforcement, consisting of irregular syndicates on

migrants and un-registered business exchanges, as well as the lack of certainty on official immigration systems towards migrants. This was been demonstrated by previous evidence that, in order to survive, they had to be flexible and keep a low profile and adopted a style where they could easily move and reconstitute themselves anytime a dispersed. Gentrification of the Stripe area is the most decisive outcome of the over-all rejuvenation of the district with the money and resources being the core elements. This significantly alters the economic picture in a more stable way, which gentrifies the Harlem area, but displaces the very people that the informal economy thrives on, thereby reducing the space (physical and social) where informality could thrive. In Guangzhou, policymaking to redevelop urban neighborhoods and to preventably disrupt migrant enclaves such as Xiaobei is highly likely, but, in a sense, these networks may change their locations from one district to another, or simply go silent only to emerge in different forms shortly thereafter. In New York, the moment a street market is chased away by the luxury condo of a community's changing demography, there are almost no chances those things would be replaced by anything even remotely close to as effective. In that sense, although the informal economy of Harlem is seriously being driven away by the injuries coming from the rising prices and lack of space, which used to be controlled by common sense of the people, the Xiaobei informal economy is persisting in a very relaxed format, so to say, due to the cat-and-mouse game with the authorities and the existence of the places where the informal business can freely run.

Therein lies the big irony, which stems from both the case examples, showing the

paradoxes of the system. Thus, from an empirical perspective, the painful echo of Xiaobei and Harlem's experiences reminds us that informalization is often a shady solution to alleviating some of the socio-economic effects of their historic mass exclusion. The factor of alienation from the formal economy has somehow contributed to the innovation of alternatives and a mode of survival out there. From such perspective, it is possible to state that theories such as Wacquant's "advanced marginality" or "globalization from below" may help to understand the evolution of informal economy in various settings. Thus, the study, focusing on Guangzhou, China, and New York City, USA, in order to compare the Chinese city and American city atmosphere and show that informal systems not only belong to the past times but also to the present times in which informal economies arise wherever marginal groups can see that there is not enough formal supply for the given unattractive legal context for them. Perhaps the comparison of Xiaobei and Harlem demonstrates that informal economies usually emerge under favorable conditions of exclusion but only for as long as those structural barriers are not overcome because, say, a lack of job opportunities or immigration restrictions, combined with class bias or discriminatory employment policies.

In addition, there are not only comparable general sentiments but also similar official stances at the same time in both cities when it comes to the informal economy. Meanwhile, the authorities frequently enforce unregistered activities (travel visas violation in Guangzhou, police check-ins on street vendors in New York), such regulatory mechanisms only conceal the multiple advantages that the communities even

the formal system covertly depend on. First, some Xiaobei traders supply affordable deviant goods and facilitate trade with the African markets, which the Chinese formal businesses have difficulty in reaching, leading to an indirect contribution of this illegal trade. Informal services deal with such things as care for children, serving cheap food that is not available anywhere else, transportation within the area, etc.; hence, the city also indirectly benefits when these vendors refuse to pay fines or simply because informal activities keep the unemployment statistics smaller than otherwise might be the case. When viewing such a paradoxical relation, it can be assumed that, in both Guangzhou and New York, the notion of informality, then, has simply found a structural attachment to the urban economy that cannot easily be detached from with no little damage to the urban residing population.

Both cases only display the dynamic nature of informal economies but also pose the same questions for urban policy. What all three cities have in common is that urban underground business activities succeed because they are able to answer real needs, be it through providing important tasks like any kind of job, services, and community identity, which are not reflected adequately enough in the formal economy. In Xiaobei, the fact that the poor/working classes will create their own paths (either to work or survive) when given the chances will be very evident. This is a significant introduction of theories, the next stride to consider would be what urban policies, rather than just clearing out, could be better dedicated to these outlier systems. As the two communities, Xiaobei and Harlem, face different challenges in details but share the identical concern:

support the livelihoods of marginalized people with the solution of preserving the positive characteristics of informality as well as incorporating the weaknesses of it in an appropriate way. The third section on policy implications will present potential strategies that will help balance between regulation and support, produce a more inclusive urban economy.

Thus, a comparison between Xiaobei and Harlem lay bare the idea that there is one underlying reason: the cities' informal economies yielding to the formal economy could be resourceful, even in divergent environments, opening countless options for the marginalized workers. These two instances highlight the fact that the informal economy is already a significant contributor to the functioning of the urban environment in mortality, employment, services delivery, and needs meet. However, the support by the formal economy will ensure that this function becomes sustainable. By associating the informal economy into formal economic circuits, Guangzhou and New York can elevate the urban economy, for instance, Xiaobei, as an enclave for international trade, run more orderly with registered visas and contracts as formal currency, while the legal framework in New York will protect and help the -informal enterprises to grow and innovate to bigger formal enterprises as they face the global competition. In this respect, the formalization is not only a process of becoming a part of but also a path to a more social justice it provides. It ensures that the privilege of globalization are, in Guangzhou get into the hands of the marginalized instead of skipping them. Being given legal status, informal workers are provided with the base for demanding just wages and for securing

safe workplaces and to competing in the markets with the right to choose – this, of course, will narrow the gap that irregular employment generates. A significant feature of the integration of informal economies in the official planning process is the guarantee of fairness: it gives a voice to the people previously shut out, affirms their role in the city structure and strategic vision. The experiences from other cites bring to focus the more intensified point that the main urban planning efforts that capture the informal life improve the cities rather than doing the opposite. In summary, order matters: formalization is a strategy that cuts across economic value added as well as social value added. Specifically, Xiaobei and Harlem instances declare that the informal economies are not mere popular imageries that are supposed to be destroyed; instead, they function as vital systems that, if rightfully recognized and adequately supported, will lead to the development of a more socially just and dynamic urban setting.

9. Policy Implications

The informal economies in Xiaobei and Harlem present significant challenges and opportunities for urban policymakers. In both cities, marginalized populations rely on informal economies as a matter of economic survival, yet they operate under continual threat of eviction, arrest, or loss of livelihood due to their tenuous legal status. Policymakers thus face a dilemma: cracking down on informality can harm the very residents who are already vulnerable, but ignoring it can perpetuate unsafe or exploitative conditions. As Wacquant (2008) points out, communities like these exist in spaces where conventional regulatory frameworks offer little protection or support.

In Xiaobei, African migrants navigate an ever-shifting landscape of immigration rules and lack access to legal housing or business licenses; in Harlem, long-time residents confront displacement pressures from urban redevelopment (Smith, 1996). The overarching challenge for policy is to strike a balance between regulation and accommodation - to protect the rights and well-being of those relying on informal economies without simply criminalizing their survival strategies.

When initiating responsive actions, it becomes evident that a single, unequivocal model is inadequate. Thus, each locality should consider its customized intervention. Below, we outline targeted policy recommendations for Xiaobei (Guangzhou) and Harlem (New York City), followed by broader inclusive strategies applicable to both.

Policy Recommendations for Xiaobei (Guangzhou):

- Enable Conditional Formalization of Informal Businesses: City authorities in Guangzhou could pilot programs that allow migrant entrepreneurs in Xiaobei to register and operate businesses legally on a limited or conditional basis. For example, the government might designate an “informal enterprise zone” in the Xiaobei area, where certain small businesses can obtain a temporary business permit or micro-license at low cost. Within this zone, enforcement of some regulatory requirements (like stringent capital minimums or local partner rules) could be relaxed. A tiered permitting system could be introduced: for instance, traders below a certain monthly turnover could operate under a basic, renewable

permit with minimal fees and paperwork (Tier 1); mid-sized informal shops could obtain an intermediate license if they meet basic health and safety criteria (Tier 2); and the most established enterprises could be offered a pathway to full business registration (Tier 3) contingent on compliance with key regulations. The goal of such a policy would be to bring informal trade partly into the legal fold—granting migrants some security and rights—without requiring full compliance that is currently out of reach for them. Implementation challenges: Officials might be reluctant to officially sanction activities in informal settlements, fearing that it could encourage more undocumented migration or appear to undermine immigration law. Careful coordination would be needed between agencies (immigration, police, commerce) to ensure that leniency in business licensing does not conflict with enforcement in other domains. Pilot programs could start small and be evaluated for economic and social benefits (e.g., increased tax base from permitted fees, better oversight of product safety) versus any unintended consequences.

• Provide Support Services and Legal Protections for Migrant Informal Workers: The Guangzhou city government, possibly in partnership with NGOs, should expand programs that assist those working in the informal sector. This includes offering microfinance opportunities (micro-loans or grants) to informal entrepreneurs so they can invest in inventory or equipment, which would improve their productivity and income. Legal aid clinics could help African migrants understand their rights and navigate issues like visa renewals, evictions, or disputes—reducing their vulnerability to exploitation. The city could also work

with community organizations to establish resource centers in Xiaobei that provide language translation, help with filling out forms, and guidance on any legal avenues available for business or residency. Additionally, authorities should consider issuing guidelines or training for local police to prevent harassment of informal workers and encourage approaches that focus on serious crime rather than visa technicalities. Implementation challenges: Building trust is critical. Migrants may be wary of government initiatives, fearing they are traps to identify and deport undocumented individuals. To address this, programs should involve respected community leaders and perhaps operate under the auspices of neutral organizations (like international NGOs or community associations) to signal that the intent is supportive. Confidentiality assurances and non-enforcement zones (where accessing services won't result in immigration checks) could encourage participation.

Policy Recommendations for Harlem (New York City):

• Inclusive Zoning and Preservation of Affordable Spaces: New York City policymakers should adapt zoning and land-use regulations to protect Harlem's traditional economic activities and vulnerable residents. For instance, the city could create special commercial zoning overlays in Harlem that legalize and accommodate street vending in certain areas. This might involve designating specific streets or public plazas where licensed street vendors can operate freely, possibly with infrastructure like kiosks or open-air markets provided. Periodic

open-air markets or vendor fairs in vacant lots could also be officially sanctioned, giving informal sellers a legal venue. Equally important is preserving affordable housing and commercial space so that low-income residents and businesses aren't forced out. Strengthening rent control and rent stabilization measures, supporting community land trusts, or offering tax incentives for landlords who lease to local small businesses at below-market rates are tools that could be expanded in Harlem. The city might even consider establishing a "cultural preservation district" in parts of Harlem – an area where longstanding local businesses (including informal ones that might be transitioning to formal) receive benefits such as property tax abatements, priority for storefront improvement grants, or exemption from certain fees to help them remain in place. To fund supportive measures, a small surcharge on new luxury developments in Harlem (a kind of community reinvestment fee) could be earmarked for grants or subsidized spaces for local entrepreneurs. Implementation challenges: Balancing development interests with community preservation can be politically complex. Real estate developers and some city officials may resist zoning restrictions or fees, arguing they could slow economic growth. To address pushback, the city should emphasize that maintaining Harlem's cultural and economic diversity is itself a valuable asset and that inclusive growth leads to long-term stability. Partnerships with local development corporations can identify win-win solutions, such as including affordable vendor spaces in new projects. Robust enforcement of any new zoning provisions will also be needed to ensure that informal vendors truly get the space promised, rather than being edged

out by higher-profit uses over time.

• Pathways for Informal Entrepreneurs to “Go Formal” (if desired): While not all participants in the informal economy will want to formalize, many would benefit from an easier path to legitimacy. The city should lower barriers for informal entrepreneurs who seek to transition into the formal economy. This could involve establishing a one-stop “business legalization clinic” in Harlem that provides comprehensive assistance: help with paperwork for permits or licenses, connections to pro-bono legal assistance for resolving past fines or violations, and guidance on accessing small business loans. The process for obtaining street vendor permits, for example, needs reform - the current cap on permits in NYC has created a black market and decades-long waiting lists. The city council could increase the number of vending permits and create a tiered licensing system (similar to the Xiaobei recommendation): a low-cost, entry-level license for single-person enterprises under a certain income threshold, with simplified requirements. Another approach is to offer financial incentives for formalizing: waiving first-year business registration fees, offering tax credits or grants to vendors who invest in upgrading to meet health/safety standards, etc. The message should be that formalizing will bring benefits (access to wider customer markets, legal protections, potential inclusion in city-run markets or events) and not just burdens. Implementation challenges: Some informal operators fear that formalization will reduce their income (through taxes, fees) or expose them to scrutiny that could shut them down. To alleviate this, policies should be gradual and supportive. For example, an

amnesty period for past unlicensed activity could encourage people to come forward without fear of punishment. Also, demonstrating success stories - like a former street vendor who now runs a thriving licensed food stall with city help - can build confidence in the system.

• Empower Community Engagement in Policy-Making: Informal workers and community members should have a voice in decisions that affect them. City governments can institutionalize this by creating forums or advisory councils that include representatives of street vendors, day laborers, informal caregivers, and migrant communities. In Harlem, a working group on the informal economy could meet regularly with the Mayor's Office or Community Board, ensuring that policies (from sidewalk use rules to police training) take into account on-the-ground realities. Similarly, Guangzhou could engage leaders from the African community in discussions about how to manage Xiaobei's neighborhood issues. By hearing directly from those in the informal economy, authorities can craft more pragmatic regulations - for example, designing vending permits or market spaces that reflect actual needs and hours of operation of vendors - and build trust with communities that are often distrustful of officials. Implementation challenges: Integrating informal stakeholders into formal policy discourse requires overcoming stigma and bureaucratic inertia. Officials must be willing to treat informal workers as legitimate contributors, not dismiss them as irrelevant or illegal. Community representatives may need support to participate effectively, such as translation services (in Guangzhou's case) or assurances that speaking up about problems won't lead to

retaliation. Over time, however, such engagement can lead to more nuanced and accepted policies.

Guangzhou and New York should not limit themselves to rigidity through monetary penalties but rather focus on methods to be inclusive and adaptive. Rather than seeing the viduals and unregistered businesses as problematic, city authorities should understand them as legitimate economic agents responding to immediate community demands. Through the creation of pathways for those in the informal economy to gain official recognition, alongside support mechanisms to improve their livelihoods, and careful adjustment of urban growth to prevent displacement, policy-makers will be able to leverage the beneficial traits of informal economies while reducing the challenges. Ultimately, the strategies will have to go hand-in-hand with larger efforts aimed at decreasing the systemic inequalities whether immigration constraints or racial-economic inequalities that created informality, to begin with. Welcoming the positive contribution of the informal economy to urban culture and integrating it into the city's development will result in more socially just and resilient cities.

In the end, the policy consequences of this research underline the recognition that the formal exposure of informal economic actors will result in the realization of immense gains for urban settings. Xiaobei and Harlem findings help me appreciate and point out that, when cities incorporate the politics that do not aggressively charge or discriminate

against the informal workers, but rather, they harmonize the different groups into the formal economy, it will yield positive results in multiple aspects. Thus, the cities can double their returns: the productive will amount to higher, the equitable will lead to greater, and the inclusive aspect will grow deeper. First, taking informal enterprises into the realm of the formal economy creates a platform where innovations and advancements go hand in hand – with the assumption that the typology of informal enterprise will be growth oriented as the formerly informal entrepreneurs move up to expand their operation and invest back into changes that boost productivity. This creates a stimulus of intangible power, and, as a result, the public coffers are well furnished by taxes for public service delivery. Secondly, formalization assures social justice by giving the workers a social package, the basic labor laws, and economic opportunities, which, until that moment, were denied to them. It is basically a justice issue: No worker or business should be no more labeled as unworthy of privacy and humanity for informal work. By officially recognizing the informal actors and granting them their dues, we decrease their exploitation in the form of mistreatment and bribes, and we empower them in their fight of improving their lives rather than resigning to the status quo. Thirdly, the inclusive approach of the formalization gives human the integrated picture of the city. When the homeless, street vendors, migrants, and casual workers have a chance to participate in the discussions pertaining to community development plan or the policy-making process, it leads to a more inclusive governance and a sense of belonging among those communities. This approach is shared with international development plans. Actually, the occurrence of the words 'diverse, safe, resilient and

sustainable cities' in the UN Sustainable Development Goals give a clear indication of how people do envisage the incorporation of the informal sector, since it is generally assumed that lifting informal workers off poverty is key to the realization of these plans. Furthermore, the plot of the international labor campaigners argues that formalization is not only essential for 'social inclusion, social justice, and real, dynamic social transformation' but also for urban development. Practically speaking, mayoral strategies may include subsidizing registration for micro-entrepreneurs, zoning of the legal street vendors in specific locations or establishing farmer's market, or giving sufficient training and credit for the informal employees and protecting the poor citizens from gentrification. In short, it becomes evident that urbanizing the informal scene is not merely a systematic technique but a long-path vision that leads to a more prosperous, egalitarian, and inclusive permanent town. In the list of recommendations that will project for Xiaobei and Harlem, special attention will be paid to the channeling of informal towards formal economies in a way that maximizes the strengths of these communities while at the same time taking care of their composition.

10.Conclusion

The main purpose of the study was to identify how the informal economies of Xiaobei and Guangzhou, as well as those of Harlem, New York, represent adaptive strategies for marginalized communities from globalization, neoliberal policies, and exclusion. The observations made clearly indicate that informality is a much deeper process than occupational polymerization, as urban economic life is being reconstructed. All these

are supported by political solidarity, spatial deceptions, and cultural ingenuity that challenge the existing formal economy.

I found some important points in response to the question of my research. As the first thing, the informal economies of Xiaobei and Harlem are supported by their community networks, mutual trust, and connections. Hence, putting it as a universal ingredient, social capital is required to enable the informal markets to function in the areas where formal institutions are weak or inaccessible. The way that local places transfer signs of informality is unique, for example, transnational trade and migrant entrepreneurship dominate in Xiaobei, while locally oriented services and street commerce characterize Harlem. Thus, the global and local factors of anxiety may differ widely, depending on which historical circumstances take priority. Another finding is that the informal economies of each community are highly adaptable, which means that they can become more resilient and flexible to endure such challenges as crackdowns or gentrification. Moreover, the traders of Guangzhou and the informal entrepreneurs of Harlem go on both simultaneously and continually adapting their strategies to overcome legal hindrances as well as economic problems. Such a dynamic situation powerfully exemplifies the variable features of informality.

I believe this research offers a more detailed view of urban informality based on the comparison between an enclave, the Global South, and the Global North inner-city neighborhood. It provides a conceptual bridge between two sets of the literature that

are regularly considered separately: the work on migrants' informal economies in developing-world cities and the work on undesired habit in post-industrial urban neighborhoods. The comparative aspect has become the basis for the conclusion that the poverty, exclusion, and underprovision of formal protection as causative agents imply similar adaptive responses, however distinctive those responses are on the surface. Planning and policy makers must be aware of this as shared condition, empowering the informal workforce, and integrating informal activities, which is likely to be relevant across a variety of contexts. This can be done by putting in place legal instruments or policies that protect informal workers in different contexts like street vendors in New York City or migratory traders in Guangzhou.

Therefore, the thesis calls for a balance not just from an economic aspect but also a social one. In other words, the faith of these systems begins because some segments of the population have no participation in the shared fortune. This work draws attention to a sense of need for planning paradigms that stress inclusivity of the mentioned sector by considering the informal economies of Xiaobei and the neighborhood of Harlem. Cities must strive for a system that expresses the advantages of informality through which communities can understand their own problems and needs, the visible cultural assets, and the existing social solidarity. They should determine the informal clusters' exacerbating factors so they can get at the root cause of the problem rather than only dealing with eradicating the informal actors. We see that cities currently trying to cope with globalization, which play with the informal economy under strict control, risk

rendering their economies even more complex and fragmented. To gain a foothold in this ever-changing landscape, cities that learn from and with their informal economies—be it from Guangzhou or the US—will become ever more inclusive and just for all city dwellers.

I'm waiting for additional research that can be done in this study by examining other case studies in the other regions, specifically informal economies of European cities and other Chinese migrant hotspots, looking for similar patterns in Xiaobei and Harlem, or for new evidence of the different manifestations of such informal economies. It would also be helpful if a long-term study is conducted that analyzes how informal economies adapt or diminish over time in case of being subjected to policy changes or economic shifts. The further exploration of these questions by scholars and practitioners will definitely contribute to understanding how to benefit from the strong sides of informal economies and how to avoid their weaknesses in order to promote the development of a peaceful and equitable city.

11.Limitations and Future Research

In looking back and considering my research work, I find it vital to clearly describe the processes of data collection as well as highlight the limits of the study. I employed a qualitative case study approach, conducting 20 semi-structured interviews – 12 in Guangzhou's Xiaobei enclave and 8 in New York's Harlem with West African immigrant entrepreneurs, informal street vendors, small business owners, community

organizers, and local experts (including NGO representatives involved in migrant support). These interviews were done with the assistance of community organizations such as the Harlem Business Alliance and local neighborhood associations in Harlem and the Guangzhou African Community Network as well as migrant-focused NGOs in China. This member helped me both in recruiting participants and in building trust. I reinforced the interviews with field observations (attending meetings and observing street markets in Harlem) and virtual ethnography (reviewing online videos, social media, and receiving photo updates from local contacts) used due to access restrictions. （Appendix B）

Additionally, I studied the city policy reports, non-profit publications, and statistical data (e.g., migration and unemployment figures) to triangulate and contextualize these qualitative insights. This complex tactic, thus, yields immersive, firsthand data on informal informal economic networks, but at the same time poses a few drawbacks. The first two of the relative small sample size and focusing two particular communities mean that the deep and multifaceted of the findings and illustrative are not generalizable. It may be possible that by depending on remote observation and second-hand reports for the Xiaobei case, a critical detail that was present and observable would have a chance to be reported by the fieldwork interviewer. Similarly, the use of community gatekeepers to locate interviewees might have been the possible source of the control bias – those who were connected in the local community were potentially overly privileged, while the invisible-high red flag awareness was the possibility of low or

solitary people at the gate. Language and cultural barriers were also there: besides the fact that some of the interviews were in French, others were probably in Mandarin, and thus the translators could have their own understandings, which made the situation more complicated. My cultural stereotypes could inevitably find their way into the transcript, even though I kept checking and verifying the correctness of the transcript. The final argument is that both my cross-sectional approach and my focus on the networks that have been spread from West Africa and Harlem's possession in Guangzhou may not be sufficient to illustrate the informal economic dynamics of other migrant groups and urban communities.

With the consideration of these limitations, I propose some ways in which further research can extend the present study. Doing further case studies in other global cities and the Article Discussion of this study could examine whether or not these findings apply beyond the selected countries, examples being illegal economies of African migrants in cities of major European countries or in other cities in China with good African communities. A wide-ranging analysis that covers the participants of the two types of networks or a mixed-methods project that draws on both the qualitative and the statistical data could help reveal more about the generalizability of the results. The longitudinal, when tracking informal entrepreneurial networks and survival strategies that constantly upsurge, might be useful through the years or make the policies (such as immigration laws, urban redevelopment plans, or crackdowns on street vending) that are official to locals in order to have an insight different from the cross-section in this

thesis. Moreover, a richer perspective on the relationships between the formal sector and the informal economy could be achieved by including perspectives from other stakeholders. We can do this by involving NGOs, local traders or other foreign residents who have long been in the communities. Through this exploration, I aim to go beyond the current understanding of urban informality and rise awareness of the gap between the formal systems of planning and the needs of marginalized communities to guide more inclusive and equitable urban plans.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction:

- Thank the participant and explain the study's purpose.
- Confirm consent for recording and anonymity.

Section 1: Economic Practices

- Can you describe your primary economic activities? (For example, what goods or services do you provide, and who are your customers?)
- How do you source your goods or find clients? Do you use digital tools such as social media or messaging apps?
- What are the biggest challenges in running your business or work informally (e.g., dealing with regulations, competition, or payment issues)?

Section 2: Social Networks and Trust

- How do you build trust with your customers or business partners? Are there intermediaries or community leaders who help connect people or mediate issues?

- Have you ever encountered conflicts in your informal work (for instance, unpaid debts or instances of fraud)? How were those situations resolved?
- How important are cultural or religious institutions (such as churches, mosques, community centers, or hometown associations) in supporting your economic activities?

Section 3: Policy and Regulation

- How do government policies or urban regulations affect your informal business or work? (Think about things like needing permits, risk of fines, police inspections, immigration rules, etc.)
- What strategies do you use to avoid or cope with regulatory issues? (For example, operating at certain times or places to evade inspection, or keeping your business small-scale.)
- Have recent changes in the city (such as gentrification, redevelopment projects, or shifts in law enforcement focus) impacted your livelihood? If so, in what ways?

Section 4: Culture and Community

- Do cultural practices or community events (like festivals, street fairs, religious gatherings) support your economic activities in any way?

- Are there specific spaces in the community (markets, plazas, certain streets, or community centers) that are important for your work? Why are those places significant?
- How does your business or informal work contribute to your community's identity or cohesion? (For instance, does it fulfill a need for the community or keep cultural traditions alive?)

Closing:

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with the informal economy in your community?
- (After the interview, thank the participant again for their time and inform them that you will be happy to share the results of the study with them once it is completed.)

Appendix B: Interview Summary Profiles

Participants in Xiaobei, Guangzhou (12 Individuals)

- Trader A (Nigerian Electronics Trader) exports refurbished mobile phones to Lagos, Nigeria, managing 90% of his orders through WhatsApp groups. His monthly turnover reaches $15,000, with goods stored in decentralized warehouses across Foshan, Dongguan, and Zhaoqing. To evade police raids,

he conducts loading and unloading operations between 1:00–4:00 AM and relies on church-based diaspora networks for logistics.

- Trader B (Ghanaian Apparel Trader) specializes in exporting low-cost women's clothing from Guangzhou's Shahe Market to Kumasi, Ghana. She markets products on Instagram and requires a 30% deposit for purchases. To bypass banking restrictions, she utilizes informal currency exchanges, which charge a 12% fee. As part of her cultural adaptation, she also operates a "fusion restaurant" blending Ghanaian stews with Cantonese dim sum.
- Trader C (Malian Handicraft Importer) brings Malian wood carvings and leather goods to African migrant communities in China. His inventory is stored in a church basement, and transactions are mediated by pastors, with communal dispute resolution. To navigate inspections, he claims his goods are "personal collections." His perspective on business in Guangzhou is summed up by his statement: "Here, trust outranks the law."
- Landlord A (Urban Village Landlord) rents out 12 apartments to African migrants at 60% of market rates. He uses hidden cameras to warn tenants of police raids and collaborates tacitly with local officials to maintain low crime rates. Reflecting on his role, he says, "They pay, I stay silent—this is Guangzhou's unwritten code."
- Lawyer A (Immigration Attorney) provides legal assistance for cargo seizure appeals and visa extensions for African migrants, though his success rate remains below 20%. To help his clients continue business operations, he

advises them to register shell companies under “tourism visas” to obtain temporary business licenses. He encapsulates the predicament of his clients: “Their choices: risk staying or return bankrupt.”

- Pastor A (Church Leader) manages a Nigerian Pentecostal church that is officially registered as a “cultural exchange center.” Beyond religious services, the church facilitates economic activities by hosting post-service trade fairs where migrants can store goods for free and resolve business disputes informally.
- Trader D (Senegalese Food Importer) imports Senegalese coffee and spices, catering to both African migrants and local cafes. He takes orders through WeChat mini-programs and employs motorcycle couriers to deliver goods while evading regulatory oversight.
- Trader E (Kenyan Phone Accessories Vendor) operates in night markets, selling low-cost phone cases and chargers to African students and tourists. To avoid tax scrutiny, he processes payments through secondary Alipay accounts. Despite his business lacking a formal storefront, he remains confident: “My stall has no sign, but everyone knows where to find me.”
- Landlord B (Sublandlord) subleases apartments to African migrants at a 20% markup. Rather than offering formal rental contracts, he collects deposits to minimize legal risks. During inspections, he claims that his tenants are only “short-term visitors.” Summing up his approach, he states, “Higher risk, higher profit.”

- Trader F (Congolese Electronics Supplier) sources electronic components from Shenzhen's Huaqiangbei district for export to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He communicates with clients via Telegram and prefers to settle payments in Bitcoin. His philosophy is captured in his remark: "Blockchain is my passport; code is my contract."
- Community Leader A (Migrant Representative) is a self-organized leader who coordinates essential services for African migrants, such as waste disposal and utility payments. He also negotiates informal "tolerance policies" with local authorities to maintain stability. Despite the lack of official recognition, he asserts, "We have no official recognition, but we govern ourselves."
- Translator A (Language Intermediary) provides translation services between English/French and Chinese for African migrants. He charges hourly rates to assist with government paperwork and rent negotiations, playing a crucial role in bridging language barriers for the community.

Participants in Harlem, New York (8 Individuals)

- Vendor A (Hot Dog Vendor) is a third-generation street vendor on 125th Street, selling spiced hot dogs. He earns approximately $300 daily, with 70% of his customers being Black Harlem residents. To attract more customers, he uses Instagram Stories to announce his real-time locations. As a form of

cultural resistance, he decorates his cart with murals of Black history as part of the Harlem Food Heritage Project.

- Vendor B (Vintage Clothing Vendor) upcycles discarded garments into unique "streetwear revival" fashion. Her monthly earnings reach $1,200, though she spends 45% of it on fines. To circumvent permit regulations, she sews tags on her clothing that read "Not for Sale—Charity Donation."
- Artist A (Street Muralist) paints murals on corporate-owned buildings, such as Starbucks, to critique gentrification. To monetize his work, he sells NFT versions of his murals and earns around $2,500 monthly. Additionally, he negotiates "cultural compensation fees" of up to $5,000 per mural from businesses. He views his art as a tool for activism, stating, "My art is a weapon. I turn their walls into our stories."
- Organizer A (Anti-Gentrification Activist) leads grassroots campaigns against displacement in Harlem. He creates the Harlem Survival Map, disguised as a tourist guide, to highlight informal businesses. As a form of tactical urbanism, he converts vacant lots into pop-up gardens and markets to reclaim space for the community.
- Deacon A (Church Deacon) oversees a historic Black church that runs a food bank serving 200 households weekly and a gig-posting board to connect job seekers with local opportunities. While officially registered as a religious charity with tax-exempt status, the church also provides indirect support for unlicensed street vendors.

- Vendor C (African Craft Vendor) sells wood carvings and woven goods, many of which feature anti-gentrification slogans. To avoid fines, he organizes weekly “pop-up markets” that change locations frequently. His approach to selling goes beyond commerce: “We sell not just products.”
- Barber A (Community Barber) has run a Black barbershop in Harlem for 40 years, providing not just haircuts but also a space for community discussions. His business model includes bartering services, such as offering free haircuts in exchange for plumbing repairs, strengthening local solidarity.
- Musician A (Underground Jazz Artist) performs in jazz clubs and independently sells self-produced records. His income is evenly split between ticket sales and underground record sales, allowing him to evade strict copyright enforcement. Reflecting on Harlem’s changing landscape, he states, “If they shut down the club, we play in basements.”