



## Adaptation, Prosperity or Precarity: Economic Pathways of Malian Traders in Yiwu, China's Global Marketplace

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**Abstract:** Economic adaptation to the Chinese market presents major challenges for Malians due to their lack of preparation in terms of skills, motivation and market entry strategy. The study of the economic adaptation of Malian traders is relevant. Firstly, Yiwu is becoming a preferred destination for Malian traders wishing to establish themselves in Asia, to act as a bridge between China and Africa. Secondly, the migrant community perceives Yiwu as the Middle East of China, with a predominantly Muslim population. Data was collected from 20 Malian traders who have set up a business in Yiwu and live there for a qualitative analysis. This group of traders were classified into four categories using a typological analysis. The findings reveal that Market Leaders are financially successful and effective at navigating market conditions. Transnational Hustlers are traders who adapted to market conditions, but instead of attaining high local success in Mali, relied on transnational networks. Survivors are Malian traders who obtained moderate economic success despite minimal market adaptation. Struggling Traders are those who struggle with both economic outcomes and market adaptation. Future research could explore other cities by carrying out a comparative analysis to identify convergences and divergences with the Malian diaspora in China involved in commercial activities.

**Mots-clés :** Malian traders; Economic adaptation; Yiwu; China; Market

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17099384>

### 1 Introduction

The literature review on Africans in China identifies three arguments for the pull factors that motivate these migrants to settle in China. The first argument is based on education purpose (Bouchaib, 2023; Gbollie & Gong, 2020), the second factor is based on the search for business opportunities (Hu, 2021; Prah & Sibiri, 2021) and the third factor of attraction is diplomatic, particularly with a strong presence of African diplomatic missions in Beijing and Guangzhou (Bodomo, 2015). The push factors that encourage Malians to leave their country of origin are firstly political, particularly with the recurring political instability since 2012 (Sylla & Cold-Ravnkilde, 2022), secondly the need for Malian traders to expand their business at home and conquer the global market (Hummel, 2016), and thirdly the search for a better future to escape poverty (Afridi et al., 2020). The wave of African migrants, particularly Malians, heading for China presents challenges for both the migrants and the host country. Economic adaptation to the Chinese market presents major challenges for Malians due to their lack of preparation



in terms of skills, motivation and market entry strategy. Research has shown that migrant entrepreneurs may possess these skills, but the strict regulations of the host country can pose major obstacles to their economic adaptation (Fanling et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2016). This research will therefore focus on the specific case of Malian traders in Yiwu.

Malian traders refer to all Malians currently in Yiwu who have accommodation and a business license enabling them to legally set up a company and carry out commercial activities between Africa and Yiwu. Moreover, the Malian population in China is dominated by traders who are scattered between Guangzhou and Yiwu according to their field of trade activities. Those interested in electronics and clothing are most often based in Guangzhou (Liang & Le Billon, 2020), while those selling building and decoration materials are in Yiwu (Said & Olivier, 2015). Xiuling (2022) shows that Africans in Yiwu play an important role in the economic development of Yiwu. African entrepreneurs in Yiwu create jobs for the local population of Yiwu. In African countries, these migrant entrepreneurs contribute to the economy of their country of origin by creating jobs that can eradicate poverty (Loxley et al., 2015).

The concentration of African traders operating in China on low-quality, low-price products is causing concern (Mathews & Yang, 2012). African states and the Chinese government are working within the framework of the Canton Fair to enable these African traders to open their doors to quality and affordable products, which will enable them to increase their profits and, to a large extent, supply the African market with quality Chinese products (Bochun & Zetian, 2024). This issue is important insofar as the focus on quality goods will enable these African traders to sustain their business and increase their income in a highly competitive global business environment. This will require economic adaptation to the Yiwu business environment. This article focuses on the economic adaptation of Malian traders in Yiwu in order to understand the strategies implemented by these traders to improve their economic success, their market adaptation and their transnational networks.

With the rise of globalisation and the shift in economic dynamics in some huge markets such as China, understanding the economic experience of Malian traders in an environment such as Yiwu is becoming increasingly important. Moreover, the city of Yiwu, in Zhejiang province, is increasingly becoming an important crossroads for international trade, as it continues to attract several migrant entrepreneurs from different African countries, particularly from Mali. This wave of commercial migrants highlights the complexity of economic adaptation in a global environment. Economic adaptation is a strategy by which an individual or group of individuals implements measures in response to changes in the context in which they operate and which require the adaptation of their internal operations in order to improve their business outcomes (Brzozowski, 2017). In the case of my research, it's about the personal motivation, business skills and market entry strategy that Malian traders put in place to improve their business results. Maintaining competitiveness and ensuring long-term sustainability depend on this flexibility according to (Borjas, 1994).

The study of the economic adaptation of Malian traders is relevant. Firstly, Yiwu is becoming a preferred destination for Malian traders wishing to establish themselves in Asia, to act as a bridge between China and Africa. Secondly, the migrant community perceives Yiwu as the Middle East of China, with a predominantly Muslim population (Said & Olivier, 2015). Third, Yiwu has seen a notable influx of African residents, including around 800 Malians out of an estimated 3,000 African residents in 2018 (Bodomo, 2015).

Despite the importance of the economic adaptation of Malian traders in Yiwu, the literature has so far focused on the economic interaction between African traders and the local Chinese population. Furthermore, most research focuses on Africans in general and pays less attention to the fact that Africa is a continent made up of 54 countries and therefore 54 communities with different realities. Further research into the economic adaptation of specific countries is needed to enable academics and policy makers to understand the nuances between the populations of different African countries. To fill these gaps, this study aims to explore the economic adaptation of Malian traders in Yiwu. This study will be guided by two research questions.

RQ1. How do Malian traders use their business skills/experience, personal motivation and market entry strategy to adapt economically, and how these skills lead to economic success?

RQ2. What factors explain the divergence in economic outcomes and adaptive strategies among Malian traders?

The exploration of these two questions allows us to understand useful insights concerning the economic adaptation of Malian traders, while also contributing to the limit of literature review on Malian traders in the emerging Yiwu market. Moreover, the literature review is studied in relation to the topic by focusing on Yiwu and the theories and concepts related to economic adaptation. To answer the research questions, qualitative data were collected through semi-structure interview. This study was inspired by the economic adaptation model proposed by Jan Brozowski, which highlights the theoretical relationship between immigrant entrepreneurs and economic adaptation. The remainder of the article is composed in sections with the next section exploring the literature reviewed, focusing on Yiwu as a market hub, economic adaptation which explores concepts such as personal motivation, market entry strategy and skills/experience. Section 3 explains the methodology used to answer the research questions. Section 4 presents the results of the research and finally Section 5 provides a discussion and conclusion of the article.

## 2 Research method

A qualitative methodology with a typological approach was convenient because it allows us to answer the research questions while classifying Malian traders into different categories on the basis of their level of adaptation. The typology approach as a methodology in social science is a method of classifying and organizing objects, structures and phenomena based on their shared characteristics and differences (Bhattacharyya, 2020). The advantage of this approach is that it provides a clear picture of the phenomenon under study, in particular the economic adaptation of Malian traders in Yiwu.

The data was collected from 20 Malian traders who have set up a business in Yiwu and live there. This is important because there are a good number of Malians in Yiwu who identify themselves as traders but in reality, do not own a business in Yiwu. They are most often students and traders who have their business based in Guangzhou but spend a fair amount of time in Yiwu. The participants in this study are exclusively Malians who have their business and accommodation in Yiwu. The choice of Yiwu was justified by the presence of a fairly large number of African and Malian traders. All the participants in this study are men, because during our interviews in the field, there were no Malian women owning a business in Yiwu. The Malian women present in Yiwu are the wives of Malian traders established in the city.

Among the participants aged 25 to 30, there are 4 individuals who represent 20% of the total. The age group of 31 to 40 includes 7 traders who represent 35% of the total participants. The majority of Malian traders belong to the age group above 40 years, with 11 participants representing 55% of the sample interviewed. Married traders constitute the majority of our sample, with 16 out of 20 participants, or 80% of the total sample. Six individuals are single, representing 30%. The educational qualifications of traders are as follows: seven traders, or 35% of respondents, received a formal education. Among these, four traders, or 20% of the sample, are graduates of primary schools. High school graduates comprise 8 individuals, representing 40%. Finally, five people obtained a Bachelor's degree, which is 25% of the sample. This demographic profile highlights a community of traders dominated by men, with a significant proportion being married and over 40 years old. It demonstrates a diverse interest in education, albeit with varied representation among secondary school diploma holders. The present study offers an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic composition of Malian traders in Yiwu, encompassing their age, marital status, and educational qualifications.

**Table 1:** Demographic profile of the participant

Participant	Gender	Age	Education level	Years in China	Language used	Interview length
<b>M1</b>	Male	27	Bachelor Degree	3	French	45 minutes
<b>M2</b>	Male	34	Masters	7	Bambara	51 minutes
<b>M3</b>	Male	45	High School Degree	9	Bambara	38 minutes
<b>M4</b>	Male	37	Bachelor Degree	8	Bambara	19 minutes
<b>M5</b>	Male	42	High School Degree	12	Bambara	43 minutes
<b>M6</b>	Male	53	Informal Education	18	Bambara	3 hours
<b>M7</b>	Male	29	Bachelor Degree	4	French	40 minutes
<b>M8</b>	Male	50	Informal Education	15	Bambara	1 hour 20 minutes
<b>M9</b>	Male	45	High School Degree	13	Bambara	45 minutes
<b>M10</b>	Male	48	Elementary School	14	Bambara	54 minutes
<b>M11</b>	Male	50	Informal Education	16	Bambara	49 minutes
<b>M12</b>	Male	38	High School Degree	8	Bambara	38 minutes
<b>M13</b>	Male	27	Bachelor Degree	6	French	50 minutes
<b>M14</b>	Male	32	Elementary School	7	Bambara	1 hour
<b>M15</b>	Male	32	Elementary School	9	Bambara	41 minutes
<b>M16</b>	Male	32	High School Degree	6	Bambara	45 minutes
<b>M17</b>	Male	36	High School Degree	10	Bambara	38 minutes
<b>M18</b>	Male	52	Informal Education	18	Bambara	39 minutes
<b>M19</b>	Male	35	High School Degree	9	Bambara	54 minutes
<b>M20</b>	Male	55	Elementary School	19	Bambara	1 hour 10 minutes

It is important to note the background of the principal researcher of this study in order to understand certain points of view that could be biased. The main researcher is a Malian who has been living in Beijing since 2019 as part of his studies. He frequently visited the city of Yiwu as part of their research.

Some of the questions asked during the interview were: What specific skills or experiences do you bring to your business in Yiwu? How have these contributed to your ability to adapt economically? Can you describe any personal goals that drive your efforts? What strategies did you use when entering the Yiwu market? How have these strategies influenced your success in adapting to the market? How would you define economic success for yourself as a trader? Additional questions were asked about the scale of their business (see appendix).

The data was collected over three separate field visits to Yiwu by the researcher to interview and observe Malian traders on their business practices, challenges and first-hand experiences. The research was mainly qualitative, utilizing observation techniques, semi-structured interviews, and informal discussions. This approach allows the researcher to deepen the analysis of the research question in order to obtain decisive and relevant information to enrich the article.

**Table 2:** Data collection on the field phases

Date	Objectif and achievement
<i>From May 20 to June 6, 2023</i>	The researcher spent two weeks in the city of Yiwu to meet the appointment initially obtained with the president of the Malian Traders Association. This trip was initially intended to establish contact with Malian traders in Yiwu and also to finalize the development of the half-format questionnaires that the researcher would use to collect data later. Field observation during the first trip enabled the researcher to gain a better understanding of the social and economic adaptation dynamics of Malian traders in Yiwu. This trip enabled the researcher to observe social and commercial interactions for the first time, and how these social exchanges influence traders' experiences. This provided important contextual details that helped this dissertation create the research framework through informal interviews conducted with stakeholders to include the aspect of their future aspiration for China. The researcher made observations focused on Malian traders by spending enough time with groups of traders in an African restaurant and accompanying them to the "Futian" market. The goal was to see how they do their market activities, the way they work with Chinese suppliers, and how they overcome the social difficulties. Field observation allowed the researcher to get a more solid perspective on the type of business and realities facing Malian traders in Yiwu. This first contact with the business environment in Yiwu also enabled the researcher to experience the daily interaction between Malian traders and Chinese suppliers, and the difficulties associated with this interaction. Dewalt and Dewalt (2010) assert that participant observation is an essential research tool since it allows researchers to explore in depth the behavior of groups as well as their social dynamics in their natural environment. The researcher's hands-on experience with traders provided important insights that informed the development of the interview questionnaires. The first visit not only provided an opportunity to experience direct interaction with the Yiwu business world, it also added other aspects of great importance to these Malian traders. In the course of everyday discussions, Malian traders missed no opportunity to mention the problem of their children's education, and the remittance and cost of the health system. Most interview participants demonstrated how they provided monetary support to their relatives back in Mali, as remittances played a critical role in their migration journey. The researcher decided to include questions related to remittances when designing the semi-structured interview guide for policy recommendation to stakeholders.

<b><i>January 3, 2024 until March 28, 2024</i></b>	The researcher completed his second fieldwork visit to Yiwu. The three-month period focused on semi-structured interviews along with informal interviews as well as observational data collection started during the initial visit. The researcher selected semi-structured interviews as his primary data collection method since these interviews produce an in-depth understanding of predetermined interview guidelines. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), semi-structured interviews remain the ideal method for conducting exploratory research when researchers want to understand the participants' experiences and opinions in depth. The guide used during the preliminary investigation research contained open-ended questions that explored all areas of trading, from social adaptation elements to economic adaptation inputs and their future aspirations in Yiwu.
<b><i>December 9, 2024 to December 19, 2024</i></b>	The third visit occurred in December 2024 after a discussion between the researcher and the supervisor. The researcher decided to make a final field visit for this study in order to strengthen his analysis of the typological classification that occurred during the data analysis. This visit lasted one week and consisted of doing a mini interview round with the same respondents about their future aspirations in China. This visit allowed for a clear direction of the outcomes of the framework: stay in China, temporary stay, hybrid presence, and leave China. It also helps to validate the typology classification that was established from the data analysis.

### 3 Findings

To answer the first research question: How do Malian traders use their business skills/experience, personal motivation and market entry strategy to adapt economically, and how these skills lead to economic success? This study explored the economic adaptation of Malian traders in Yiwu with reference to Brozowski's model (2017). The appendix presents the questions asked to the Malian traders, with section 1 addressing their social demographic profiles, section 2 questions relating to their business scales and finally section 3 which explores questions on economic adaptation, in particular with concepts linked to skills/experience, personal motivation and market entry strategy.

To answer the second research question. What factors explain the divergence in economic outcomes and adaptive strategies among Malian traders? The findings go into more detail using a typology analysis. It gives a nuanced picture of the various experiences and strategies of different types of traders in Yiwu. It does this by making profiles of market leaders, transnational hustlers, survivors, and struggling traders among the Malian traders community in Yiwu. Figure 1 presents the characteristics of each typological group as well as the differences that distinguish them from each other. Each typological group is studied separately through concepts such as skills/experience, personal motivation and market entry strategy. This is justified by the fact that each group has these studied phenomena in common (Bhattacharyya, 2020)



**Figure 1:** Typology analysis: four types of traders from economic adaptation

### 3.1 Market Leaders

These elite Malian traders in Yiwu are distinguished by the volume of their business through the number of their employees, the number of warehouses they owned, and the volume of goods sent each year to Africa. Beyond their simple commercial success, these individuals also possess a deep understanding of market mechanisms, which allows them to take advantage of opportunities while mitigating risks. They inherently leverage knowledge of the intricacies of local and global trade. Additionally, their approaches foster stronger relationships with suppliers and allow them to meet the needs of their Malian customers accordingly. In this section, we will discuss the key qualities of market leaders, including their skills and experiences, personal motivations, and market entry strategy. This part gives a classificatory picture of market leaders containing their profile and the reason for their classification. The empirical criteria for classifying these traders are: Market leaders are those who have more than 3 employees in Yiwu. They send more than 50 containers per year to Mali. They have at least one office and their own warehouse. Their operations are only concentrated between China and Mali.

#### *Skills and Experience*

The views gathered from market leaders show that this group of traders built up a solid base of experience and skills long before they arrived in Yiwu. They hone their skills and experience over their long years of trading with valuable market and consumer insights. In his own words, M4 (37), shared his story:

*“I started trading little by little from a young age; I was selling from my phone on WhatsApp, but I finally learned how to read the market. I attended trade fairs and learned from experienced traders, especially from my big brothers. My big brother back home taught me a lot about negotiation and identifying quality product with low budget.”*

The story of M4 highlights the importance of continuous learning and adaptability. His narrative highlights the need to constantly seek information and understand the specificities of the Yiwu market. However, some market leaders better understand the current needs in their home countries and do not hesitate to invest their financial resources to meet this need. This is the case of M7 (29) who was able to increase its market share and investment portfolio thanks to its wealth.



He emphasized: *“Having a lot of products is not necessarily the path to making a lot of money. It’s about knowing what products your customers want and why they want them.” As I have learned more, I have learned what is coming, and I predict my customers' needs better than before. For example, before I could send containers full of motorcycles to Mali, but I had difficulty selling them. Today, for example, when I send 5 containers full of lithium batteries from solar panels, I sell them all in less than a month because the country is facing an energy crisis.”*

One of the beneficial effects of increased wealth for market leaders is that they continue to take calculated risks by investing money in new product lines or increasing the number of products they stock in their stores in Mali, thus consolidating their market position.

### **Personal Motivation**

Personal motivation allows market leaders to maintain consistency in their activities, as financial success is not a long-term guarantee. Many worthy goals require hard work and determination to achieve, which is why ambition helps market leaders stay motivated in their efforts to achieve them. Moreover, market leaders are very interested in public validation and take on the role of mentor and financial backer for members of their community. The case of M5 is consistent with the general view of market leaders on their personal sources of motivation to achieve or maintain economic success.. M5 expressed his ambitions as follow:

*“I want to be a role model for the youth of Mali. This mindset helps to reignite my goals, which also allows me to be a source of inspiration and motivation for others to pursue their goals as well. I hope to prove that with hard work and resilience, we can succeed in any context as malian.”*

M5’s commitment to his Malian community demonstrates a level of motivation that goes beyond himself. He is motivated by his desire to help others and is involved in mentoring newcomers, helping them navigate the complex world of trading in Yiwu. Due to his financial success, he stated that this allows him to give resources and support to others:

*“Every time I see someone struggling, I think back to my own beginnings. Before, everyone in this industry seemed like competition to me, but now I support everyone because I know that a rising tide lifts all boats.”*

This personal motivation for mentoring from the Malian trading community in Yiwu also helps to improve M5’s reputation, attracting more customers and suppliers given its position as a helping hand. He stated that he uses his wealth to uplift his community and assist those who are less fortunate.

### **Market Entry Strategy**

Market entry strategy is the set of strategies used by Malian traders to penetrate the Yiwu market and occupy an important position. Among the Malian traders, market leaders demonstrate their insight into market entry strategy by gaining a good understanding of the differences between Mali and international markets. M6 (53) described their strategy:

*“With Mali as a starting point, I observed a lot. I communicated a lot with people from different backgrounds and countries when I came to Yiwu. I understood that not all innovative and beautiful items can be sold in Mali or other African countries. I focused on what is suitable and can be sold as quickly as possible in my country. The next step is to build excellent relationships with Chinese suppliers who can meet your needs at any time. It’s all about strategy and making good decisions.”*

Market leaders also makes extensive use of research and planning, and M6 is a good example of this as they demonstrate how some of the successful traders apply new business information into their daily modus operandi. His financial stability allows him to conduct market research and test products well before anyone else, which allows him to always have an advantage over his competitors. He continued by explaining:



*“I always try to keep a sample of products in my containers when I ship my regular products. My employees in Mali will try these samples in the Railda market (a market in the heart of the capital of Mali) to see how the customer will react to them. These samples help me respond quickly to changes in demand or add new products to my inventory in Mali.”*

M6 (53) shows the importance of market research before launching a product. It leverages the immediate needs of Malian customers and builds its brand as a supplier in the Malian market by having a wide variety of inventory. He has the financial means to study and pivot quickly in response to changing market trends, thus ensuring his economic success. Market leaders are an impressive showcase within the Malian community in Yiwu due to their financial success. These narratives show that market leaders have the patience to first study the difference between the Yiwu and Mali markets and then test sample products in the Mali market to understand what customers think before marketing a product.

### **3.2 Transnational Hustlers**

Transnational hustlers are experienced traders who have proven skills in the Yiwu market environment, but they relied on their overseas connections rather than focusing on the Malian market to achieve their sales results. They are resourceful individuals who can leverage their creative skills, personal motivations, and market entry strategies to navigate the complex terrain of international trade, enabling them to establish a bridge between Yiwu and different countries in Africa.

The empirical criteria for classifying these traders as transnational hustlers are: They sell their goods in multiple countries. They have at least 3 employees in Yiwu and at least one employee in a country apart from Mali. They send at least 20 containers per year to different countries apart from Mali.

#### ***Skills and Experience***

This group of traders has several similarities with market leaders, notably the heritage of an economic activity inherited from their families. They all possess transnational skills and trade negotiation that enable them to thrive in multiple market contexts. The point of view provided by M2 (34) gives a perspective on this family heritage.

*“I grew up in a family of traders. I learned early on how to negotiate and how important it is to negotiate and build relationships with partners. I had a foundation of skills that allowed me to adapt quickly when I arrived in Yiwu. But what really helped me overcome my challenges was my experience working with suppliers from different countries. Indeed, I used to travel a lot to different countries to buy products for our shop in my home country before coming to Yiwu.”*

M2's story illustrates how his family background and past experiences prepared him to excel in the Yiwu market. His knowledge of international business practices and negotiation strategies strengthens his ability to negotiate favorable deals. However, he often relies on these skills and does not take the time to properly penetrate the Malian market, preferring to use the contacts he has built up over 10 years to operate from Yiwu to different African countries. Occasionally, this dependence leads to a disconnect with Malian consumer preferences, which M2 acknowledges:

*“I know quite well what works in other markets, but Mali being in some ways older than others on the style and fashion level, I sometimes forget some of its trends because I always deal with different countries, especially the ones with high income”*

#### ***Personal motivation***

In terms of personal motivation, transnational hustlers share a desire to stay in touch with their families and communities in Africa. One of the most important aspects that makes them transnational hustlers is their high mobility between Yiwu and Africa. Moreover, their personal motivation as transnational hustlers is essential,

pushing them to seek transnational opportunities to establish links between China, their country, and certain African countries. M16 (32) shared his thoughts as follow:

*“What motivates me is, of course, to improve the conditions for my family back home. Moreover, visits to the country at least every two months. It gives me the strength to come back with strong ambitions each time I visit them. It gives me the strength and the desire to set up an empire present in all the countries of Africa. What matters more is building something for my community than making money.”*

The deeper reasons for his passion for entrepreneurship are reflected in M16's commitment to his family and community. This motivation guides his business choices and shapes his approach in his interactions with Chinese suppliers. Another aspect of the personal motivation of transnational hustlers is their desire to constantly produce new products. This encourages a race for innovation, firstly between themselves and then between other groups of traders. During negotiations, M13 (27) often emphasizes the potential of his African market across several countries, seeking to obtain products that resonate with his customers.

*“I remember the first time I introduced a brand-new product that had never been in West Africa. It's an electronic device that allows you to communicate with children at home no matter their age. Because it's a device that you can stick on the wall. Every time you call the device, you can see and communicate directly without anyone picking up the phone. All the trouble I faced here in Yiwu was worth it when I saw the joy on the faces of some of my customers.”*

### **Market Entry Strategy**

This group of Malian traders use a vast trading network inherited from their families over decades to tap into new markets. Transnational traders are adept at leveraging extensive networks and have a nuanced understanding of global supply chains. M17 (36) explained their strategy in more detail:

*“When I enter a new market, I usually reconnect with all my friends and old partners who have lived or worked in the same city. They inform me about cheaper products in that area and introduce me to suppliers. Very often, even if I am new to the local market, I have enough networks to gather information that can help me make a decision.”*

M17's reliance on its transnational networks is a relatively sound strategy for entering the market. By using connections on the African and Chinese sides, transnational traders keep abreast of market demands and supplier capabilities. However, this strategy can sometimes lead to a disconnect from what is happening on the ground in Mali and Yiwu, as they focus on broader global trends rather than the current Yiwu market. M2 (34) discusses this challenge as follow:

*“Most of the time, I know more about what works in Senegalese markets than in Mali, and sometimes I even forget that I am Malian because how I blend myself in different culture. I try to find that balance.”*

Transnational hustlers in Yiwu revealed a resilient determination to navigate the complexities of global trade. It was common to see M16 (32) often on the phone, calling contacts across Africa to close deals or provide information on logistics. Most transnational hustlers lack a sense of community as they are more focused on business relationships. The findings highlight how transnational hustlers are able to balance their own transnational networks with local market dynamics in Yiwu but also highlight their vulnerability and the complications of trying to integrate deeper into the Malian market. The section gives a picture of the traders classified as transnational hustlers.

### **3.3 Market survivors**

Market survivors among Yiwu's Malian traders are those who have moderate economic stability and are struggling to adapt in the local market. These traders represent a relentless ambition to sustain their business by leveraging

their networks and demonstrating absolute perseverance. While they may not have the financial success of market leaders, survivors thrive by carving out their niche through a combination of selective adaptation strategies and strong ties to the Yiwu Malian community.

The empirical evidence for the classification of these traders as market survivors is as follows: They either share an office or a warehouse with other traders. They have less than 3 people working exclusively for them. They have to collaborate with other traders in order to send their containers to Africa. Among the participants, 5 traders were designated as market survivors.

### ***Skills and Experience***

Regarding Skills/Experience, Survivors often have a basic understanding of how Yiwu's markets work but may lack the depth of knowledge that distinguishes them from the other traders. These are traders who are often under-educated and attached to traditional trading systems. Their skills are drawn from the perspective they receive in the form of advice from the Malian community with whom they are close in Yiwu. In this regard, M8 (50) stated:

*"I spent several years in Yiwu. I learned a lot from the Malians I found here. I think my lack of education at the western school penalizes me in my activities now. I always like to return to what is familiar. Sometimes, I have trouble keeping up with modern trends. I am told that to know the latest trends, you have to have TikTok, so I am not on social networks that's why I rely on the Malian community in Yiwu to find a direction."*

M8's story highlights the difficulties that can arise when market changes are not well received. Thanks to his years of experience and the support of the Malian community in Yiwu, he has learned the basics of trading, but his reluctance to diversify and offer new products has hindered the growth of his business.

### ***Personal Motivation***

Survivors often face financial difficulties, therefore personal motivation from their family members becomes essential to boost their productivity and creativity. Migrants seek peace and the possibility of realizing their life projects and freedoms. Their mobility, voluntary or forced, is linked to structural factors of the world: inequalities in human development, political crises, demography, environment, and human rights. M8 explained why he is determined to maintain his business despite the challenges:

*"It's not easy in Mali but we are trying to do something in China for a better future. No matter how challenging China can be, it's still better than Mali in terms of opportunities. I work to feed and educate my children and my wife. I want them to recognize, no matter if I am rich or not, that dedication and hard work give results. I believe that perseverance will eventually give better results in the future. I maintain my optimism for a more favorable result"*.

M8's family's education and well-being motivate him to persevere and progress, even in the face of challenges. His drive is a testament to his deep emotional commitment to his business, often leading him to pursue familiar paths rather than those that offer the prospect of the highest profit margins. On the one hand, his dedication to his community is remarkable; however, his fierce attachment to a limited circle could also be an obstacle to his willingness to explore new opportunities.

### ***Market Entry Strategy***

Survivors tend to be conservative in their market entry, focusing on products they know and using existing networks. In a global market, it is imperative to innovate and expand, as failure can result in your market niche being taken over by a competitor. Growth is not made easier by a conservative outlook. Ultimately, the most effective way to determine the likelihood of success is to observe rapid expansion. M18 (52):

*"I tend to stick with my first business ideas and the product I want to sell because I know what will work for me. I can't afford to take big risks or try new things, so I really like to play it safe."*

M18's approach is a mindset that is both an asset and a liability. By relying on familiar relationships and trusted products, he may reduce financial risks, but he also overlooks potential avenues for growth. This limited flexibility may limit his ability to adapt to market changes, as he noted:

*“When I see something that has the potential to sell in Mali, and I sometimes try to give it a try, but I don't go any further. I'm probably used to the way I do things since day one.”*

Survivors have developed a mix of resilience and caution in conducting business. M12 (38) surrounds himself with a small circle of Malian friends, and his marketing strategy is more focused on personal relationships than on developing strong methods to keep his sales afloat. His office is stocked with Malian household items that he considers his specialty in the trade but lacks the variety that could attract a wider audience. M12's stable economic performance highlights his limitations in terms of market adaptation. M8's ideas resonated with other traders at community gatherings, where he stressed the importance of resilience to overcome market obstacles. He said:

*“Never envy those who have succeeded before you. Even if you are not rich first, we have each other, and we are rich for it. And as you learn to support each other, we will find ways to succeed, even if that success means taking small steps along the way.”*

The M8 perspective in the form of preaching is more common at gatherings in Malian culture, where elders take the floor to give emotional support speeches to all present. The goal is to reach those who are going through difficult times but are not vocal about their difficulties.

The findings reveal the characteristics of survivors, which are a mix of resilience, intrinsic motivation, and prudent behavior in the market that allows them to maintain a stable economic situation. Although they struggle to adapt to the market, their strong commitment to their families and communities drives them to succeed in the Yiwu market. Their experiences reflect the challenges of navigating an ever-changing business environment while remaining true to traditional practices and ideas. This section gives a detailed Profile of market survivors and classification justification.

### **3.4 Struggling Traders**

Struggling traders represent the group of Malian traders in Yiwu who face difficulties related to market adaptation and low economic gain. Despite their utmost efforts, this group of individuals has failed to establish a stable position in the market. The problems encountered by these traders are often attributed to limited resources, a lack of understanding of market dynamics, and difficulties in skillfully navigating the complexities of global trade. Moreover, these traders lack access to information, resources, and networks that are critical to the development of successful businesses. Their lack how to identify specific products, identifying the most reliable Chinese suppliers, reputable legal services, and support from the broader business community.

As for the empirical evidence for the classification of struggling traders, they share an office and do not have a warehouse to stock their products before shipments as the other Malian traders. They have only one employee and usually a Chinese secretary as required by the law that regulates business licenses for foreigners. They have to collaborate with other traders to send containers in Africa. Among the 20 participants, 5 were classified as struggling traders.

#### ***Skills and Experience***

With limited skills and business experience, struggling traders have difficulty adapting to the Yiwu market. Difficulties include accessing key information and lacking collaboration with experienced market players. They therefore have difficulty finding strategic partners that allow them to have goods on the Yiwu market without paying the entire amount at once as market leaders and transnational hustlers do. One of these members, M10 (48), described his difficulties in these terms:

*"I came to Yiwu with the dream of creating a gigantic company. My beginnings were not bad at all, but today things are not going as I wish. When I send my goods to back home, it takes at least three months for me to collect these funds. This is what is stifling my business."*

While immigrant traders may have drive and determination, some have little information about how to establish a business and keep it running. M10's journey highlights the importance of acquiring the right skills and know-how to succeed in a global market. His challenge indicates a lack of preparation and understanding of market demands, which leads to negative economic outcomes. He elaborate:

*"I feel disconnected and confused when I see others succeeding. Sometimes I buy the same products that they send into the country, but half of my investment is not coming back to me. Getting good advice can be a difficult thing, and maybe I need that help."*

The result highlights a tension between his aspirations and the realities of his situation, highlighting the real need for targeted training and support in the community.

### **Personal Motivation**

Immigrant entrepreneurs are motivated by a combination of pull and push factors, such as the need for achievement, the desire to be independent, opportunities for social development, the risk of unemployment, family pressure, and individuals' general. For struggling traders, personal motivation can be both an advantage and an obstacle. M19 (35):

*"I am the son of a village chief in Mali. In our culture, going on an adventure means succeeding. It is unacceptable to return home without having made a lot of money. Unfortunately, people in my village think that being in China automatically means being rich. While sometimes I have trouble paying even my taxes. But despite everything, we maintain the goal of financial success. I think and try to persevere, but the results are not always as I would like."*

In difficult times, motivation is not enough. M19 shows the importance of getting out of your comfort zone to train or be helped by the most efficient in the commercial community.

### **Market Entry Strategy**

Faced with unfavorable conditions, struggling traders often resort to a reactive strategy to enter markets, where they stick to a familiar product rather than exploring new potential opportunities like market survivors. Moreover, Unlike other Malian traders, this group does not take the time necessary to study the market in order to profit from it. M20 (55) stated:

*"I mainly sell things that I know and can easily access. I have been selling the same product for 5 years, and I am cautious about trying another product. It is not bad to stick with the same product, but the only challenge is that I have a lot of money with some customers in Mali; it is annoying because they do not know that if they do not pay me back, I will end up going back to Mali."*

The fear of failure demonstrated by M20's resistance to expanding his business indicates a significant barrier to growth. His approach derives from his business habits of selling to the same customers and buying from suppliers without taking the risk of exploring other opportunities. This situation slows down his economic success and even reinforces his precarious financial situation. Some traders were more open to sharing enough about the difficulties they are encountering in Yiwu; on the other hand, others limit themselves to not going into details related to their difficulties. M10 (48) is an introverted trader who spends a lot of time in his office and rarely engages in conversation with the few traders who come to see him for private or commercial reasons. Unlike in the traders' office, M10 has only two product samples, including photos of two cars he is looking to sell since he is in the automotive field. All these factors reduce his reach to a large audience with his products in Yiwu and Mali. Lacking proactive marketing and engagement strategies, he struggles to stand out in a competitive landscape. Despite his

classification as a struggling trader, M12 relies heavily on the Malian community in Yiwu. He participates in community meetings and is considered a silent observer according to his peers, M12:

*“I want to learn from others, but I feel a lack of connection with this environment. This environment is not at all made for me. Some traders want to keep their activity hidden so as not to offer the best advice. I want to give more, but some of our association pretends to help when the reality is different.”*

M12's feelings highlight the emotional isolation that often accompanies economic hardship, with a particular focus on his lack of connection with the Yiwu environment. He has a social support network with Malian traders, but his economic adaptation is weak due to his lack of economic gain.

Struggling traders have a deficient skill set, a strong personal motivation, and a reactive market strategy that hinders their path to financial success. Their experiences demonstrate the challenges of navigating a global business landscape to accommodate the fundamental issues of market adaptation and financial success. To get around these problems, they need to have mentors, work together, build strong relationships with Chinese traders, and learn about the market by identifying specific products. This part gives a full outlook of struggling traders.



**Figure 2:** Classification of the 20 cases participants

#### 4 Discussion and Conclusion

This study analyze the economic adaptation of Malian traders in Yiwu using the immigrant entrepreneur's economic adaptation framework proposed by Jan Brzozowski. The framework allows to highlight how skills/experiences, personal motivation, and market entry strategy influence Malian trader's economic success, market adaptation, and the application of transnational networks. It is evident that Malian traders face enormous challenges related to their economic adaptation and the identification of solutions that facilitate this adaptation will allow for the formulation of more tailored policies to support immigrant entrepreneurs.

The skills and experience of migrant traders are fundamental to their success in the Yiwu market. According to Brzozowski (2017), migrant entrepreneurs with high adaptive skills are better able to overcome market complexities and seize opportunities. The market adaptation and economic success of Malian traders depend on



their previous business experience in other countries, knowledge gained through international exposure, and negotiation skills. These factors play an important role in their economic adaptation processes. Brzozowski demonstrates that experienced traders can leverage their knowledge by identifying new trends and customer needs, leading to improved financial performance (Brzozowski, 2020). Due to their experience in various markets, including their own, Malian traders are often excellent negotiators and excel at securing good deals when sourcing from Yiwu. On the other hand, Malian traders who lack these skills struggle to compete and cultivate the relationships needed for growth, which ultimately delays their market adaptation.

The motivation of immigrant entrepreneurs plays a major role in their economic adaptation processes. As Brzozowski (2020) mentions, immigrants driven by strong motivation are more likely to take initiatives to improve their economic results. The findings show that Malian traders have a strong desire to improve the well-being of their families. This desire influences their level of ambition. Traders who are motivated by their ambitions and benefit from the support of their community demonstrate more resilience and flexibility in their business strategies (Santoro et al., 2020). The findings show that Malian traders who are strongly motivated to raise their families and develop their communities, carefully learn and identify the best products that best meet the needs of their customers. This motivation cultivates a sense of purpose that they can utilize in their business strategies and commitments to partners (Rametse et al., 2018).

Market entry strategies are fundamental to understanding how traders can adapt to the market and make economic gains. According to Brzozowski (2020), business success can be attributed to a carefully crafted entry strategy, as it allows the trader to better adapt to local conditions and effectively exploit existing networks. Malian traders based in Yiwu exploit various strategies, including networks; knowledge of experienced traders; well-established networks with Chinese suppliers; product niches; and business alliances. Studies have shown that immigrant entrepreneurs who effectively merge knowledge of the market in which they operate with international networks achieve better results (Nguyen & Lee, 2022). Malian traders who build strong relationships with Chinese suppliers are better positioned to navigate the complexities of the Yiwu market, leading to better access to in-demand goods and more competitive prices. In addition, those who learn from the experiences of others who have succeeded can adjust their actions and avoid mistakes.

Drawing on the data from the 20 Malian respondents, we describe four distinct typologies of Malian traders based on their experiences and strategies to navigate this complex market. The typologies—market leaders, transnational hustlers, survivors, and struggling traders—offer vital information on the varying degrees of economic success and adaptation among the Malian traders community. Market leaders tend to follow proactive approaches, including adding to their product portfolios and backing up with marketing ventures to enhance their prominence and competitiveness (Nguyen & Lee, 2022). Transnational hustlers rely profoundly on their transnational networks to keep their businesses alive. These traders have a wealth of experience across various markets and use their network to reach out to potential clients from different countries in Africa. While their strategic networks with the local Chinese allow them to maintain the social challenge in Yiwu, they spend relatively little time developing a strong local customer base in Mali or creating a unique brand identity, which may yield moderate outcomes in their home country (Harrison & Dyer, 2021).

Market survivors are traders who manage to maintain moderate economic growth in Yiwu despite minimal market adaptation. Survivors often benefit from their existing social networks within the Malian community, providing them much-needed assistance and an existing clientele (Gomez et al., 2020). These traders are skilled and experienced, but they are not fully taking advantage of the opportunities available to them. Lack of economic gain and market adaptation affects struggling traders. These individuals struggle significantly to navigate the market, leading to poor financial performance and limited success (Santoro et al., 2020). Common challenges include a lack of ambition, insufficient market knowledge, and lack of social resources.

In conclusion, this study shows how skills/experience, personal motivation and market entry strategies work together to help Malian traders in Yiwu adapt to the Chinese market. Brzozowski's (2017) framework provides a comprehensive lens for understanding these traders whose success lies in effectively balancing these forces as



they navigate the Yiwu marketplace. Malian traders' journeys show that experience and skills are vital, but so is personal drive and a market entry strategy. Furthermore, traders who take advantage of transnational networks gain leverage over their competitors by accessing the resources and markets that successfully drive sustainable success. The Yiwu scenario suggests that Malian traders are not entering the market without any challenge, as they are seizing a valuable opportunity. The typological analysis established that the Malian community in Yiwu is heterogeneous despite cultural and familial similarities. Future research could focus on traders of different nationalities in Yiwu to understand the nuances between Malian traders and other nationalities operating in Yiwu.

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