

Current Status, Challenges, and Pathways for the Integration of Local and Immigrant Cultures in Dongguan under the 'Dual Ten Thousand' Context

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Abstract. Dongguan is one of China's most representative immigrant cities, and the long-running encounter between local and migrant cultures has continually shaped its urban life. As the city enters the "Dual Ten Thousand" stage—over one trillion RMB in GDP and more than ten million residents—questions of cultural identity become increasingly important for social cohesion and long-term development. Based on historical change and current realities, this study offers three main findings. First, relations between local and immigrant cultures have moved through three broad periods: open tension around 2000; gradual easing after 2007, supported by initiatives such as the "New Dongguanese" discourse; and a further softening after 2014, when official distinctions between locals and migrants became less salient. Second, cultural integration today remains uneven and multi-layered. It is marked by (1) clear generational divides within the local population, with older residents tending to preserve traditional norms while younger locals embrace more fluid identities; (2) differing migrant experiences shaped by economic stability and Household Register (hukou) status; and (3) the parallel existence of a geographically concentrated local culture and a more dispersed, internally diverse migrant culture. Third, these conditions together create a complex integrative landscape rather than a single, linear path toward assimilation. To strengthen integration and build a shared urban identity, Dongguan needs to raise the visibility and symbolic weight of local culture while making it inclusive, expand spaces for dialogue across groups, and improve migrants' everyday security through better jobs, healthcare access, and educational provision.

Keywords: Immigrant city, local culture, immigrant culture, cultural integration, cultural identity

1. Introduction

1.1. Immigrant city

Dongguan is widely regarded as a typical immigrant city. The 7th National Population Census shows that non-local residents make up about three-quarters of its permanent population [1]. This pattern did not appear overnight; it took shape gradually and has shifted across time. Between 1994 and 1995, the local–non-local ratio moved from near parity to a clear imbalance. By 2000–2001 it had exceeded 1:2, rising further to 1:3 in 2003–2004. The ratio reached its high point in 2005–2006 at roughly 1:3.5,

and then eased slightly. Data from 2024 suggest a relatively stable ratio of about 1:2.5 [2]. Taken together, these figures support describing Dongguan as an “immigrant society” [3], one that has been shaped by roughly three decades of sustained population inflow.

The relationship between locals and migrants in Dongguan is therefore a long-standing social issue rather than a new topic. Interest has sharpened again in recent years largely because the city has entered a new stage of development, defined by the dual ambition of maintaining a permanent population above ten million and a GDP above one trillion yuan.

1.2. The new starting point of the “double ten-thousand city”

Reaching the “dual ten-million” threshold marks a new starting point for Dongguan’s urban trajectory. In 2021, Dongguan became China’s 15th city to pass both benchmarks—GDP over one trillion yuan and a resident population above ten million. This achievement is significant, but its meaning goes beyond celebration. It confirms the gains of the past decades while also signaling that Dongguan has moved into a more competitive tier of cities. The next task is to adjust the development model toward “high-quality development.”

In practical terms, this means that economic growth alone is no longer enough. Dongguan needs more balanced progress across the economy, society, culture, and the environment. Alongside its well-known “hard power,” the city must also strengthen its “soft power,” especially in areas that shape everyday life and urban belonging. Only when these two forms of capacity grow together can Dongguan sustain competitiveness and move forward with confidence.

1.3. Urban integration and urban identity

The 7th National Population Census reports that as of November 1, 2020, Dongguan had 10.4666 million residents, including 2.6388 million household-registered residents and 7.9522 million in the floating population. Among them, 6.1935 million came from other provinces and 1.7587 million moved within the same province. Dongguan therefore has the highest floating-population share in the Pearl River Delta, and migrants constitute the numerical core of the city’s permanent population.

People are not only carriers of culture but also central resources for urban development. In Dongguan, migrants supply crucial labor and knowledge that support economic and social growth [4]. At the same time, rapid expansion increases pressure on social governance, public services, and environmental sustainability [5]. In a national context of aging and low fertility, cities that can attract and retain an active population are better positioned to compete. Unlike many inland cities facing out-migration, Dongguan continues to draw net inflows and sustain a large migrant community.

The key challenge is how to turn this demographic advantage into genuine integration—economically, socially, psychologically, and culturally [6]. Building a city where migrants and locals can live cooperatively, and where residents feel pride and belonging, matters not only for growth and stability but also for Dongguan’s longer-term goal of becoming a high-quality bay-area city.

“Urban integration and urban identity” is a broad theme covering economic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. This paper approaches the topic mainly from the cultural perspective.

2. Concept definition, key issues, and research design

2.1. Core concepts

This study works with three central concepts—local (indigenous) culture, immigrant culture, and multicultural integration—which are defined in the Dongguan context as follows.

Local culture (Guanyi culture).

Local culture refers to the ways of life that have historically developed among Dongguan's indigenous residents. It includes shared values and social norms, everyday customs, local linguistic expressions, and material or spatial symbols such as traditional architecture, historical relics, urban landmarks, and handicrafts.

Immigrant culture.

Immigrant culture here refers to the cultural practices brought and sustained by migrant residents living in Dongguan. It similarly covers everyday lifestyles, values, customs, language use, and material or symbolic expressions that migrants carry from their places of origin and reproduce or adapt in the city.

Multicultural integration.

Multicultural integration in Dongguan describes the process through which local and immigrant cultures interact and gradually form a new, hybrid urban culture. This emergent culture draws on elements from both sides and becomes recognizable—and acceptable—to long-term locals and new arrivals alike [7].

2.2. Key issues

Culture is produced and reproduced through people's everyday practices, so the relationship between locals and migrants is at the heart of cultural change in Dongguan. This study examines that relationship through the lens of mutual recognition and everyday interaction. In particular, it asks:

What are the main features and internal compositions of Dongguan's local culture and immigrant cultures, and what kinds of attraction or influence does each exert?

How do local and immigrant cultures shape one another over time, and through what mechanisms do they change in tandem?

How do different migrant groups perceive, accept, and identify with local residents and local culture in Dongguan?

How do local residents perceive, accept, and identify with migrants and the cultural practices migrants bring into the city?

2.3. Research design

2.3.1. Literature reports

The existing literature can be broadly categorized into two main groups. The first group comprises theoretical academic works that provide academic definitions and theoretical implications of terms such as indigenous culture and immigrant culture. Notably, studies focusing on Dongguan offer valuable theoretical insights for this investigation. The second group encompasses empirical reports on Dongguan, its indigenous culture, and immigrant culture. These reports include the 7th National Population Census Report, Dongguan's Population Development Plan, the annual Statistical Bulletin of the National Economic and Social Development of Dongguan City, and the Report on Dongguan's Urban International Competitiveness. These sources are utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of Dongguan, adopt a comparative analytical approach, and elucidate Dongguan's developmental positioning within the Pearl River Delta region, nationally, and globally.

2.3.2. Social surveys

Prior to initiating the social survey, the research team classified the target respondents and formulated the survey methodologies. The survey was conducted between March 2024 and September 2024.

2.3.2.1. Classification of the types of survey objects

Table 1. Classification marking table of objects to be investigated

Major Category	Sub-category	Mark	Feature
Dongguan Local Residents	Generational Dongguan Natives	1A	At least three generations have lived in Dongguan.
	Second-generation Migrants in Dongguan	1B	Born and raised in Dongguan, or raised there without being born in the city.
Dongguan Migrant Population	Migrants with Local Hukou	2A	Typically professionals or key contributors to Dongguan society, classified under local household registration policies
	Migrants without Local Hukou	2B	Large-scale and widely distributed, primarily blue-collar workers (industrial laborers).

The individuals are categorized into two primary groups with four subcategories, as indicated in Table 1. It is important to highlight that, in this study, foreign immigrants in Dongguan are further classified into two groups: individuals originating from within Guangdong Province and those from outside the province, for comparative analysis. Individuals who are non-Chinese nationals are not currently included in the examination.

2.3.2.2. Survey methods

An online questionnaire was administered to support the aims of this study, with the instrument designed around the focal themes and distributed mainly to young students in Dongguan. Using random sampling, we obtained 208 valid responses. Among these, 37 respondents were local students and 171 were immigrant students; of the immigrant group, 138 came from within the province and 33 from other provinces. Overall, the sample composition was broadly consistent with the regional profile of students enrolled in Dongguan's universities.

To complement the survey, we also carried out semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Dongguan residents other than young students. Participants were recruited across four categories (Type 1A, Type 1B, Type 2A, and Type 2B), with roughly 5–10 interviewees in each group. Interviews were conducted face-to-face to allow for richer, more situated accounts of participants' lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. An interview guide was prepared in advance and adjusted to fit the characteristics of each group. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling.

3. Research findings

3.1. Three stages of the cultural integration process

The integrated development of Dongguan's local culture and immigrant culture has undergone a historical evolution. Research based on interviews and literature from around 2000 reveals a period of conflict between the two cultures. Local residents displayed exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants, labeling them with terms such as Waidilao(outsiders), Beilao(northerners), Mangliu(vagabonds), Mingong(migrant workers), Dagongzai(young male migrant workers), and Wailaimei(young female migrant workers). By 2007, the government introduced the term "Xinguanren (New Dongguan Residents)" to address immigrant-related issues directly. Various

initiatives were implemented to support immigrants in integrating into Dongguan society, thereby improving relations between locals and newcomers. Post-2014, the consolidation of the "Xinguanren Service and Management Bureau" culminated in its abolition by the end of 2018. The official discontinuation of the term "Xinguanren" signifies a deliberate government effort to minimize distinctions between locals and immigrants [8].

In conclusion, the integrated development of Dongguan's local and immigrant cultures, as an immigrant city, has long been a governance focus. However, the new goal of achieving a population of ten million and a GDP of one trillion yuan presents fresh demands. The current situation is not inadequate but rather insufficient. Addressing how to effectively realize tangible and perceptible diversified integration, foster a "cultural identity among the ten-million population," boost social cohesion in Dongguan, and bolster the city's overall competitiveness and sustainability are pressing issues that require in-depth examination and resolution in light of these new circumstances.

3.2. The degree of cultural integration and its presentation are unevenly distributed

The survey revealed a nuanced landscape of cultural integration between local residents and immigrants in Dongguan. The extent and expression of this integration vary notably among different resident groups in Dongguan. Broadly, these variations can be categorized into three main aspects:

3.2.1. The cultural conservatism of the older generation contrasts with the cultural openness of the younger generation within the local community

Clear generational differences are visible among Dongguan locals (Type 1A) in how they respond to the integration of local and immigrant cultures. Older residents—many of whom are grandparents—tend to hold more conservative cultural views. In practice, this often shows up as skepticism toward immigrants and their cultural practices, and in some cases as avoidance or negative stereotyping. By contrast, younger locals, especially those born in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, generally have higher levels of education, wider social exposure, and more frequent cross-group contact. Most of them speak in favor of inclusivity, show curiosity toward cultural difference, and are relatively positive about the possibility of cultural blending. As the share of non-local residents has continued to rise, this older, more conservative stance has become less common within the local population.

Despite these differences, older and younger locals also share several important traits. Both groups express strong pride in being from Dongguan, maintain a deep attachment to the city's cultural heritage, and rely largely on locally rooted social networks.

3.2.2. Variations in the perception of cultural integration exist among immigrants from diverse social strata

Immigrant groups in Dongguan differ markedly in how they understand and evaluate cultural integration. Migrants who have obtained Dongguan household registration and have stable jobs and social ties in the city usually report a growing sense of belonging over time. They tend to view cultural integration positively and often hope that their children will learn and participate in Dongguan's local culture, while still retaining selective elements of the family's place-of-origin traditions. In contrast, migrants with household registration but without stable employment or strong local networks are more cautious about integration. Many remain culturally oriented toward their hometowns, though they are not necessarily resistant to engaging with local customs. Migrants without Dongguan household registration are more likely to treat the city as a temporary place to work and earn money. Given this transience, they rarely develop strong local identification, show limited interest in cultural integration, and typically have fewer sustained interactions with local residents.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that, for many migrants, cultural integration does not come before economic and social integration in the formation of urban identity. Time matters: cultural identification tends to emerge after people secure work, stability, and everyday social routines, rather than serving as the initial driver. Although cultural hybridity can in principle generate new symbolic resources that attract migrants, Dongguan at present has not yet accumulated enough widely recognized “cultural capital” of this kind.

3.2.3. The lack of dominance in the localization of native culture and the decentralization of immigrant culture diversification

Research indicates that various groups in Dongguan, including local residents, second-generation Dongguan individuals, immigrants with Dongguan household registration, and the significant floating population without such registration, perceive a lack of distinctiveness in Dongguan's local culture. While the traditional local culture holds appeal for older Dongguan residents due to its regional and traditional attributes, it struggles to resonate with younger generations and newcomers. Despite the presence of certain folk customs and culinary traditions that garner interest, barriers such as language differences, limited cultural engagement opportunities, and inadequate integration with mainstream culture hinder active participation. Insufficient promotion and publicity further contribute to the perceived lack of attractiveness and influence of Dongguan's local culture, particularly among immigrants and within the broader context of the Pearl River Delta, Guangdong Province, and nationwide.

Immigrant culture in Dongguan is highly plural rather than organized around a single dominant “outside” tradition. Existing studies show that the city’s floating population comes mainly from Hunan, followed by Guangxi, Sichuan, Jiangxi, Hubei, Henan, Guizhou, Chongqing, Anhui, Shaanxi, and several other provinces. This demographic mix brings multiple cultural lineages into everyday urban life, including Huxiang culture, Lingnan culture, Sichuan–Chongqing culture, Chu culture, Jiangxi culture, and Central Plains culture.

Although migrants from Hunan form the largest share and Huxiang cultural elements—especially those linked to commerce and food—are widely visible across the Pearl River Delta and even beyond Guangdong, their influence in Dongguan remains relatively contained. Regional boundaries, the “outsider” position of any one migrant group, and the simultaneous presence of many other incoming cultures all limit the possibility of a single cultural center. In practice, Huxiang culture functions as one important strand among many, coexisting with other migrant traditions and helping to produce a relatively balanced, multi-source cultural landscape in Dongguan.

3.2.4. Summary

Overall, the integration of local and immigrant cultures in Dongguan is best described as multi-layered and uneven. It is produced through the everyday encounters of residents with different backgrounds, and it unfolds through both coexistence and, at times, subtle competition among multiple cultural strands. Yet because no single cultural tradition has become widely recognized as a shared center, integration rarely moves beyond the surface level. Most cultural groups continue to preserve their own core practices and identifications, which limits deeper convergence. Interview data illustrate this pattern clearly. Many participants reported broad overlap in daily habits—food preferences and taste expectations, for example—suggesting that practical, low-threshold forms of integration are already common. By contrast, integration at higher levels, such as values or interpretive frameworks, remains much weaker. Contact between local and immigrant cultures is also relatively limited: mutual influence tends to occur through occasional, localized intersections rather

than sustained, high-intensity interaction. As a result, the two cultural spheres often develop in parallel, meeting only at scattered points instead of forming a fully interwoven urban culture

3.3. Perceptions of cultural integration among different types of residents

3.3.1. Young students

3.3.1.1. Local young students in Dongguan

Students in Dongguan exhibit a strong sense of pride and identification with their hometown, often overestimating the local population's share of the total permanent population. Moreover, they perceive Dongguan's influence within the Pearl River Delta, Guangdong Province, and nationally as being above average.

Local students in Dongguan are optimistic about the integrated development of local and immigrant cultures. They perceive a level of superficial integration between the two cultures, with no apparent barriers or prejudices hindering interactions between local and non-local students. The local students anticipate that immigrants will gradually assimilate into Dongguan's culture, eventually identifying as true Dongguan residents. While local students are open to forming close relationships and even families with non-local students, they acknowledge that cultural integration remains incomplete. Interactions between locals and immigrants are primarily limited to non-essential aspects such as dietary preferences. Furthermore, social interactions often result in the formation of distinct social circles among locals and non-locals, impeding deeper integration.

3.3.1.2. Out-of-town young students in Dongguan

Most out-of-town students in Dongguan come from within Guangdong Province, while a smaller share arrive from other regions. This composition is consistent with the usual intake profile of local universities. When describing Dongguan, many non-local students first point to manufacturing as the city's most visible feature. By contrast, they often experience local culture as dispersed and not especially salient in daily life. Even so, many remain curious about it, though they struggle to identify clear or distinctive cultural markers.

In their everyday routines, non-local students interact in ways that are largely similar to local students. They form stable peer networks of their own and generally evaluate local students positively. Most report smooth relationships and say they are open to closer ties, including long-term friendships or even family connections. At the same time, several interviewees noted a subtle psychological distance that can surface in cross-group interaction.

When asked about future plans, many non-local students are hesitant to stay in Dongguan after graduation. Their concerns focus mainly on salary prospects and living costs rather than cultural adjustment. They also tend to see the ongoing blending of local and immigrant cultures as a broad, long-term trend, while expecting each side to retain a recognizable cultural identity rather than merging completely.

3.3.2. Local residents in Dongguan

3.3.2.1. Type 1A

Type 1A locals generally express strong pride in Dongguan and a clear sense of hometown identity. Many describe themselves as straightforward and warm-hearted, and they often emphasize a preference for a slower, more comfortable way of life rather than intense career competition—especially when comparing themselves with immigrants. In their view, Dongguan's local culture grows out of folk traditions and everyday foodways. It is situated within the broader Lingnan cultural

sphere and carries a rural tone and relatively conservative orientation, which they feel makes it less easily reshaped by immigrant cultures.

At the same time, even when locals point to elements they see as culturally distinctive, they often note that these are not very visible in public life. They attribute this to weak cultural promotion, which in turn limits the extent to which local culture can meaningfully attract or speak to immigrants. Many therefore remain cautious about the possibility of a smooth cultural fusion. They anticipate persistent difficulties rooted in language differences and divergent ways of thinking. Looking ahead, they see more frequent contact as essential: increasing everyday interaction, building mutual understanding, identifying shared ground, and allowing coexistence to develop gradually over time.

3.3.2.2. Type 1B

Type 1B residents often describe living with a “double belonging”—feeling connected to Dongguan while also sensing ties elsewhere. This produces a more tentative or shifting urban identity. Although they may not fully see themselves as “authentic” Dongguan natives, they recognize that being born and raised in Dongguan, together with having local social networks, anchors them in the city. This mixed identity becomes especially visible during traditional festivals: family customs are usually inherited from older generations, yet local Dongguan elements are also incorporated naturally, without a sense of contradiction.

Because their exposure to local traditions is limited, Type 1B residents often feel they do not know Dongguan culture well. They can identify a few features they consider unique, but they rarely view local culture as a strong, independent system with wide influence. In their accounts, immigrant culture may subtly reshape local culture, though this is not always easy to notice in daily life. By contrast, they more readily observe the influence flowing the other way—immigrant cultural practices spreading into local life, particularly through schooling and education.

Many Type 1B interviewees also speak of Dongguan’s reputation as an industrial city and acknowledge its economic strength, but they argue that sustained development will require stronger cultural presence. In their view, this should go beyond surface symbols such as cuisine. Instead, Dongguan needs to protect and reinterpret its deeper heritage, expand channels of cultural communication, and build a more coherent cultural framework that can generate shared recognition and real social impact.

Overall, they remain cautious about how far local–immigrant cultural integration can go in the near term. Still, they see integration as the broader direction of change. Both locals and migrants, they argue, need to step outside their own circles, increase communication and cooperation, and create conditions for deeper interaction. They also stress that protecting migrants’ rights and improving their everyday security are not peripheral issues but basic prerequisites for any meaningful cultural integration—and that these conditions can be shaped through deliberate policy choices.

3.3.3. Dongguan immigrants

3.3.3.1. Type 2A

For Type 2A immigrants, a sense of identity and belonging in Dongguan is closely tied to material security and social embedding—especially stable employment, perceived social standing, and length of stay. Those who have lived in the city for many years, hold secure jobs, and have built local networks usually report a stronger attachment to Dongguan. They are more willing to learn about local traditions and are also more likely to take part in cultural activities organized in the city. By contrast, immigrants with weaker attachment often say they find it difficult to notice or interpret local cultural symbols in everyday life.

Across this group, many continue to maintain strong ties to their native cultures and tend to socialize mainly with people from the same hometowns or villages, largely because of shared dialects and familiar cultural habits. They often feel that Dongguan's local culture is not as visible or influential as its industrial identity, which limits its everyday impact on migrants. Still, most believe cultural integration is possible. Compared with earlier periods, they see integration as broader and more substantive today, though it unfolds slowly and depends on time. In their view, deeper integration requires practical support: improving migrants' livelihood security, and providing more accessible spaces, events, and opportunities for cultural contact.

3.3.3.2. Type 2B

Type 2B immigrants are mainly industrial workers and short-term residents. Their lives in Dongguan are marked by limited stability, and many approach the city as a place to work temporarily rather than a long-term home. Because of economic constraints and a lack of cultural infrastructure, they often have few resources—or even time—to sustain their native cultural practices in a consistent way. Influenced heavily by modern media and fast-paced urban routines, they rarely participate in Dongguan's indigenous cultural life and show little active interest in it. Some mention moments of cultural mismatch, but for most, cultural integration is not an urgent concern compared with immediate work and living pressures.

4. Conclusion

Over the past four decades, Dongguan's rapid rise has relied heavily on sustained migrant inflows. As a prototypical immigrant city, Dongguan has had to negotiate the relationship between indigenous and immigrant cultures while moving into the “Dual Ten Thousand” stage of development—over ten million residents and a GDP above one trillion yuan. This study identifies three broad phases in that cultural relationship: early conflict, gradual easing, and a later weakening of formal boundaries, with government policies and regulatory narratives shaping each transition.

Today, cultural integration in Dongguan remains complex and uneven. Differences appear across generations, social strata, and cultural communities. Within the local population, older residents often hold more conservative cultural orientations, whereas younger locals tend to be more open and flexible. Among immigrants, attachments to the city vary by economic security, length of residence, and social position, creating layered gradients of urban identity. At the same time, Dongguan's indigenous culture retains strong regional roots but has struggled to develop a highly visible or widely shared symbolic appeal for migrants. Immigrant cultures, meanwhile, are diverse but lack a single unifying theme that could anchor a common urban narrative. The result has been a prolonged pattern of low-intensity coexistence, where the two cultural spheres overlap in daily life but rarely merge in deeper ways.

Strengthening cultural identity in a city of this scale requires an inclusive approach to urban cultural governance. Three directions are especially important. First, Dongguan should rebuild a stronger sense of local cultural identity by revitalizing indigenous traditions and translating them into a distinctive urban cultural brand that connects historical foundations with contemporary urban experience. Second, integration will remain shallow unless migrants feel secure in everyday life. Improving employment quality, educational access, and healthcare provision is therefore not only a welfare task but also a cultural one, because these conditions enable long-term settlement and meaningful belonging. Third, the city needs more sustained platforms for cultural exchange—spaces that encourage intergenerational conversation, cross-class contact, and routine interaction between locals and migrants. With consistent policy support and coordinated resources, Dongguan can cultivate a new urban culture that draws from both indigenous and migrant traditions, moving from

“heterogeneous coexistence” toward a more genuinely pluralistic form of shared city life. In doing so, Dongguan can strengthen social cohesion and better position itself as a high-quality Bay Area city, an industrial center, and a culturally recognizable metropolis.

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