

**Academic writing sample: Taken from essay ‘Critically examine the role of food and foodways in shaping urban migrants’ experiences of Shenzhen and Guangzhou.’**

Introduction

Scholars of China studies are writing in a stimulating time. Just two years shy of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, sociologist Fei Xiaotong (1992) maintained that a comprehensive understanding of Chinese society was stifled by suppositional Western theorising. I contend that eighty years later, ‘knowing China’ (Pieke, 2016:1) equivalently demands an epistemological (re)pluralising.

The post-reformist state’s rapid emergence on the global stage has it more deeply entangled in heterogeneous networks of neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and extraterritorial values (Ho, 2018b). Within China studies, Pieke (2016) critiques an over-attended traditional political preoccupation with disturbed global hierarchies. This essay looks to cultural Sino-geographies to achieve a more holistic assessment of China’s lived realities, with particular attention to the spatio-temporalities of generational and African identities. Situated within a postsocialist and postcolonial framework, it examines the role of food(ways) in shaping contemporary urban experiences of first-generation migrants in Shenzhen and African migrants in Guangzhou. Post-socialism here refers to ‘theoretical reconceptuali[sations] of the meanings of Chinese socialism in the context of global capitalist modernity’ (Litzinger, 2002:34). Postcolonialism is understood as a theoretical framework that seeks to challenge homogenised knowledges and structuralist racial hierarchies (Loomba, 1998). The predominant part of the literature attended was published within the last thirty years, in recognition of the speed of China’s post-Mao (Anagnost, 2008) transformation and thus the conceptual relevance of newer discourse.

Comparing a domestic and international diaspora within this conceptual apparatus, this essay disturbs reductionist assumptions around Chinese identity (Yeh, 2014) and opens space to consider the future of urban foodways. It draws primarily from O’Donnell (2010), Ho (2018a), and Bodomo and Ma’s (2012) studies of Shenzhen and Guangzhou, with attention to relevant limitations. The first section will demonstrate how marginalised Shenzhen and Guangzhou migrants use foodways to performatively (re)assert collective identities within significant spaces. It will then compare how migrants differently harness capitalist and collectivist values to performatively negotiate their sense of self. The third section will scale down to the body to

evidence the entanglement of migrants' sense of belonging in the postsocialist forces of modernising China. This essay develops on Foucauldian notions of the body as a significant tool and mediator of politico-moral identity (Hall, 1996) to conclude that migrants navigate processual and socio-political productions of self through gastronomy, critically in relation to uneven and situated forces of globalisation and capitalism specific to their locale (Weller, 2006).

### Contextual introduction

Unlike the exhaustive literature on the West, Chinese foodways have been more poorly attended to in the social sciences beyond an acknowledgement of its cultural importance (Mintz, 2002), however the language barriers are recognised. What scholarship does exist is largely Eurocentric, focused on Western territories or communities. In *China to Chinatown*, Roberts (2002) examines the impression of post-colonial attitudes toward Chinese foodstuff in America. Yee (2003:97) assesses hybrid Sino-American foodways' as an 'economic institution' while Lu and Fine (1995) attend to its politics of authenticity. This essay attends to such literature gap and analyses the experiences of first-generation domestic migrants in Shenzhen, and of Africans in Guangzhou, seeking to give academic representation to two differently marginalised groups in urban China.

Both located in the coastal Guangdong Province and part of the Pearl River Delta of southeast China (Hu, 2022), the cities' industrial histories play a vital role in the embodied experiences of migrants today. Shenzhen's rapid industrial growth has been of scholarly fascination, procuring academic sobriquets such as 'The Shenzhen Phenomenon' (Hu, 2020) and 'Experiment' (Du, 2020). In 1979, President Xiaoping architected a series of enterprising urban projects, part of a monumental 'opening and reform' (Lora-Wainwright, 2023), that hoped to pull China's post-Maoist economy out of near bankruptcy (Hu, 2020). The move was economic and political, as Deng strove to reclaim the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party after the Cultural Revolution while latching on to global escalations in neoliberalism and globalisation (ibid.). Shenzhen was a priority. Designated one of four Special Economic Zones (SEZs), the city underwent extensive design and development under three plans: 1984, 1996 and 2010 (Hu, 2020). Proximate to Hong Kong and thus able to capitalise off the island's financial status, the first involved a spatially focused development of Shenzhen into a 'foreign-

oriented' and 'balanced industrial structure' in a 'belt and cluster' (ibid.:45) shape with fifteen industrial parks. The 'instant city' (Du, 2020:296) has since grown at a record pace from a small fishing village to a city of 13.3 million (World Population Review, 2024). Guangzhou's development was also part of China's reform period. Although not an SEZ, Guangzhou saw great economic growth from the end of the twentieth century, also benefitting from its historical status as a foreign trade hub in the Qing dynasty (Hu, 2022). Its population has soared by 12 million since 1990 (World Population Review, 2024).

Both megacities are rich in migrants; the critical difference lies in demographic composition. *Domestic* migrants make 'the DNA of Shenzhen' (Hu, 2020:79), and its development fuelled by a massive influx of nationals who originally flocked to 'Early Shenzhen' as part of the industrial nation-building project (Cai, 2018). Shenzhen now has the largest migrant proportion of any Chinese city, almost 70% (Xiaozhao, 2023). First-generation Shenzhen migrants, once the subject of the city's 'golden age' (CGTN, 2018) transformation, face oppression and differently intersectional marginalisation. 'Old Shenzheners' are college-educated, urban *hukou*-holding migrants (O'Donnell, 2010), while *nongmingong* migrated from rural areas and live informally *without* formal *hukou* (Jakimów and Barabantseva, 2016). The *hukou* is a state-institutionalised regime that confines citizenship identity and rights to a specific region with internal migration rights almost exclusively favouring those of higher social and professional status (Ho, 2011). 'Old Shenzheners' face social marginalisation, their sense of belonging stifled by simultaneous conditions of having spent most of life away from their birthplaces and having their status as Shenzheners so quickly eclipsed. For *nongmingong*, marginalisation is eventuated at the intersection of social and economic statuses, meagre pensions from a lifetime's casual labour trap near-retirees in a cycle of poverty (Cai, 2018).

Guangzhou has around 40% migrants (Xiaozhao, 2023), but its demographic is *international*, with around 200,000 legal and illegal African inhabitants (Hu, 2022). Its cosmopolitan status is now without tension, constituting a 'panicked multiculturalism' (Noble, 2013:162) rife with 'anxieties' from ethnic discord. This discussion on the migrant experience is sensitive to such prevailing racisms originally propagated by European imperialism's anti-Black discourse (Brown, 2017). Black bodies in China are oft recipients of injurious partitionist stereotyping. This includes being seen as lazy and incompetent, and name calling such as *heigui* ('black ghosts') (Ho, 2018a:9). More recent accounts of racism against Guangzhou's African diaspora have been published in academia (Lan, 2016), with particular attention to Black discrimination

and enforced testing during the Covid-19 pandemic (Leung, 2020; Kirton, 2020). This essay thus identifies anti-African racism as an ongoing issue in Guangzhou, marking the political relevance of the case study as situated within a wider framework around China's post-colonial political networks.

Drawing attention above to Shenzheners' *hukou* counters essentialising imaginaries which treat China's urban and rural lifeworld as discrete and polarising entities (Lai, 2014). While noting first-generation migrants' heterogeneous statuses, this essay's interest moving forward lies in ideological discrepancies between first and latter-wave migrants in what Veeck (2000:107) terms the 'oxymoron[ic]' 'socialist market economy' of contemporary China. The marginalisation discussed is one of generational political ideals and thus both 'Old Shenzheners' and *nongmingong* are examined together. This essay equally recognises the ethical problematics of the term 'African' and does not lay any claims to a homogenous cross-continental identity. Instead, 'Africans' and first-generation Shenzhen migrants are referents for wider networks of generational and ethnic migratory flows to serve a broader analysis of inter- versus intra-national diasporas in contemporary urban China. In doing so it endeavours to critically synthesise the limited literature available on each locale to mature an understudied (Anglo-American) academic domain.