The Cultural Politics of Eating in Shenzhen

In 1995, over lunch at a modern restaurant in Shenzhen, South China’s wildly booming city, the successful real estate developer Wang Jin explained the difference between socialism and capitalism in culturalist terms: “Southerners eat fish and seafood because those are the most common types of protein in the region. Fish and seafood are hard to catch. So, in the past, if Guangdong people wanted to eat, they had to have quick hands and eyes; they had to be sneaky to catch the fish. In contrast, cattle and sheep graze on the northern plains, and, let’s be honest, how hard is it to kill a cow? Cows are stupid. All you do is pick up a stick and conk them on the head, they keel over, and you eat. That’s why northerners aren’t as quick-witted or as good at business as Guangdong people. However, this is also why we’re more honest. We never had to be sneaky to eat well.”

Wang Jin elaborated on his vexed feelings about China’s transition to capitalism with the following parable: Once upon a time on the socialist cattle ranches of northern China the state provided the land and the feed for the livestock, decided how many head of cattle would be raised, and allocated beef to the people. Even if mistakes were made or cattle died, the state provided cattle ranchers with grain. This guarantee—to supply food despite failures of production—was called the “iron rice bowl.” By contrast, the reformed fisheries that came into being after 1979 exist in a less stable world, where managers compete for scarce resources and make production decisions without knowledge of the market for their fish. They cannot depend on the state to provide food if they fail to produce enough fish. Nevertheless, some fishery managers have become wealthy, even though they sometimes
extension, northern beef eaters symbolize state socialism, and southern seafood eaters represent the emergent capitalism of China’s post-Mao market economy. Not surprisingly, Wang Jin had much to say about how the success of Shenzhen’s housing market was due to corruption: the quick and the sneaky were best able to navigate and fish the sea of South China capitalism. Similarly, he explained the relative “backwardness” of capitalist experiments in northern China as a result of the essential thick-headedness of beef eaters in cities like Harbin, Xi’an, and Zhengzhou. Nevertheless, even as Wang Jin pondered whether corruption is intrinsic to capitalism, he remained convinced that it is necessary to reform Chinese socialism and open Chinese society to the world.

With the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949 the Chinese state increasingly centralized production, instituting a hierarchical system of work units to produce, allocate, and redistribute goods. By using the culturally resonant terms beef eaters and fish eaters Wang Jin was metaphorically rewriting and interpreting the complex history of Chinese work units. His parable operates on two levels. First, it reduces recent Chinese history to essentialist terms (northerners versus southerners) that refer to extant economic inequality. Second, it judges this history as the result of a compromised moral order. According to Chinese alimentary ethics, honesty is morally superior to sneakiness or corruption. Socialism allowed for honesty; however,
honesty does not pay (so to speak). In contrast, capitalism, which seems to require corruption, pays all too well.

According to Wang Jin’s parable, the ranch theoretically produced a better society than the fish farm, since it was more egalitarian and less corrupt. However, in practice, the fish farm fed more people, which was the actual test of legitimate government. Moreover, even though fish production fed more people, the Chinese government chose to produce beef for reasons of prestige. Before 1985 Wang Jin had tasted beef only a few times; consequently he had no desire to return to the work units of that era. He glanced significantly at our overladen table before acknowledging that incentives, even shady ones, had improved the lives of the people.

My conversation with Wang Jin offers a point of departure for discussing the social implications of eating in Shenzhen, a city that occupies a unique place in the geography of China’s post-Mao modernization. Located just north of Hong Kong in the south Chinese province of Guangdong, Shenzhen was the first Chinese city opened to foreign investment and capitalist business. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s construction in Shenzhen symbolized both the transformation of Chinese socialism and the concomitant integration of Chinese society into global capitalist networks. Early immigrants to Shenzhen, like Wang Jin, have understood their lives to embody both the potential and the contradictions of this process. For more than a decade their lives and their city actualized the promise of the Chinese revolution to provide a better life for all Chinese people, even as the corruption and greed that accompanied this transformation became bywords for Shenzhen “culture.” Today, many Chinese think of Shenzhen as a city of corrupt officials and thieves. However, if early immigrants to Shenzhen worried about the success of anticorruption campaigns, that concern was and still is enmeshed in more private considerations of their own reputation. Many early immigrants to Shenzhen became rich as their city rose to prominence. Nevertheless, they maintain that they came into their wealth honestly.

This article tells the story of Shenzhen from the perspective of this first generation of immigrants, the so-called Old Shenzhener, who use nostalgia about food to define, debate, and ultimately retreat from conversations about what Shenzhen culture was and what it ought to be. Their food nostalgia is part of a larger cultural tradition of Chinese alimentary politics. Talking about favorite foods from their pasts has allowed Shenzhener to indigenize capitalist globalization to make the city their own. This practice represents an important moment in the Chinese transition to a postsocialist political economy, redefining what it means to be both Chinese and global in a post–cold war world order.

Of Immigration and Social Class: Old Shenzhener, Newcomers, Migrants, and Locals

I came to Shenzhen in 1995 to conduct field research on the transformation of Chinese cultural politics after Mao’s death. As I collected life histories, took part in casual conversations, and debated theories with intellectuals at Shenzhen University, I soon realized that my efforts to define “Shenzhen culture” mirrored what the immigrants themselves were doing to create a viable urban culture within, and despite, a maelstrom of unprecedented change and demographic transformation.

The history of Shenzhen is characterized by the fact that well into the twenty-first century the city has defied every attempt to plan or control its growth. From 1979 to 2009 the city’s population burgeoned from three hundred thousand to fourteen million, its government underwent substantive restructuring every decade, and its economy sustained double-digit growth throughout the entire thirty-year period. A popular 1980s phrase, “feeling rocks to cross the river” [moze shitou guo he], poignantly captures the visceral experience of living amid such uncontrolled growth. Traditional villages have disappeared, only to reappear as housing developments. The coastline has constantly moved, new skyscrapers have redefined the skyline, favorite restaurants and familiar shops vanish seemingly overnight, and migrants from every province in China have arrived, carrying their belongings in large plastic bags and battered suitcases.

Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s the politics and opportunities of immigration structured debates about the past and future of Shenzhen culture. People living in Shenzhen identified three classes of resident: Shenzhener, migrants, and locals. Each group is presumed to possess a different level of culture. The term Shenzhener refers to college-educated immigrants who moved from work units in other Chinese cities to build the city and develop its industrial manufacturing sector. These Shenzhener had hukou, or legal residence in the city. They dominated the city’s economy, government, and the arts. In contrast, migrant referred to people from the countryside who had come to work in the city but who, with a few exceptions, were ineligible for Shenzhen hukou. The term local referred to the three hundred thousand villagers and their children who were living in Baan County in 1978. Shenzhener habits, fads, and mores came to be identified with Shenzhen culture, not surprising for the dominant
class. In fact, Shenzhen culture overtly contrasts with the local customs of the area’s original inhabitants and the backwardness of rural migrants. To this day the preeminent class in Shenzhen has remained urban immigrants and their children. Neither migrants nor locals have been fully integrated into city life, although their marginal status has been addressed through social policies.9

I wanted to interview Wang Jin because his career illustrates key features of the Shenzhener experience. In 1985 he had transferred to Shenzhen from a work unit in the gritty northeastern industrial city of Harbin, where he had overseen the construction of factories. In Shenzhen he was responsible for constructing dormitories and housing compounds for work-unit employees. In 1992 he “jumped into the ocean [of private enterprise]” (xia hai), using his experience and connections to take advantage of Shenzhen’s emerging private-property market. His views on cultural differences between North and South China as well as the relative merits of planned versus market economies were formed in relation to the ongoing construction of Shenzhener culture.

The urban immigrants who came before 1992 are known as Old Shenzheners; the Old Shenzheners call later urban immigrants “latter-day arrivals” (houlai de) or “newcomers” (xinlai de). Newcomers refer to themselves simply as Shenzheners. I use the term Old Shenzhener to call attention to the historic restructuring of Shenzhen’s dominant class. The dominance of Old Shenzheners in the 1980s gave way to the ascendancy of New Shenzheners in the 1990s. Today New Shenzheners have eclipsed the society once embodied by Old Shenzheners.10

The Spirit of Old Shenzheners

Because food has such a privileged place in Chinese society, Old Shenzheners used it to impose their sense of culture on the shifting territory of both Shenzhen and, more generally, post-Mao China. Shared meals deepened friendships, greased business deals, and reaffirmed hometown identities. Regional culinary traditions provided a visceral symbol for locating people in space and time. A tradition of alimentary politics gave a critical edge to conversations about eating and memories of certain foods. Old Shenzheners today remember the sense of camaraderie that building the city together created among all strata of society. This sense of community was experienced not only in communal dining halls but also in alfresco dining stalls (dapaidang), where local residents and entrepreneurial migrants opened small establishments. In these dining stalls all classes of people could enjoy steamed fish, fragrant jasmine rice, and fresh greens stir-fried in garlic before returning to their respective jobs. “That spirit,” one Old Shenzhener explained to me, “was the true Shenzhen spirit.”

Shenzhen culture today is characterized by extreme inequality and corruption, which many Old Shenzheners decry. They hoped and believed that inequalities would be transcended over time, that a market economy would eventually create a society in which every Chinese citizen had enough to eat, a comfortable home, and the ability to send their offspring to school. Animating the Old Shenzheners was the ideal that hard work would benefit both society and individuals—the image of everyone eating together at an alfresco restaurant. The Old Shenzheners’ history is both inspiring and cautionary. This first generation of immigrants to Shenzhen did change the world, though not in the ways they dreamed; Shenzhen did not become the harmonious society they envisioned. Despite their relative wealth, many Old Shenzheners distance themselves from contemporary Shenzhen culture, identifying themselves instead with the political and economic ideals of the early reform era.

Rice and Rustication

Old Shenzheners saw economic reforms as a means of achieving political ends. Like other Old Shenzheners, Wang Jin had come to Shenzhen to demonstrate his political commitment to economic reform; living in temporary housing with unreliable electricity and bad sanitation was a small price to pay. Many Old Shenzheners link their food memories with the experience of so-called rustication, when, under Mao, they served in work brigades in the countryside.

I heard Big Sister Liang’s story in the summer of 1999, when she invited me to one of Shenzhen’s newest culinary hot spots, Northeasterners. The restaurant was so popular, she warned, that we might have to wait fifteen minutes for a table, a decidedly long time in a city where waitresses hustle patrons to tables almost before they cross the threshold. When we arrived, the three-story restaurant was humming. Young waitresses dressed in bright colors and long pigtails bustled among tables laden with northeastern specialties. Meanwhile, customers toasted each other with glasses of Xiaoshao’er and Beidacang, two brands of potent, northeastern baijiu, a 106-proof grain alcohol.

To accompany our baijiu we ordered a variety of dishes, including stewed pig’s feet, blood sausage, and deep-fried fish with red sauce. The meal’s climax was steamed, slightly sweetened cornbread (wotou), which our waitress served after the last of the savory dishes had been tasted and the
last drop of baijiu drunk. Big Sister Liang sighed and said, “The two years I was in that Shandong [northeastern China] brigade, we ate cornbread every day. At the time, we longed to eat northeastern big grain rice, but most of it went to the state. Who’d have thought cornbread would become the latest health food!” Big Sister Liang’s son was not moved; as far as he was concerned, cornbread was just another fad among his parents’ generation. “My son has no idea what we went through,” Big Sister Liang lamented. “He thinks the whole world is like Beijing and Shenzhen. Someday, I’ll take him to that place and he’ll dong.”

In Shenzhen, there are a variety of ways to express different levels of understanding. To confirm that someone understands what to do—how to fill in a form, for example—one asks, “Do you mingbai?” To express dissatisfaction with a lover’s lack of understanding, one says, “He doesn’t laojie me.” To indicate that a person, especially a young child, has reached moral maturity, adults say, “She dong things.” When a parent wants to guide a child’s moral development, she will explain the conditions that will yield understanding; thus, if Zhang Tao visits the rural area where Big Sister Liang served for two years, he will dong. A flat “he doesn’t dong” is a harsh rebuke, usually provoked by shame and anger when a child knowingly misbehaves. What didn’t Zhang Tao understand?

During the years of the planned socialist economy, the Chinese state produced grain that was used both to feed the population working in cities and to finance the expansion of industry. A Chinese citizen’s rice ration was based on one’s contribution to urban industrial production and hukou status. Urban residents ate the state’s grain; rural residents did not. By linking food production and its allocation to an individual’s residence, the Chinese state established a system that valued urban residents more than rural residents. Thus, when an urban youth volunteered to work in a rural area, she accepted not only a lower social status but also nutritional deprivation for the good of the country.

As a child, Big Sister Liang had received a rice ration based on her Beijing hukou. During the first year of rustication, she had been allocated a monthly ration of processed and unprocessed grains, as well as a portion of highly desired Dongbei polished rice. However, during her second year on the commune, Big Sister Liang’s hukou status changed from urban to rural resident, and she became responsible for producing her own quota of staple food by working in wheat- and cornfields. Consequently, she often went to bed hungry, only to wake to a breakfast of corn gruel because she did not have the skills to grow enough wheat, corn, or rice. A popular slogan at the time was, “While working, eat dry [grains], when free, eat wet [grains].” To Chinese like Big Sister Liang, the difference between wet and dry cooked grain was a difference between watered-down and therefore unnourishing gruel and nourishing cooked rice or steamed cornbread. Gruel made of rice or corn was all right when a worker was not laboring in the fields, but a solid meal of cooked rice or cornbread was necessary for an agricultural laborer. In practice this meant that Big Sister Liang often ate watered-down gruel and went hungry because she did not understand agriculture. She was able to eat cornbread regularly and rice on special occasions only when she had mastered farming skills and
could contribute to the collective economy. Ironically, one of her most painful rustication memories was thirst. To fulfill her work quota and earn her grain, Big Sister Liang had to stay in the fields, where there were no bathrooms. Rather than urinate outside near the fields, where anyone could see her, she chose instead not to drink. In this way, and on a very visceral level, Big Sister Liang sacrificed herself for her country. By giving up her urban grain ration, Big Sister Liang gave the state an additional seventeen jin (8500 grams, roughly seventeen pounds) of quota grain, which could either be allocated to another urban resident or used to finance industrialization projects.

Big Sister Liang’s hunger was complex. More than a mere corporeal need, it tested her belief in the Communist Party. She had written her petition to work in a remote rural region by pricking her finger and squeezing out a drop of blood for each stroke of every character. When she wanted to leave the countryside, she studied hard to qualify for college entrance exams and earned a seat in the class of 1983. After graduating from Beijing University, she decided to apply for a position in Shenzhen, even though her mother begged her to stay in Beijing where she could have a secure job in a work unit. But Big Sister Liang’s experience of hunger in Shandong made the promise of a state grain allocation appealing. In Shenzhen, she would have a rice ration, which would enable her to contribute to the new society. Still, the early years were difficult. Later, when faced with any sort of inconvenience, Big Sister Liang liked to joke, “This is nothing. When we came to Shenzhen, it was just like rustication!”

Zhang Tao failed to understand that when his mother ordered cornbread, she was reminded of the meals she had forgone both in rural Shandong in the early 1970s and, a decade later, in Shenzhen—moments when she had sacrificed her physical well-being for the benefit of her country. Big Sister Liang wanted to use the example of cornbread to teach Zhang Tao about the value of self-sacrifice, especially because, as Shenzhen approached the new millennium, self-sacrifice for the common good was not only dismissed but mocked. Big Sister Liang was well aware that her ideological commitment to socialism was passé. New Shenzheners and the children of Old Shenzheners expressed their personal preferences whenever possible, especially when eating. Thus Zhang Tao had interpreted his mother’s cornbread as just another fad in which personal taste and a desire to try new foods were the important considerations. He had joined us only because his mother liked northeastern food and he wanted to make her happy.
The political morality of the Old Shenzheners contrasts greatly with the New Shenzheners’ selfishness or, as Wang Jin had emphasized, corruption. Generally speaking, Old Shenzheners represent an older, socialist ideology in which the collective should be served. In their eyes, newcomers live to satisfy personal desires rather than contribute to the project of building a new Chinese city. Big Sister Liang believed that her experience as a rusticated youth had kept her honest when confronted with Shenzhen’s many temptations. She often argued that there was nothing wrong with earning money; the important issue was how one earned that money. She had several ready examples of times she had refused kickbacks and bribes in her capacity as a construction supervisor. Her husband, an architect in a municipal design company, often remarked that Old Shenzheners still lived in early-era housing with small pensions. By contrast, latter-day arrivals occupy the penthouses of Shenzhen’s upscale developments. Thus, even when Old Shenzheners have become rich, they repeatedly emphasize that a profound desire to contribute to China’s modernization nourished their willingness to trailblaze the city.

Imagining Home, Creating Culture

Old Shenzhener nostalgia for socialist meals is situated within the context of Shenzhen’s population explosion and accompanying demographic transformation. Before 1992 Shenzhen was a local, Cantonese city. Locals constituted a significant percentage of the population, migrant labor came primarily from other parts of Guangdong Province, key government leaders transferred there from other Guangdong cities, and Hong Kong investors dominated the manufacturing sector of the economy. Moreover, Old Shenzheners understood that their task was to modernize a backwater, rural community. Consequently, Old Shenzheners learned to speak Cantonese and began to eat Cantonese foods, immigrating culturally as well as geographically. In other words, the utopian nationalism of Old Shenzheners accommodated regional difference.

After 1992, however, migrants arrived from all over the country, including Muslims from Xinjiang, ethnic Koreans from Jilin, and Miao from Yunnan. This second generation of migrants did not come to develop Shenzhen but to take advantage of the economic opportunities the city now offered. They spoke Mandarin, not Cantonese. Within several years, Shenzhen was the only Mandarin-speaking city in Guangdong, and the only city in China where the majority of the population came from elsewhere. Unlike Old Shenzheners, latter-day arrivals have had no need to adapt culturally to Guangdong Province. Nor have New Shenzheners shared Old Shenzheners’ commitment to socialism. Instead, the later arrivals have sought their fortune by creating deterritorialized networks of hometown family and friends and adapting to local landlords, Old Shenzhen administrators, and an increasing population of international investors. These newer Shenzheners and even the children of Old Shenzheners, like Zhang Tao, have often explained to me that, although they live in Shenzhen, they are not Cantonese because their hometowns are in Anhui or Sichuan or Jilin or Qinghai or Inner Mongolia. Yet, their relationships are not bound by geography; they have been calibrated through the emergent laws of supply and demand. Shenzhen was the first Chinese city to experiment with markets for jobs, housing, education, medical care, and large-scale food service. Shenzheners assume that since people come from different hometowns—and, by extension, different countries—they desire different things. Moreover, they accept the notion that markets are the best way to satisfy these desires. Consequently, New Shenzheners practice a form of cosmopolitan nationalism that encourages a peripatetic lifestyle between Shenzhen and their hometowns.

Because the new migrants brought a range of distinctive hometown foods, certain culinary fads have provided important venues for New Shenzheners’ market-driven cosmopolitanism. In 1999, when Big Sister Liang treated me to dinner at Northeasterners, the restaurant was one of the first megachains to have opened in Shenzhen. By 2009 Northeasterners was merely one of many chains, including 6,000 Flavors (soup), Mao’s Hometown (Hunan cuisine), Little White Sheep (lamb hotpot), New Laurel (nouvelle Cantonese), and Full Spring (dim sum). These chains simultaneously express modern values and satisfy individual tastes. New Shenzheners pride themselves on their city’s efficiency, sanitation, and progressive policies, which are explicitly connected to the project of modernization. Like the city’s upscale restaurants, Shenzhen chains boast clean interiors and experimental cuisines, and provide soap and toilet paper in spotless bathrooms. Nevertheless, Shenzheners also believe that although everyone migrates to Shenzhen to seek fortune, what constitutes “good” fortune is a question of personal desire and private ethics. Consequently, even when these chains offer classic dishes, they may also specialize in untraditional preparations, such as soup stock made of medicinal herbs in which customers cook their favorite meats and vegetables hotpot-style, double-hot fish head and noodles, and taro and sweet
potato casserole with coconut milk. These are the mixed and changing tastes of modern Shenzhen, not the traditions of an older village.

The marketing of regional differences under the rubric of modernized Chinese cuisines represents a transition from the utopian nationalism of Old Shenzhener to the cosmopolitan nationalism of New Shenzhener. One autumn evening in 2008, I joined a group of former school classmates from Tianjin for a dinner of hometown dishes at Gathering of Friends, a family-owned and -operated restaurant. According to head chef Big Sister Liu, the secret to Gathering’s success lies in the quality of its wheat products. Seven chefs from Tianjin make traditional noodles, flatbreads, oil sticks, dumplings, pot stickers, and bread crisps. Some former Tianjiners claim that Gathering’s wheat products taste better than those back home. Big Sister Liu explains: “You don’t make money on wheat products, so many restaurants just make ordinary noodles or flatbread. But anybody can do that. My long-term customers return to enjoy the tastes they remember from childhood, and that’s wheat. Of course, the dishes have to be high quality, but the real secret to gaining customer loyalty is a fragrant flatbread that takes them back to Tianjin in a bite.”

Big Sister Liu told us that on her last visit to Tianjin she had called on several older aunties, who taught her how to make pumpkin and dried shrimp pot stickers, a new dish that revealed Tianjin culinary skills and taste. “Those old aunties know how to make food go a long way. These pot stickers are cheap to make. You can use old pumpkin and just a few dried shrimp to achieve a delicious flavor.”

The classmates paid homage to their hometown by ordering a meal that would have been impossible to eat during their childhoods. Born in 1962, they had participated in neither rustication nor the Cultural Revolution, two moments that defined the historical consciousnesses of Old Shenzhener. Their youth was, however, marked by a lack of meat, even of enough to eat in general. Their families could never afford the refined wheat necessary to make Gathering’s delicious pot stickers, let alone its appetizers, meat dishes, and out-of-season vegetables. The hometown food at Gathering enabled the classmates to imagine themselves as having grown up in a new and improved Tianjin, a Tianjin, in other words, where it was possible to upgrade the menu constantly. Migrating to Shenzhen allowed them to return to an imagined Tianjin that conformed to their ideas about the culinary good life, not to a Tianjin where dumplings with refined flour and pork filling were a treat served only during the Lunar New Year and other special occasions.

Eating Ideology

Old and new members of Shenzhen’s ruling class agree that their lives improved when they came to Shenzhen. They disagree, though, on what their immigration experience means for China as a whole. For Old Shenzhener, the political question has been, how do we extend our benefits to all Chinese people? For New Shenzhener, the political question is one of privatized desire: What do you, as an individual, want?

Old Shenzhener’s nostalgia for socialist meals competes with New Shenzhener’s commodified appetites. The ascendance of New Shenzhener reflects the aging Old Shenzhener population, demographic growth, and the reemergence of a traditional Chinese alimentary politics. Old Shenzhener like Wang Jin and Big Sister Liang believed in the possibility of a socialist utopia; they remembered eating during the early years when Shenzhen was like a commune, in that everyone was working for a common aim. At that moment in time Old Shenzhener experienced the fulfillment of the revolution. Their belief in hard, collective work resonated with traditional Chinese discourse about the state’s raison d’etre—to feed the people. In fact, their labor did lead to a materially rich future.

In contrast to the Old Shenzhener, newcomers and the children of Old Shenzhener never experienced the socialist commitment of the city’s first decade; their experience in both their hometowns and in Shenzhen has been marked by increasing wealth and the proliferation of commodities. They have created a cosmopolitan Chinese culture in which modern convenience and the market allow them to satisfy their personal desires and express their personal tastes. Their food nostalgia evokes the imaginary perfection of their hometowns and childhoods.

The changing historical consciousness of Shenzhen immigrants shows the ways in which meals carry multiple meanings; the interaction between Big Sister Liang and her son over their shared meal reveals diverse, even opposite points of view. Underlying Big Sister Liang’s food nostalgia was an ostensible appeal for the values of socialist society, but Zhang Tao unambiguously interpreted the meal in terms of contemporary Shenzhen’s fad-driven food culture.

Chinese philosophers have long maintained that eating well pacifies political discontent. Eating together in Shenzhen’s early food stalls once symbolized the fulfillment of the political aspiration to extend the benefits of reform to all Chinese people. Mom-and-pop restaurants served government officials, company executives, office workers, and laborers all together. In contrast, ordering from a menu is
an everyday manifestation of the New Shenzhener lifestyle, a practice that has diminished the status of the alfresco restaurants that once defined Shenzhen spirit. Shenzhen now boasts a plethora of eateries, each of which appeals to a different niche. Workers from a nearby factory eat at an alfresco food stall, Old Shenzheners eat in hometown restaurants, hip young executives drink Western cocktails in upscale bars, and New Shenzheners eat in the megachains that provide air-conditioned environments, clean floors, and sanitation-department-inspected kitchens.

The moral and political imperative to feed the people remains immanent in every Shenzhen meal and provides a culturally resonant rhetoric for discussing inequality and corruption. A common Chinese expression, ren yi shi wei tian, can be translated something like this: “People have made eating their heaven.” Or, perhaps, more politically: “Humanity takes food to be the highest good.” The new object of Shenzhener food nostalgia is a romanticized hometown of abundant and delicious foods, where it is possible to imagine that inequalities have been transcended. This imagined abundance and the promise of unfettered choice also make it possible for members of Shenzhen’s dominant class to downplay the extent of the growing inequality of access to food in the city, in addition to problems of food-related health crises like SARS. Whether socialism will be the means through which eating, rather than just eating well, once again becomes a focus of Chinese public policy remains to be seen.

NOTES

I would like to thank Jonathan Bach, Kate Mason, Winnie Wong, and the anonymous reviewer of this paper for generously reading and commenting on earlier drafts.

1. Gang Yue identifies four motifs in ancient Chinese writings that have influenced modern understandings of what it means to be human: (1) hunger/fulfilment as the principle that defines the relation between the peasantry and the state; (2) cooking as a metaphoric model for governance that blends oral experience with political and philosophical persuasion; (3) fasting as a gesture of moral sagacity and social protest; and (4) the ritual of social coercion that recycles hatred in the form of “revenge cannibalism” and the allegorization of the human condition conceived on the negative paradigm of being eaten. See Yue, "Vexed Foundations.”

2. Judith Farquhar analyzes how eating practices have enabled Chinese people to embody the often contradictory values of Maoism and reform in Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

3. Shenzhen’s territorial predecessor was Baoan County, an agricultural no-man’s-land located along the Bamboo Curtain between mainland China and Hong Kong. In 1979 the central government elevated Baoan County to the status of Shenzhen Municipality. This restructuring was necessary, because under Chinese law, agricultural production was located in rural areas and industrial production was located in urban areas. In practical terms, reforming and opening Shenzhen entailed rezoning an agricultural region for industrial manufacturing. The new city was named after Shenzhen Market, the county seat of Baoan.


5. I have lived and worked in Shenzhen since 1995. The research for this paper is based on interviews I have conducted and the life histories I have collected over the past fifteen years.

6. Administrative restructuring in Shenzhen has occurred at two levels simultaneously. The first level has involved the transition from a rural county to a municipality. The second has entailed adaptations necessary to governing the burgeoning urban population and attendant social and environmental infrastructure. I examine this history in “Vexed Foundations: An Ethnographic Interpretation of the Shenzhen Built Environment,” unpublished manuscript.

7. In 1978, to control movement from rural (agricultural) areas to the more privileged urban (industrial) areas, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress issued the Regulations Governing Household Registration (hukou). According to hukou regulations, Chinese citizens can obtain housing, go to school, receive medical care, and purchase state-subsidized food only in the village or city where they are registered. The enforcement of hukou regulations has lessened with the promulgation of housing, education, and medical markets. However, for those who cannot afford to buy goods and services, hukou status continues to determine opportunity and welfare.

8. I analyze these three different classes in “Becoming Hong Kong, Razing Baoan, Preserving Xin’an: An Ethnographic Account of Urbanization in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone,” Cultural Studies Special Issue on Hong Kong 15, no. 3–4 (2001): 419–445.

9. In Shenzhen, migrants and locals embody two different avenues of social transformation for villagers in post-Mao China. Migrants have left villages to work in China’s booming cities, including Shenzhen. However, locals were villagers who had access to land and were able to capitalize on those resources in the new era. Shenzhen villagers are some of the richest in the city. See O’Donnell, “Vexed Foundations”; also Jonathan Bach, “From Peasants to Citizens: Urban Villages in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone,” unpublished manuscript.

10. For their part, many new Shenzheners, especially bureaucrats, have emphasized how their assignment to Shenzhen represents a continuity of politically motivated immigration to the city.


12. Cantonese is the language spoken in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and the western part of Guangdong Province. The name comes from Canton, the British name for Guangzhou. Hakka is spoken in eastern Guangdong, including eastern Shenzhen. The language of Guangdong’s third-largest city, Chaozhou, resembles Hokkien, or Minnan dialect, the language spoken in Fujian Province and Taiwan.


14. Research on post-Mao Chinese culture has pointed to the restructuring of national identity in terms of regional traditions. Regional foods and meals have provided a touchstone for the consolidation of regional and municipal differences.

15. Unlike latter-day Shenzheners, however, the children of Old Shenzheners speak Cantonese and are nimbly bicultural, moving easily between Shenzhen’s generalized mainland culture and the Cantonese cultures of Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Moreover, many Old Shenzhener children are elegantly tricultural, having lived and studied abroad.

16. Since 2005 Shenzhen Municipality has attempted to recover local history. However, the New Shenzhen culture that arose during the 1990s and into the first decade of the new millennium explicitly rejected local history.

17. The appearance of soap in Shenzhen public bathrooms began in 2003 as part of the city’s efforts to prevent the spread of SARS.


19. I thank the anonymous reviewer of my original article for clarifying this point.