

Morning Tea

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Text and Photographs

Jersey girls who have frequented Chinatown know it as dim sum, a meal served by waitstaff pushing carts piled with stacks of bamboo steamers and serving platters. When the server pauses at our table, we choose our favorite dishes: honey-pork buns, shrimp dumplings, egg tarts, steamed breads, blanched vegetables with sauce, and braised meatballs, which are then transferred from cart to table. Another server passes by and hungry brunchers select from a display of warm soymilk, regular milk, and, possibly, yogurt. A third server approaches the table, this time offering less familiar delicacies such as cow stomach lining, stewed pig intestine, and pickled chicken claws. At the end of the meal, a floor manager counts the empty steamers, bowls, and plates, multiplies the total by a fixed price, and hands the bill to the nearest person at the table. Sipping the last of now cold jasmine tea, we look at each other and smile; this is why we take the PATH into the city, for a taste of Chinese culture.

Cantonese speakers generally refer to their tradition as *yam cha*, “to drink tea,” but when inviting a friend to a meal, will also mention the time of day. Throughout Guangdong Province, there are restaurants that open from five a.m. to midnight, serving morning tea, lunch tea, afternoon tea, dinner tea, and late-evening tea. Nevertheless, morning tea is by far the most popular form. Older Cantonese men and women gather at six a.m. to read newspapers and chat over a pot of tea and basket of dim sum. A few hours later, housewives meet their friends at those same tables, their pre-school children in tow. Nearby, China’s new managerial elite hold business power teas at upscale teahouses. Morning tea is a custom that provides Guangdong’s diverse population, rich and poor, young and old, and men and women with a common cultural identity: Cantonese. Indeed, northern Chinese immigrants

and visitors to Guangdong frequently point to yam cha as an example of a distinctively regional culture.

Yet, cultural maps, especially those “translated from,” obscure landmarks as often as they illuminate unexpected detours; and, more often than not, our maps bring us home again even when we think we’re on another road. Clearly, Jersey girls and Beijing tourists use different maps to locate morning tea. For us, dim sum is a metonym for all of China. In contrast, northern Chinese distinguish between the culture of their home towns and that of Guangdong province. Yet, Guangdong natives make even finer distinctions, reminding us that the adjective “Cantonese” derives from the anglicized name for the provincial capital of Guangdong, Canton, which is officially known as Guangzhou. It does not, however, accurately describe the languages and traditions characteristic of other Guangdong cities, where morning tea is drunk, but Hakka, Chaozhou, or even Hokkien spoken. All this to make a simple point. New Yorkers, Beijing sophisticates, and urban Cantonese have drawn dim sum onto very different maps, begging the question: Were we ever really mapping the same territory? And, given that we all live on the same planet, how do we learn to read each other’s maps?

The difficulty of mapping cultural territories becomes even more apparent when trying to survey Guangdong’s second city, Shenzhen, which has denied its provincial origins, instead placing itself at the shifting center of Beijing’s post-Mao political field. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping designated Shenzhen to be China’s first special economic zone, where China’s post-Mao regime could begin dismantling the planned economy and erecting one open to market forces. For many in the West, the establishment of Shenzhen signaled the triumph of capitalism; some went so far to call it the end of history.

Yet, in retrospect, it seems that few of us knew this place or how we got here. Established just north of Hong Kong, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone fundamentally restructured Cold War topographies. Crossing from the Chinese side of the bamboo curtain, Socialists encountered a world in which market forces functioned like forces of nature. Capitalist aborigines weathered plummeting rates of return, adapted to rising costs, and when possible harnessed these forces to profitable ends. Moving from our side of the bamboo curtain, we discovered a parallel universe. Revolutionary gales had ripped through feudal villages and left agricultural communes in their wake. Socialist natives had learned to survive an unstable political climate, where collectivization, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution had selected for political astuteness, Party loyalty, and the ability to harness these forces to radical ends.

Before 1980 Shenzhen was a rural hinterland, with roughly 300,000 farmers living and working in agricultural and marine communes. In fact, the area constituted a Cold War

no-man's land between socialist China and colonial Hong Kong, where both small-scale skirmishes and secret accommodations characterized relations between communists and capitalists. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, Red Guards had come to the border to wave cherished copies of Mao's Little Red Book, promising to liberate Hong Kong's proletariat, while disgruntled others ran or swam across the border to join the colony's enslaved masses. At the same time, locals smuggled genealogies and outlawed heirlooms to Hong Kong relatives for safekeeping, while the Maoist regime sold agricultural products to Hong Kong merchants in order to earn hard currency. Thus, the decision to make Shenzhen a special economic zone was not arbitrary. Reformers hoped that Hong Kong capitalists would invest in Shenzhen, jumpstarting the new economy. They believed geographic and cultural proximity, in addition to economic self-interest, would facilitate the process. After all, Hong Kong, they emphasized, was a Cantonese city, where global capitalism had thrived.

The 1980 reforms quite literally set China in motion. Under Mao, the Chinese state had kept citizens in their place by regulating housing and job opportunities. In order to move from a village in rural Guangdong to Guangzhou, for example, a worker needed to be first transferred from an agrarian to an industrial work unit, which would then provide him and his family with housing. After 1980, however, people could not only work for themselves, but also look for jobs in the new businesses that others set up, wherever the job existed. In turn, loosening employment restrictions created housing and rental markets. The effects of these changes transformed Guangdong, and nowhere more than Shenzhen. As both Hong Kong and domestic capital first lurched, then charged into the new city, factories mushroomed. Workers migrated from secure jobs in national enterprises to try their luck on Shenzhen's labor market. By 2005, it was clear that Chinese citizens had voted with their feet. In the twenty-fifth year of its existence, Shenzhen's migrants totaled eleven to thirteen million people, depending on who and how you counted, boasted one of the fastest growing economies in Asia, and had replaced rural communes with postmodern skyscrapers, rice paddies with superhighways, and village markets with housing estates, shopping malls, and, of course, teahouses.

Ten years ago, at a morning tea in Shenzhen, a Beijing economist explained, "Living in Shenzhen is like living in a foreign country." He continued, "I feel more at home in Taipei. Everything here is different—the language, the food, the customs." The others at the table nodded their agreement.

One of his students added, "Cantonese people really understand capitalism. Northern people come here and get fleeced because we haven't totally reformed our system. Relative to that of Shenzhen people, our economic consciousness is too old-fashioned."

In keeping with Northern Chinese cultural maps, he used the adjectives “Cantonese” and “Shenzhen” interchangeably, as none of the scholars at the table came from Guangdong. I had arrived in Shenzhen from New Jersey, by way of Houston, Texas. The teahouse workers seemed, mostly, to be migrants from other parts of China. The waitress was from Fujian, the manager from Hunan, and the busboys were speaking in Anhui dialect. Everyone else in the restaurant addressed each other in Mandarin, the national language, rather than Cantonese, the provincial lingua franca. The chef may have been a Guangzhou native or a Cantonese-trained immigrant; whatever his hometown might have been, he had added Sichuan appetizers and Shanghai sweets to the teacart, which suggested a non-traditional approach to yam cha.

Academic mapmakers, each of us at the table was a scholar committed to charting the new social formations that had arisen in Shenzhen. The economist’s research focused on how to use Shenzhen’s history as a model for accelerating economic reform in western China. He was particularly interested in identifying economic laws that had universal applicability, regardless of local culture or political climate. “That way,” he explained, “The government could institute favorable policies, which in turn, would naturally lead to economic growth.” His students explored the discrepancies between international and Chinese trade conventions, and one had even proposed a way to finesse those differences with respect to tariffs. They shared an assumption that economic change could be legislated.

By contrast, I had arrived thinking that global capitalism had compelled China to initiate economic reforms. In order to make my point, I observed that Shenzhen lived like Houston; it was familiar, but at the time I couldn’t quite say how. They agreed: China was adjusting to global capitalism. And then the conversation swerved. They lamented at how slowly the rest of the country was modernizing. They wondered what was special about Guangdong that enabled these processes to flourish and, once identified, they hoped to legislate that characteristic nationally, bringing local economies more inline with international conventions.

Aware now of how the Chinese state might allow residents to redeploy Cantonese cultural forms to capitalist ends, I realized how that morning tea had highlighted new relations between Shenzhen’s emergent capitalist, managerial, and laboring classes, as embodied by the restaurant owner, the professor, and the waitress. Moreover, I understood how that economic process could be charted on political maps. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say, I understood that I had persisted in mapping as economic what my colleagues understood to be fundamentally political in nature. Under Mao, the Chinese state had fixed people’s places in the world through control of housing and employment opportunities. Today, a market “with Chinese characteristics” regulates access to those opportunities. I use the word “regu-

late” to call attention to a political understanding of this process. A restaurant owner who had worked as a kitchen helper opened a teahouse and made enough money to send his child to private school. Both opening a restaurant and attending a private school are economic acts that have only become possible through political changes. A professor who once had guaranteed employment through the university system learned to take on consulting jobs because his salary was insufficient to purchase a house. Under Mao, he would have been guaranteed housing and could have conducted research during the time he now spends consulting. A waitress who would have otherwise become a farmer’s wife served food she could not afford to eat, yet still managed to save enough money to buy high heels and makeup, which only thirty years ago had been condemned as bourgeois.

I suspect that Chinese people, Cantonese included, experience Shenzhen as being “like a foreign country” because, even though morning tea is indigenous to the region, the meaning of dim sum has changed as the socialist planned economy has given way to capitalist market forces. And, from 1949 to 1979, that’s what capitalism was in China: foreign, which is perhaps why none of us knew where we were. My colleagues from Northern Chinese seemed disoriented by the marketing of a regional cultural form, while familiar with this brand of ethnic consumption, I kept thinking I had inadvertently returned to New Jersey. And it wasn’t just about tea. The earth has shifted and the meaning of other cultural forms—Mandarin, factories, Hong Kong capital, and skyscrapers—has also changed. Once signs of nationalism, collective progress, unjust colonialism, and running dog capitalism, these forms now actualize both opportunities for savvy individuals to move ahead, and obstacles for members of oppressed groups to overcome. Struggling to come to terms with the scale and scope of their revolution reformed, Shenzhen migrants have borrowed from local place names, describing their experience as an encounter with Cantonese culture.

I understand the urge to survey new territory in terms borrowed from an outdated cartography. To the extent my research failed, it failed because I am still learning how to read Chinese maps. On the bright side, to the extent my research succeeded, it succeeded because I have a native’s sense of capitalism. Unlike my colleagues, I wasn’t surprised when private corporations cut back on medical benefits in order to bolster profit margins. But this doesn’t mean that Chinese people are now living in our world. It means that our world has changed, too. The question is how long we will continue to use outdated cultural maps to understand China, and, by extension, ourselves.

To illustrate some of the ongoing cultural tensions and economic contradictions that shape Shenzhen, I have photographed a teapot at sites where Cantonese culture hovers above awareness, and then suddenly gives way to the increasing foreignness of daily life: a gated community, built by workers who live in temporary housing; the Shenzhen-Hong

Kong border, which is a part of China that Chinese citizens need a passport and visa to visit; and a construction site, where American, Japanese, and Hong Kong blueprints are being realized. It is a cheap, white porcelain teapot, mass-produced for use in restaurants. I found it discarded near the Houhai land reclamation site, one of the largest civil engineering projects in China. Like the adjective, Cantonese, which lumps together otherwise unconnected activities because they occurred in Guangdong, the teapot integrates visually disparate places simply because I placed it there, calling attention to the surveyor's tracks. A friend told me he felt these images too forced, artificial; another said she appreciated their deliberate randomness. Both comments seem to the point. I too have borrowed from Cantonese culture in order to make myself at home in Shenzhen.

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Curbside Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Speed Bump Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Land Reclamation Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Shenzhen-Hong Kong Border Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Balmy Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Pedestrian Underpass Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Rainy Day Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Reliable P.I. Teapot

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Pedestrian Overpass Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Sanitation Worker with Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Gated Community with Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Greenification Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Inadvertent Still Life with Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Migrant Worker with Teapot

photo ©Mary Ann O'Donnell



Lion's Mouth Teapot