Belonging to the City: Cosmopolitanism, Urbanites, and Chinese Cities

Jennifer D. Heung

ABSTRACT

As Chinese urban centers become populated with migrants, urbanites search for new ways to distinguish their social and economic status within urban space – practices which are often linked to transnational flows of culture and commodities. This paper explores the new formulations of Chinese identity within an urban space that is specifically influenced and constructed by globalization. I argue these new cultural practices of “urban cosmopolitanism” are motivated by class anxieties of urbanites, who fear the loss of their privileged positions. With the influx of mobility and increasing presences of internal migrants within cities, urban residents are no longer the only bodies allowed access to urban space.

Urban cities, such as Guangzhou, hold a unique place in the Chinese imaginary since more than half the majority of China’s 1.3 billion population do not have the privilege of living there. Cities and the promises represented by urban life are complex and intricate. The draw of economic and cultural vibrancy is oftentimes coupled with images of alienation, fear and danger. This paper explores the experiences of urban Chinese bodies and how the physical body is inscribed by and with specific practices that implicate Chinese urbanites’ struggle to come to terms with “modern” meanings of being Chinese, both within a localized national context as well as within a context of cosmopolitanism. The spatial intersections of activities found within the local and transnational spaces in Guangzhou, formerly known as Canton, are particularly interesting when examined in conjunction with globalization literature which highlights temporal and spatial “deterritorialization” of culture, individuals, and nation-states (cf. Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Harvey 1989). Globalization adds another conceptual layer onto bodily practices within place and space. How are we to understand practices that mark certain urban Chinese bodies as modern or cosmopolitan? In what ways do they speak to larger issues such as China’s transition towards a more open economy or increasing influences of globalization?

Jennifer D. Heung is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology, St. Mary’s College of California.
The data used in this paper is drawn from 25 formal interviews and approximately seventy-five semi-formal interviews conducted over a period of 15 months in Guangzhou between the years 2000-2002. These interviews were aimed at eliciting research participants’ experiences of “urban life” in Guangzhou, perceptions of internal migrants who come to cities, and interactions with foreigners. Participant-observation was also conducted in a wide variety of social settings to gain a sense of everyday life in the urban space of Guangzhou. Most often I accompanied individuals to their place of work, which included state enterprises, joint venture companies, language institutions, IT companies, universities, and multinational corporations to observe their experiences and interactions with others.

In Guangzhou, I originally examined individuals’ use of China’s hukou or household registration system, which limits people’s ability to freely move to urban areas (Cheng and Selden 1994; Mallee 1995; Chan and Zhang 1999). On one level, restriction to residency was designed to control the rate of development in the cities after 1949. On the other hand, however, through the control of movement, this system sought to create specific kinds of bodies which were linked to places of residency. Urban residency meant having a particular kind of body that accessed national resources and thus consolidated a socialist Chinese body. Currently this system is still relatively intact, yet it is constantly being negotiated by individuals and the state, especially in light of economic reforms which have eroded the state’s ability to control all forms of movement. Due in part to the slow unraveling of the state hukou system, I argue that cultural practices of “urban cosmopolitanism” are motivated by class anxieties of legal urbanites, who fear the loss of their privileged positions as proper urban hukou holders. With the influx of mobility and increasing presences of internal migrants within cities, legal urban residents are no longer the only bodies allowed access to urban space, which was one fundamental sign or marking of their privileged social and economic position. The desire to perform “urban cosmopolitanism” and the need to distinguish oneself from internal migrants perhaps speaks to a larger sense of uncertainty and fear regarding the economic, social, cultural changes resulting from the economic reforms in China. While economic reform has brought many new opportunities it has also been accompanied by perceived social ills such as internal migrants arriving to most of China’s urban centers. These “outsiders” entering and integrating into what previously was privileged urban space, suggests that the socialist state structure, which in the past secured urbanites’ privileged status, is slowing losing its power. As Guangzhou’s urban landscape becomes populated with more rural and urban internal migrants, urbanites in general search for new ways to distinguish their social and economic status within urban space—practices which are often linked to transnational and cosmopolitan flows of culture, ideas and commodities. To mitigate the fear of losing status, urbanites have turned to alternative means to establish hierarchy and status. The ability that some Chinese urbanites have to acquire, learn, and desire new modern and cosmopolitan practices allows them to produce bodily forms of higher symbolic value in the rapidly changing economic and cultural spheres created by globalization.
The concept of cosmopolitanism has been taken up by various disciplines to explore the ways of thinking and acting outside of one’s society. This concept has been linked to discussions of “traveling theory” whereby an individual who experiences displacement through movement such as migration, exile, or nomadism (see Hannerz 1996; Kaplan 1998; others). In its most general sense, the term is used loosely to describe anyone who moves around the world and is aware of and connected to larger global trends. More recently some scholars have critiqued its usage as a concept embedded in European intellectual history and attempt to reframe the concept from a different vantage point outside of the western world such as South Asia or China (Breckenridge et al. 2002). My use of the concept also takes up this challenge to understand how urban Chinese reconfigure cultural practices to be “cosmopolitan” and if they truly challenge the boundaries of the nation-state or merely illustrate both the “liberating and negative effects of an increasingly transnational world” (Kaplan 1998:123). My approach to cosmopolitanism and the urban inhabitants of Guangzhou is drawn from work that focuses on cultural competence and the cultural skills one builds up to “maneuvering more or less expertly within a particular system of meanings” (Hannerz 1996:103). This approach highlights a specific aspect of post-reform Guangzhou as the city grapples with the different types of economic and social changes occurring. The mix of free market forces and existing socialist state structures create a complicated environment whereby individuals are required to negotiate and navigate through two different systems that at different times work together and contradict each other. Certain residents of Guangzhou can find themselves in a number of situations which require different systems of cultural meanings, such as working in joint venture companies or dealing with foreign co-workers at social events. This understanding of cosmopolitanism as a set of skills which allows one to move between and among different systems of meanings also reflects the space of Guangzhou with its historic and contemporary connections to outside places. Furthermore, the orientation and the space of Guangzhou as a city which is more open and outward-looking towards issues of economics, cultural fashions, and other social phenomena lends itself to an environment where one is likely to find cosmopolitan tendencies.

Spaces for the Modern Body

One of the easiest and most tangible ways of gaining more cosmopolitan skills is through interactions with foreigners. Akin to a form of enculturation, interaction with foreigners, both Chinese and western, gives an urbanite the necessary skills to deal with individuals from various cultural backgrounds. For many mainland Chinese this can be a daunting process as they struggle with communication in another language and deciphering unfamiliar body language specific to another culture. Subsequently, urbanites are eager to become accustomed to different cultural behaviors and this process is more than just a mere familiarization of another culture. In fact, gaining fluency within another culture is linked to
learning specific skills which are perceived to be fundamentally different from “Chinese” approaches.

The possibility of a broader worldview was realized through these interactions and was often mentioned in my fieldwork discussions regarding the workplace. Wang Qili, 28, came to Guangzhou three years ago from Fujian province and is currently employed by a foreign advertising company. In our interview she commented on the familiar experience had by her and many of her friends who also worked in different joint venture companies,

People who work in multinational corporations are influenced by company culture. They watch more western movies, listen to western music, and have different values from their parents. You just start doing these things because that’s what everyone does. You have to start doing these things so you can talk with the different workers. What movies are they all talking about, what new activity did they find in Guangzhou. These kinds of influences come from abroad, from the different people who work there.

Shasha, a young woman from Liaoning province, who had been in Guangzhou for three years also commented on the new traits she was attempting to cultivate in her joint venture company,

I try to be braver and more aggressive when I handle things. There are a lot of personal mannerisms to learn such as saying hello to a man, looking people in the eye or dressing more sexily. A lot of Chinese girls are doing the same thing as I am. I think we are trying to learn from western styles, not just me but my peers too. We have changed a lot. Now, we’re all very crazy when we go out, we have a lot of fun and scream a lot. We go camping, play pinball games, and try new things like bungee jumping or coffee appreciation nights.

Initiative and independence on the job are important qualities. These skills coupled with inventiveness and self-reliance becomes an important theme. In addition, experiences in a joint venture environment emphasize the need to learn to act on one’s own. In turn, the process of becoming more proficient in the workplace translates into a shifting sense of identity. One important characteristic of the transitional urbanite is the number of times they have changed jobs. Everyone I spoke had changed jobs at least three times if not more. This trend is in direct contrast to the state socialist system whereby all jobs were assigned by the government to university graduates through the fun pei (state allocation) system. The motives behind changing jobs are many but as I spoke with my research participants; many were in search of jobs which would be more satisfying. In other words they were eager to find a job that not only provide financial gain but also was interesting and challenged them to perform well. Many urbanites I spoke with were eager to learn new skills which would be beneficial in the global marketplace. Initially these skills were viewed as a form of capital but then upon changing jobs they wanted their newly acquired skills to be valued
by their employers. What initially started out as a means to be attractive to transnational companies became a source of personal pride in their own skills.

It is important to note the difference between urban space and cosmopolitan space. I argue that urban space is still attached to the physical boundaries of what is considered urban, whereas ideas of cosmopolitanism are connected to a larger sense of identity that is not based on a specific location. This distinction changes how the “body” is inscribed with various practices. Within urban space, bodies were marked by various state structures and inscribed with values and practices reflecting ideological priorities. With the decoupling of behavior from political meaning, some urban bodies are inscribed with different practices and behaviors. Definitions imposed upon the body are no longer only linked to the state, but to other systems of meaning. These alternative and, at times, competing systems of meanings are found in Guangzhou due to transnational space facilitated by international investment and global economic flows. Social and cultural perceptions are no longer only linked to physical space but also to a notion of identity that moves beyond geographic limitations.

The focus on learning the right kind of behavior is central to being a cosmopolitan. “Bodily practices… enmeshed in the ability to conduct oneself as a proper urban professional, [are an] increasingly desired sensibility” (Hoffman 2001:55). Becoming fluent in these cultural forms is not only a form of cultural capital in the work place it also becomes a form of symbolic capital in larger global urban society. Gaining skills that would give one the confidence to maneuver through the multicultural and globalized worlds of cosmopolitanism is a difficult endeavor. In my research, learning how to feel comfortable and at ease when interacting with foreigners was a common concern for many urbanites. One way of dealing with this problem was to spend as much time as possible with non-Chinese to promote enculturation.

Process of Enculturation

The attraction of enculturation is something not lost to the many English schools found in Guangzhou. In fact, increasingly more of them are starting to offer “learn English through cultural experiences” where students have opportunities to interact with their foreign instructors outside of the traditional classroom format. For example one local school, managed and established by an urbanite who relocated to Guangzhou, was in the process of designing a “home stay program” where several students would live with an English teacher for a period of time. While not able to offer a cultural experience of being in a classroom with a native speaker, the idea of living with a native speaker would be an intriguing and attractive option for many. He excitedly told me about this new marketing strategy,

The home study is my new idea. I want a foreign teacher to live with students so that they could learn more about the culture as well as the
language. I think it would be very popular since students would get so much time with someone who speaks English, but the also learn about the culture. Getting used to how foreigners live is important.

Tom had not found an instructor who would agree to live for a month with five students, but was convinced this would be a very popular “class.” The belief that this would be an ideal learning situation is noteworthy. Essentially, Tom’s idea would provide a “study abroad” experience without someone having to leave the country. Here we see that the world comes to those in Guangzhou since it is difficult for most Chinese to actually leave the country. The main point here is that the experience of living full-time with a foreigner would impart the needed cultural skills much like living in another country would provide. The idea that learning the language (English) was not considered enough. A student also had to learn the subtle cultural behaviors that a native speaker of English would have, thereby embodying all the cultural behavior of a language.

Another school, operated and managed by foreigners, organized themed “party nights” each month, such as a Halloween party where the students solved a murder mystery, or County Fair night with various games such as a ring toss, three footed raced, and egg races. These evening events were not only designed to demonstrate different aspects of “western” (mainly American) culture, but also to offer time to interact with foreign teachers. Again we see the aim is not only teaching the language, but also the appropriate cultural behaviors and experiences that signify a fluent speaker. Mannerisms of a fluent speaker can be so important that in one interview a Canadian manager who conducted placement test for incoming students commented on this issue. Jason, who had studied in China and spent several years teaching English in the country, would spend several hours a day interviewing newly admitted students. For many Chinese the opportunity to converse one-on-one in English with a native speaker was rare and produced a high level of anxiety. Jason spoke about the experience,

   Many of them are so nervous! I always act friendly and ask easy questions at first so they feel comfortable. But you know the funny thing is that I can get a sense of how good their English is by how they act. I can tell by the way they shake hands with me how good their English is going to be. It’s bizarre, but their body language tells me so much. If their hand shake is really weak and fish like, I can tell their English is going to be so-so. If they give me a really firm handshake and look me in the, it almost always means their English will be decent. I mean, it’s not always guaranteed, but I can get a good idea by how they shake my hand.

The ability to speak English well is a skill that is highly desired in a foreign market. But for some Chinese the inability to also learn the bodily practices of the language prevents them from fully engaging in the global economy. Acquiring skills, such as speaking English, also required the demonstration of cultural fluency in its use. The efforts to become cosmopolitan require a reconfiguration of identity. One not only had to possess skills
desired by multinational corporations but individuals have to perform these skills with a specific cultural fluency. Adopting different cultural values or at least understanding the different values behind certain practices then become the marker for social status.

Practicing the Modern Cosmopolitan Body

While the location and space of the city creates the desire and knowledge for the modern body, training the body to be modern can be complicated. The practices of being modern are difficult to decipher and master, furthermore they may run counter to one’s own personal liking.

During my time in Guangzhou, a number of the large local newspapers ran an article which mocked a growing group of Chinese they termed “xin xin ren lei” meaning new modern person. The article contained an extensive list of activities, a veritable how-to-list in becoming a new modern Chinese person. What was striking about the list, which contained numerous coaching tips, was the prevalence of activities which were linked to foreign (or western) practices. For example one technique suggested that when speaking one should say things like, “When I was in America…” while expressing opinions as a way to situate the fact that this opinion was garnered through an experience in a foreign country.

Jiang ke and I were discussing this list which he seemed to enjoy tremendously both for its satire as well as the truth in some of the tips. The list also included a number of mannerism and “disciplines” which should be part of the modern person. This included, of course, the ability to speak English, the penchant for drinking black coffee at western style restaurants, and taking vitamins. Ironically enough, while I was at lunch with Jiang Ke, I took out my vitamins, which caused quite a reaction. He pointed excitedly at me and beamed with satisfaction, “oh look, you must be trying to be a new new modern person!” I told him my intention was not to be a “new modern person” but asked him to say more about his reaction to the article. He replied, “It’s a funny article and talks about all the things you should be doing to be modern. Even if you don’t like it you should do it, like drinking coffee and eating a certain restaurants. Even if you don’t like the taste you still should to it because that is modern.” Jiang Ke’s reaction to the article and my taking vitamins worked to further entrench notions of the practices of a modern body. The article the Jiang Ke refers to is targeted to sell urban Chinese a specific image of what one must consume to claim a modern identity. Consumption through diet, of vitamins, coffee and certain restaurants is ultimately reflected in a proper and healthy body – a modern body is available to anyone who can afford to buy the necessary health products. More importantly, the image of me, a Chinese woman, educated in the West, participating in transnational production of knowledge, taking the vitamins, which is what Jiang Ke was told modern people do served to confirm the premise of the newspaper article.
This ethnographic example points to a number of important issues related to how Chinese perceive this project of the modern cosmopolitan body within urban spaces. The article was portrayed as a piece of satire and expresses the contradictory feeling many Chinese have towards becoming “modern.” The performance of the “modern” is tinged with fear and anxiety, which is relieved by poking fun at those who do exhibit these mannerism and qualities. The use of satire is worth noting since the function of satire is to play with both expectations as well as fears that urbanites feel towards these cosmopolitan practices. The humor dispels and highlights a larger process – the emergence of competing economic, political and cultural systems that find themselves in direct contact through globalization. More importantly, this performance of the modern is linked specifically to urban space of China where someone can find western style restaurants in which to drink black coffee, learn English, and get vitamins. There is truth behind these “disciplining techniques” for the urban body but since their emergence is from connections to capitalism it is difficult to embrace them without fighting against the automatic socialist’s critique which have dominated the social and political arenas of everyday life.

Conclusion: Transnational Space and Cosmopolitanism

The onset of economic reforms which have encouraged a more steady flow of global capital and goods are also influencing bodily practices that include a reconfiguration of social space and notions of bodily understanding. The various behaviors discussed above allow us to examine transnational connections in an appealing manner since it demonstrates how different cultural flows are understood at a local level, and in this particular case the local as viewed through the urban. Furthermore, the changing context of China’s urban space with increasing numbers of internal migrants drawn to cities, highlights larger anxieties urbanites have towards the socialist state and its inability to protect former forms of status enjoyed by urban dwellers. New strategies have been employed by some, through the use of alternative resources, to maintain their social and economic status within urban space. The desire by urbanites to engage in more cosmopolitan practices is in fact facilitated by transnational connections which allow for the movement of ideas, commodities, and people. Economic reforms have also included a body reform as reflected in the examples of the body project detailed in this paper. Yet the question remains who is determining ideas of “modern” and “cosmopolitan?” While these trends and fashions of where and what to eat and how to eat or behave have made their way into the urban landscape, the state still has a certain amount of control over what resources come into the city and more importantly, who has access to the city and its goods. The question that remains is how China will resolve the fundamental tension within the body project they created and the needs of maintaining a socialist state.
Notes

1. I use the term “legal” urbanite to refer to an individual who has possession of a government issued hukou. Similar to an internal passport, an official hukou gives an individual access to specific city and state resources and services. Since the onset of economic reforms in the early 1980s, increasingly more people arrive in cities such as Guangzhou without an official hukou to the city.

References

Appadurai, Arjun

Breckenridge, Carole, with Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabah, and Dipesh Chakrabarty eds.

Chan, Kam Wing and Li Zhang

Cheng, Tiejun and Mark Selden

Hannerz, Ulf

Harvey, David

Hoffman, Lisa

Kaplan, Caren

Mallee, Hein

Author contact information:
Jennifer D. Heung
jheung@stmarys-ca.edu

vis-à-vis is online at vav.library.utoronto.ca