

African Student Migrants in China: Negotiating the Global Geographies of Power through Gastronomic Practices and Culture

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Abstract

This paper considers how African student migrants negotiate life in China through gastronomic practices and cultures. African migration to Chinese cities such as Guangzhou and Wuhan is part of internationalization processes that are transforming cities. A thoroughfare in Guangzhou known as Xiaobei is associated with the visible urban presence of African migration because of the ethnic restaurants and shops there. Such typecasting, however, masks more complex food practices that illuminate the social stratification contained within the category popularly referred to as “African.” Food practices also direct attention to migrants’ social interactions with Chinese residents in cities. This paper first highlights the impact of African migration on urban space in China and the social anxieties arising on the part of the Chinese state and residents. Second, the paper argues that even though the African students consume Chinese food as part of their lifestyle routines in China or African food that reminds them of home, they also seek out “Western” food as a symbol of cosmopolitan identity to counter racialization in China. Their accounts of food signal colonial and postcolonial negotiations towards the wider global geographies of power in which African countries and the student migrants are situated.

Keywords: International student migration, overseas education, racialization, food and identity, food and urban space, cities, Africans in China

Introduction

CHORUS: Are you ready?
Everyone, listen to me
Wuhan ladies, wait up
Let's start, right side, left side
Put your hands up (right side, left side)

My friend, let's drink beer this weekend
Do you understand?
Do you know now?

Boss, do I have money?
Give me a bowl of spicy dry noodles (*re gan mian*)
Waitress, please don't make it spicy
Do you understand?
Do you know now?

Hey, wait up
You are very pretty
May I have your number?

Teacher, no exam please
Chinese language is very hard
I don't understand, I can't read it

The rap above, scripted and performed in Mandarin by an African rap artiste from Madagascar who studied in China, aptly captures how migrants from Africa adjust to life in China and create new social networks through gastronomic cultures and practices.¹ Across the different Chinese cities in which African migrants have converged, they face similar difficulties of adjusting to cultural expectations and learning a new language in China (signalled in the rap refrain “Do you understand? Do you know now?”). The rap lyrics also hint at the social anxieties that the urban Chinese experience towards the diversity and number of foreigners converging in China today. As Del Casino (2015, citing Probyn 2000) argues, “what people eat, how they eat it, and what it means to them is wrapped up in broader relations and processes that make the act of engaging with food complex and spatially differentiated.”

This paper focuses on how African student migrants experience and negotiate life in Chinese cities such as Guangzhou and Wuhan. The migration of Africans to China is gaining attention in academic, political and policy debates but these typically centre on the movement and impact of African traders who are in China for business purposes. The research in this paper builds on extant literature on African traders in China but shifts attention to the student migrants who seek an educational experience in Chinese universities. There were 49,792 African students in China during 2015, which accounted for nearly 13 percent of the international student population in the country (MOE 2016). Africa ranked as the third largest source continent for educational migration to China that year, after Asia (240,154) and Europe (66,746). The majority of African student migrants in China are, however, self-funded (anecdotally and as evinced in the interview sample). It is not unusual for African student migrants to participate in business activities during their stay in China, yet their motivations and

aspirations for migration are distinct from the traders (Ho 2017). The research was carried out in two Chinese cities that serve as popular destinations for African student migrants. Guangzhou in coastal China is not only the heart of China-Africa trade but also a metropolitan city where prestigious universities are located, thus allowing African students to juggle both business activities and their studies during their time in China. The other Chinese city, Wuhan is rebranding its image as an inland industrial belt into the science and technology hub of China. Like Guangzhou it contains an agglomeration of reputable universities that draw African student migrants.

While several studies have considered how Africans abroad reproduce notions of “home” and “homeland” through diasporic food culture (e.g. Tuomainen 2009; Marte 2011; Bodomo and Ma 2013), this paper considers how the African student migrants in China articulate their attitudes towards migrancy and the changing global geographies of power. The paper recognizes there exists a variety of food cultures within and between African countries (Tuomainen 2009), such as those influenced by Anglophone or Francophone identities, distance from colonial centres of power, regional and tribal influences, socio-economic status, and diaspora populations. This paper shows how multiple locations of former (Western) colonial relations are entangled with the changing global geographies of power as exemplified by China’s growing influence in the African continent today. First, the paper highlights the impact of African migration on urban space in China and the social anxieties arising on the part of the Chinese state and residents over the presence of foreigners, such as those from the African continent. Second, the paper argues that even though the African students consume Chinese food as part of their lifestyle routines in China and African food that reminds them of home, they also seek out hybrid versions of “Western” food and express Eurocentric accounts of food that signal their postcolonial negotiations towards the wider geopolitical relations in which they are situated.

The next section establishes the literature that informs the conceptual framing of this paper. This is followed by discussion of the research methodology undergirding this paper. Thereafter, the paper examines how urban food spaces in Guangzhou and Wuhan reflect wider social relations and moral hierarchies that the African student migrants navigate during their time in Chinese cities. This sets the stage for the next section which argues that their food practices and preference for “Western food” over Chinese food reflect how they negotiate multiple axes of subjectification arising from colonial pasts and contemporary processes of economic and political change. They reconstruct their identities by counter-balancing portrayals of Chinese superiority with Western-influenced cultural and gastronomic norms.

Food, Migration and the Global Geographies of Power

Studying practices of food consumption and evolving gastronomic cultures amongst migrants has presented a means for academic researchers to critically examine the impact of migration on individual lives, communities and societies. For example, Marte (2011:192) observes that the “boundaries of ‘self’, ‘home’ and ‘community’ implicated in food relations do not begin or end with individual histories and families, but extend to shifting collective maps across geographies, nations and historical times.” Food consumption as manifested through individual and collective practices thus provides “insights into the anxieties generated by social-spatial & social-cultural change” (Freidberg 2003), including those wrought by macro processes such as global

capitalism, colonialism and postcolonialism (Cook and Harrison 2003). Talking or writing about food serves as a way to investigate how people make sense of societal transformations (O'Donnell 2010).

Chinese investment and influence in African countries extend across multiple spheres, such as the export of natural resources from Africa to meet Chinese manufacturing and energy needs; the import of consumer goods from China to meet domestic demand in African countries; infrastructure development in African countries by Chinese firms; expressions of political solidarity amongst African leaders and Chinese leaders on matters involving differences with Western powers; and Chinese migration to Africa (see the collection of papers edited in the special issue by Giese 2014 for examples). Such exchanges have lent to a positive economic image of China, one in which a formerly poor nation accelerated development successfully and presents itself an alternative to “Western” models of development. According to the African student migrants interviewed, this is the key reason why they decided to come to China for further education. Other advantages of studying in China are the lower tuition fees and costs of living, along with higher success rates of obtaining a study visa, compared to educational destinations in the Western hemisphere.

China's role in the African continent has been also mired in controversy, such as alleged practices that lead to the exploitation of labour and natural resources, and support for corrupt governments in African countries in order to gain favourable concessions. However, scholars of China-African relations, such as Giese (2014) and Sautman and Yan (2009), caution against simplifying the variegated and complex perceptions and social interactions that transpire between the Africans and Chinese. In a study of African restaurants found in the trading cities of Guangzhou and Yiwu, Bodomu and Ma (2012) argue that food functions as a means for community building and identity shaping among African migrants in China. In restaurants “newly arrived members of the community [...] get to know about other Africans and about the city [...] they make business connections but also cultural connections, social relations such as friendships and various other relationships” (Bodomu and Ma 2012). Such processes of “homing” (Castillo 2016) are common practices that migrants engage in as a means of resolving their longing for the cultural familiarity of home through social activity such as food consumption. Nonetheless, through a study of Ghanaian food culture, Tuomainen (2009) usefully reminds us that foodways and identities are always already affected by colonial encounters of the past, such as through the introduction of new crops from other parts of the world and processed foods by European colonialists. European colonialism in African countries also impacted the organization of food production, labour, land tenure, transport, and agricultural practices.

Tuomainen (2009) also observes that both the African elites and unskilled workers emulated European food culture, entertainment habits and dining etiquette as “signs of civilization” (citing Ipke 1994 in Tuomainen, 2009,531). She adds that colonialism “fueled [sic] the desire in the colonies to travel and explore the source of the colonizers' power” (Tuomainen *ibid*). A longing for familiar homeland cultures amongst migrants lends itself to the preservation of ethnic food culture, but this is accompanied by integration pressures in destination countries that in turn lead to the selective adoption of foreign food habits. Tuomainen's study destabilizes essentializing framings of food as tied to nationality or ethnicity both through a historical lens as well as contemporary diaspora formations. Chapman and Beagan (2013) similarly argue that

food practices express “the specificity and interplay of each person’s multiple positionings within social relations in the current environment, as well as navigation between local and global attachments.”

In this paper, food acts as a cultural signifier and presents metaphors through which the African student migrants articulate their reflections on the wider international political economy and global cultural hierarchies in which they are embedded. Food serves not only as an identity marker, but also as a method for studying the challenges that migrants face in destination countries, the way they come to terms with such challenges, and contextualizes such identity negotiations in historical contexts and contemporary power relations. For the African student migrants discussed in this paper, migration entails negotiating past colonial histories and its lingering influences in African societies today, alongside the newfound challenges of global capitalism and the presence of new global actors such as China. While these narratives of globalization and global politics are often couched through discourses of international political economy or international relations, this paper shows that gastronomic practices and cultures present a means to unravel how people experience such global processes, and through migration, seek to make sense of it.

Several scholars have documented how migrants navigate the city through embodied experiences of food practices and consumption. As Marte (2011) observes, migrants “produce their own reality of the city through their embodied experiences... It is related to how one’s body is located in relation to the large public image of the built environment, to the networks that bind one’s relations, and also to the consensual public image received from mass media.” To the African student migrants, food practices represent aspects of “identity *construction* through a constant rewriting of what transnational identity means” (Chapman and Beagan 2013). On the one hand, their experiences in Chinese cities result in an accentuated awareness of how formerly colonized people like themselves are culturally fixed within racialized and neo-colonial discourses up till now, and these are today entwined with more complex discourses and practices to do with transnational culture and economy implicating a wider range of global actors. On the other hand, through food practices the African student migrants also assert new definitions of their cultural identity through delicately balancing what they perceive as the superiority of their cultural habitus as compared to the Chinese with whom they interact in Chinese cities. Cultures of gastronomy reflect and legitimize moral hierarchies (Prasad 2006), and by refashioning the meanings attached to cultural taste, the African students reconstruct moralizing discourses of civility and civilization.

Methodology

Guangzhou is the capital city of Guangdong province and part of the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone where Chinese capitalist experimentation first started through special incentives designed to attract inward foreign investment. The early reforms lent to its internationalization and today the coastal city remains an important trading hub for Chinese manufacturing. The inland city of Wuhan is the capital of Hubei province and functions as a major transportation hub in China. Previously industrial in character, Wuhan is rebranding itself as a hub for science and technological research by leveraging on resources presented by prestigious universities located in the city. Wuhan is a conglomeration of three smaller cities, Wuchang, Hankou, and Hanyang. Chinese cities such as Guangzhou and Wuhan, where this study was conducted, appeal to

African students because of the urban experiences they offer. Compared to metropolitan Guangzhou, the city of Wuhan might be considered provincial but it is fast internationalizing as it develops urban amenities such as international shopping districts and cafes targeting the consumption power of Chinese and foreign students and professionals. To African students both cities provide a concentration of prior social ties, as African business contacts or family members and friends were likely to have studied in one of the universities located in these two cities.

My fieldwork was conducted from 2012-2015. It consists of ethnographic observations with the African students as they carried out their daily lives in schools, hostels, workplaces and student leisure spaces. This helped contextualize their interview narratives and deepen understanding of their life-worlds in Chinese cities. I conducted in-depth interviews with 42 students whom I recruited through the snowballing technique. Approximately half of the sample was based in Guangzhou and the other half in Wuhan. Initial contact was made through the personal networks of Chinese students and by getting in touch with the international student society in several universities. The respondents were enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs in Chinese universities, and they have lived in China for at least a year. The areas of specialization popular amongst African students are in international business and economics, politics and law, computer science, engineering and medicine. Some of the courses popular amongst international students are taught in English. Two-thirds of the respondents were male and one third female. In total 78 formal and informal interviews were conducted (including repeat interviews). A minority of the African students who participated in the study were scholarship students while the rest funded their studies with financial help from family members.

The African population in China² is diverse and my study sample reflects this diversity. I did not delimit the study sample by nationality as the research focused on the student identity of African migrants. During research, I found the student migrants negotiate their positionality in relation to a wider identity category labelling them as “Africans.” Tellingly, the Chinese descriptor used in popular parlance is “*heiren*” (translated as “black people”) rather than “*feizhou ren*” (translated as “persons from Africa”). While I recognize the contested aspects of the label, “African,” the paper uses this referent to contextualize international student migration in geopolitical and geo-economic discourses of “China-Africa” relations. The population of African student migrants in China are further stratified by their nationality, religion and language (not only African languages but also as Anglophone or Francophone users). This heterogeneity is reflected in the food practices they exhibit, as this paper will show.

The interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin. A handful of Francophone respondents asked to bring along a trusted friend to help translate parts of the conversation when necessary. Below I discuss the food cultures expressed by the African student migrants based in Guangzhou alongside those that I studied in Wuhan. Inasmuch as I recognize the dissimilarities that exist between these two cities, in this paper I interface the experiences of students in both cities so as to throw into sharp relief their perceptions of Chinese food as compared to “Western” food, and to juxtapose the (perceived and material) impact of African migration on the urban landscape in these two cities.

Food Spaces in the City

Guangzhou has become a city that is closely associated with African migration because it functions as a trading hub between African countries and China. Accompanying the flow of goods and services facilitating such trade is immigration from a diverse range of countries in the African continent. Many shops associated with China-Africa trade have congregated along the contiguous roads connecting Sanyuanli with Xiaobei Lu and Taojin in Guangzhou, forming a distinctive streetscape associated with African migration. The shops along this stretch peddle an eclectic array of wares spanning electronic consumer goods to jewellery, shoes, apparel, textiles and more. Other shop spaces function as offices offering export and translation services to foreigners in China, or brokering the sale of large consumer goods such as agricultural tractors or construction and building services to African customers. Alongside the retail shops has emerged residential quarters, cafes and restaurants that cater to an African clientele.

The streetscape of Xiaobei, as described above, makes visible the influence of African migration on a Chinese city like Guangzhou. Yet it also marks out a segregated urban space that Chinese residents in Guangzhou consider “dangerous,” reflecting moral hierarchies that criminalize and stigmatize African migrants as culturally inferior subjects in the eyes of the urban Chinese (Li et al, 2009; Castillo 2016). Back in 2010 when I first expressed interest in knowing more about the African migrants in China, a local Chinese professor brought me to the Africa Trading Centre (*Zhong Fei Shang Mao Cheng*), which he recognized as a part of the city associated with African migration. A year later when I started researching the topic proper, I visited the African Trading Centre again, only to be informed by local researchers who were more familiar with the field site that African trading activities had gravitated to Tianxiu Building (*Tianxiu Da Sha*) because of a series of police raids at the Africa Trading Centre. Such raids are aimed at tackling the allegedly illegal status of African migrants working in China (see Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014 and Lan 2015 for a fuller discussion on *sanfei*) and the sale of counterfeit branded goods. The Africa Trading Centre has since been demolished alongside Taoci Mansion, which used to provide low cost housing to African migrants. Successive episodes of police surveillance led the epicentre of African business activities in Guangzhou to gravitate from site to site along the contiguous roads connecting Sanyuanli with Xiaobei Lu and Taojin. The visible urban spaces associated with African migration marks out the presence of Africans in China, yet also makes manifest the social exclusion and spatial segregation of African migrants.

On the street level of Xiaobei, several of the restaurants and cafes bear shop signages that feature Islamic words. Several shops sold barbequed food, including *halal* meats displayed on rotating cooking spits to attract the attention of pedestrians. Another shop features English language signage that identified it as a bakery and on display outside of the shop were stacks of baguettes. Further down the road stood a Chinese noodle eatery that markets its cuisine as “Lanzhou beef noodle,” attesting to its place of origin as a city in China’s Gansu Province that is associated with Islamic beliefs because of the Hui Muslim population found there. Peering inside the Lanzhou noodle shop, one sees that the eatery is populated with African customers and there are few Chinese patrons in sight. But tucked away in the apartment blocks of Tianxiu Building is a “hidden foodscape” of unlicensed hometown restaurants where a web of social interactions characterizes the use of such urban space.

Tianxiu Building is located in Xiaobei and adjacent to the public commercial quarters are apartment blocks where African migrants and travellers seek accommodation or private office space. Behind the closed doors, apartments double up as unlicensed hometown restaurants. I was introduced to one of those hometown restaurants by two Tanzanian students, Debbie and Derrick. They told me that they would bring me to sample the “best Tanzanian food” in Guangzhou. For the African student migrants who live in hostels on university campuses, access to cooking facilities is restricted by strict regulations over the use of cooking equipment in their hostel rooms. Several students whom I interviewed mentioned that they flout those regulations by using a rice cooker to prepare simple meals for themselves, but it is difficult to reproduce the “hometown” flavours they missed. Moreover, the smell of spices commonly used in African cooking would be easily detected by the hostel management.

Located in a nondescript apartment, the “hometown restaurant” they brought me to visit was a dimly lit living room that had been converted to a dining space for customers. The dining space-cum-living room featured a few wooden tables and an eclectic collection of chairs for diners, and two large refrigerators to store the cooking ingredients; behind a slightly ajar door was the kitchen (see Figure 1). From time to time, a Chinese server would bring out from the kitchen an array of stews, fried potatoes, plantains and other foods that customers had ordered. Occasionally, an African woman wearing an apron, presumably the cook, would bark orders at the Chinese server from behind the kitchen door or come out to chat with regular customers such as the students who had brought me to the restaurant.

Fig 1: Tanzanian hometown restaurant in Tianxiu Building.

Source: Author’s own, 2013

Within the informal economy that exists in Tianxiu Building, a web of social interactions markedly different from the socially segregated urban streetscape was perceptible to observers like me. While we waited for our Tanzanian food order to arrive, I noticed that another table had Chinese customers too. Curious, I enquired about this and Debbie’s friend, Derrick replied: “Some Chinese who used to do business in Africa or are business partners with Africans in China will come here.” As the evening passed, a Chinese woman came into the hometown restaurant and greeted the proprietor (who is also the cook). The Chinese woman took a seat in the restaurant but did not order anything as she maintained constant chatter with the African proprietor and her Chinese helper in Swahili (Kiswahili). When more customers arrived, the Chinese woman went from table to table to peddle Chinese phone cards and top-up services for mobile phone users. Sometimes she would settle at a table and chat for an extended period with the customers as if they were long-time friends. It dawned on me that she was a regular at the hometown restaurant. The convivial relations evinced in the intimate but less visible space of the hometown restaurant proved to be a stark contrast to the street level urban landscape of Xiaobei Lu, which socially segregates African migrants from Chinese residents who shun “Little Africa” in Guangzhou. The Chinese residents who interact closely with the African migrants may in fact come from other parts of China. They are internal migrants who have flocked to metropolitan Guangzhou for the same economic reasons as the African migrants. Li et al. (2009) and Lan (2015) observe that Chinese businesses and African migrants in China have

developed a mutually beneficial economic interdependency: hotels and rental housing in Xiaobei and Sanyuanli depend on African patrons, and other Chinese small businesses provide services (e.g. visa applications, currency exchange and translation) that cater to the business needs of the African traders.

Compared to Guangzhou, a city like Wuhan offers fewer options for African student migrants to enjoy food that they would associate with their homelands in African countries. Wuhan developed historically as an industrial city and a transportation hub that connects railway lines across China, but it is transitioning to market itself as a science and technology hub in China. What Wuhan lacks in terms of import and export trading advantage as compared to coastal Guangzhou, it makes up by capitalizing upon the agglomeration of reputable universities found there. The African student migrants who were studying in Wuhan told me they chose the city because of the repute of those universities. Through word of mouth by family members or friends, they came to know of Wuhan as an alternative destination to cities such as Guangzhou, Beijing or Shanghai. The cost of living in Wuhan is more affordable as compared to those cities. However, they considered Wuhan a less cosmopolitan city, including in their perceptions of the food choices there.

When I was introduced to Abdul from Benin for the first time, I asked if he would like to meet at Starbucks the next day to tell me more about his migration experiences. It was only when we met at Starbucks and I offered to buy lunch that he revealed the food there was unsuitable for his consumption because of his religious beliefs. He said he would bring me to a Muslim eatery further down the street. When we arrived he acknowledged the Chinese-Muslim proprietor with the greeting, “As-salaam alaikum” (a standard greeting between Muslims meaning “peace be upon you”). Looking around, I noticed the place he had brought me to featured Lanzhou cuisine. Over a plate of stir-fried noodles served with beef, Abdul told me that when he first arrived in Wuhan he did not know where to find *halal* food or how to ask in Mandarin if the meat served was *halal*. For two months he ate only fruits and vegetables. After living for two years in Wuhan he has learned to speak a little Mandarin but his command of the language was still weak. His postgraduate course in university was taught in English (a second language that he speaks fluently). He told me he now knew where to find *halal* food in Wuhan but only a few places sold such food. On another occasion, I met Abdul in a different restaurant that served “Xinjiang” cuisine, which is also *halal*. When the waitress served our food, I noticed Abdul had difficulty using the chopsticks provided to patrons. I offered to ask for a set of “Western” cutlery (fork and spoon) for him. Slightly embarrassed at exposing his ineptness at using chopsticks (a common eating utensil in China), he accepted the offer and added he would enjoy his meal more this way. While it might be said that Abdul’s misadventures with food is tied to his dietary restrictions, what this vignette illustrates are the difficulties many of the African students experience when it comes to negotiating a different cultural milieu and gastronomic practices.

Wuhan’s gastronomic culture is characterized as Hubei cuisine, which is spicy. When asked what they characterize as “Chinese food,” the African student migrants in Wuhan would mention *re gan mian* as the typical dish eaten by the Chinese residents there. In the rap written by the African musician in Wuhan, *re gan mian* was used as a metaphor to connote the everyday encounters and cultural negotiations that the African students experience through food consumption (“make it less spicy”) and the

accompanying social interactions (“do I have money?”). In Guangzhou, Cantonese cuisine is characterized by subtler flavours but the African students whom I met there told me they did not enjoy that type of Chinese food too. Rather than the Chinese food found on campus or in the streets and shopping malls of Wuhan and Guangzhou, the African students preferred “Western” or “international” food by which they meant pizza, pasta, burgers and fries. We examine next how food presents itself as a metaphor for them to refashion the social relations and moral hierarchies they encounter during migration. Such reflections also have to be contextualized in wider moralizing framings that has to do with the legacy of Western colonialism, contemporary globalization and “Westernization,” and the growing influence of the Chinese government and firms across the African continent.

Negotiating the Global Geographies of Power through Food

The preceding section highlighted the visible and invisible foodscapes associated with African migration in China. On the one hand, visibility might attest to and reinforce negative stereotypes associated with African migrants in China, accentuating moralizing hierarchies of cultural inferiority. On the other hand, the discussion above also underlined the convivial relations between the African migrants and those Chinese residents who interact with them regularly. Nonetheless, on a daily basis the African student migrants negotiate the moral codes asserting Chinese superiority as reflected in the urban landscape and through racialization. This section shows how they contest such moral codes through gastronomic practices, in particular by projecting cultural framings of “foreignness” that they associate with their identity as “international students” leading globalized lifestyles as compared to the Chinese people they met in China. Their accounts of food signal postcolonial negotiations towards the wider global geographies of power in which African countries and the student migrants are situated.

Consuming Chinese food on a daily basis was unappetizing to the African student migrants interviewed who expressed that the food they are used to “tastes different.” Even though they can buy food from the campus canteen, they prefer to buy their meals from shops outside of the campus. One evening when I met Debbie, I asked if she had eaten her dinner. She replied that she has just woken up and would like to have some food. Scoffing at the food in the campus canteen, she asked if I would like to have BBQ food instead. We walked to the other side of the campus where several street stalls had set up shop outside of the school gate. But Debbie had a specific hole-in-the-wall shop in mind. As she chose from an array of fresh meats and seafood on sale at that BBQ shop, she told me: “The BBQ fish here tastes more like the food I enjoy back home; even so we have BBQ fish with special seasoning that tastes different from Chinese BBQ fish.” Over dinner when I enquired about her impression of Xiaobei, she described it as “normal” but said the food on sale there is “more typical of foreigners’ taste such as [those from] Africa or people from Arabic countries.” Referring to a shop in Xiaobei, she added: “the Chinese don't like baguette but we foreigners like it, maybe [that shop] is the only place where you can find it apart from in Chinese bakeries.”

On another occasion Debbie asked if I would like to go to a bar to meet her friends. When we arrived at the bar, I noticed that it was populated with foreigners and a few Chinese youths. Decorating the low ceiling of the bar were miniature world flags threaded together with strings. Several of the customers were smoking shisha; the Middle Eastern practice of consuming flavoured tobacco through a waterpipe has become a trendy pursuit amongst youths globally. The waitress served us a pizza we

had ordered while we waited for Debbie's friends to join us. Helping herself to a slice, Debbie said to me: "this place has the best pizza in Guangzhou. Whenever I come I must have it." She added that she does not enjoy Chinese food or the way that the Chinese cook "Western" food, except at selected places that she frequents regularly. No sooner had we taken a few bites of our food, Debbie received a text message from a friend who asked if we would like to join her at another bar in a different part of Guangzhou.

We finished the pizza, settled the bill and took a taxi to Huali Lu (Huali Road), a street in Guangzhou lined with international bars and restaurants (at the international business district of Zhujiang New Town). We joined two African female students and an older African man. Debbie later told me the older man had graduated from a Chinese university and remained to run his own business in Guangzhou; he was married to a local Chinese woman. By midnight, the group had expanded to include four African students, the businessman and myself. They decided to adjourn to a club that was popular with both the local Chinese and foreigners. We found a small table at the second floor of the club where we had a bird eye's view of the dance floor on the lower level, which was packed with bodies moving to the groove of heavy beats under flashing neon lights. The businessman ordered a Bacardi and green tea, which he mixed together into a cocktail for all of us. That night out with Debbie is typical of a weekend pursuit for many of the African students I met in both Guangzhou and Wuhan. They displayed consumption habits that chalk up a fair amount of money each month, some of which was supported through family allowances or side income that they earned through trading activities. This might include procuring goods in Guangzhou on behalf of clients back in Africa, making small purchases for resale through e-commerce sites, or working part-time for firms doing China-Africa trade in Guangzhou (Ho 2017). The income helps support the lifestyle they lead as "international" students and which they characterized as "Western" habits (to do with their choice of food, attire and leisure activities). The clubbing culture described above, for example, is arguably a recent phenomenon in post-socialist China and was once frowned upon by the communist regime as an adulteration of Chinese society by Westernization.

During interviews with Debbie and other African students, another common stereotype they unanimously share is of how the Chinese would spit in public, even in shared eating spaces. To the African students, this practice connotes a lack of public hygiene standards and moral cultivation. Through food cultures and daily life practices such as described above, the African students in China construct a cultural hierarchy that classifies the Chinese as less "Westernized," cosmopolitan or civilized. "Western" or "international food," along with lifestyle habits, functions as a type of cultural capital (Thomas 2004; Chapman and Beagan 2013; Smith and Jehlicka 2007) for the African students in China to redefine their sense of self in a foreign environment that depicts and treats them as culturally inferior subject on account of their phenotype and affiliation to African countries considered poorer than China. Smith and Jehlicka (2007) argue that in societies transitioning towards the alleged "normality" of Western neo-liberal modernity, "Western" eating habits function as displays of "cosmopolitan tastes, nurtured through the national and international media or foreign travel." Here, "Western" influenced food habits amongst the middle-class African students are juxtaposed against Chinese food cultures to redress the cultural hierarchies which they are subject to in China (Smith and Jehlicka 2007).

By aligning their identities with the globalized “Western” cultures that characterize their middle-class lifestyles back in Africa, the African student migrants set Chinese food and cultural habits on a lower rank in their cognitive cultural ordering of the world. Inasmuch as they may display habits associated with African diasporic cultures (e.g. consuming hometown food or occasionally wearing “traditional” attire), the African student migrants also embrace an “international food culture” that is associated with Westernization and globalization. They consider Chinese food provincial as compared to “Western” or “international food.” Invoking “Western” food preferences reflects the lingering Western influences on the gastronomic cultures of African countries produced through historical colonialism and contemporary globalization. It also subtly asserts the cultural superiority of Western ways of life as compared to the Chinese experiences of the African students in China. The “Western” experience continues to hold allure for the African student migrants in China, reinforced by their encounters with prejudice and social exclusion in Chinese society.

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Despite the racialized abjection they face, the African student migrants redefine their sense of self by situating themselves in the wider category of “foreigners” who are driving internationalization and urban transformation in China. Food cultures in post-socialist states present a way to analyse the transformation of society and urban change (Thomas 2004; Smith and Jehlicka 2007; O’Donnell 2010). In Wuhan, when I asked Max, a student from Burkina Faso, whether he thinks African migration has impacted Chinese urban spaces, he replied there are more “international” eating places now as compared to when he arrived in Wuhan in 2011. Indeed over the course of my fieldwork, each time I visited Wuhan I noticed changes to the streetscape of Luoyu Lu (Luoyu Road), which runs parallel to two of the university campuses. Where modest shop fronts manned by local Chinese shopkeepers once characterized the streetscape of Luoyu Lu, the road is now lined with gleaming new cafes and bakeries featuring “Western” coffee, sandwiches and pastries. The consumption demand of foreigners, along with a growing middle-class Chinese population, has led the city authorities, developers and aspiring businesses to construct high-rise and pedestrianized shopping malls in venues such as Guanggu Square and Han Jie (*Hanjie*). Signs of gentrification are perceptible at old Chinese streets (*laojie*) such as Luoyu Road. Max told me that such “international” food and retail spaces cater to foreigners like him. He opined that the growing international student presence in Wuhan brings global brands and food trends to inland China, in a manner akin to a “culinary civilizing mission” (Durmelat 2015). In his view, such urban transformations cohere with the city authorities’ vision of projecting an internationalized image of Wuhan to domestic and international audiences.

In an ironic twist to the more familiar story of how Chinese state-owned enterprises and private firms are bringing development opportunities to African countries, here the tables are turned when African students such as Max interpret their presence in China as a driver for both urban and cultural development in Chinese cities. During our interview he added that when he first came to Wuhan the locals would express shock at seeing a black-skinned African person like him. These days it is commonplace to see Africans in Wuhan and such looks of shock from the locals in Wuhan are less likely to happen since they are now exposed to a greater diversity of cultural difference.

However, the view towards African migration in Guangzhou is different. Guangzhou has been a key crucible for Chinese projects of modern urbanization and internationalization. The visible imprint of African migration on the urban landscape is considered detrimental to China's international image because of the allegedly illegality associated with African migrants and their business conduct. During the Asian Games held in Guangzhou during 2010, the media and local researchers reported that police raids intensified at Xiaobei. In 2011 the Africa Trading Centre was closed to deter the trade of counterfeit goods that could be damaging to China's international image. More recently, pockets of African migrants have relocated from Xiaobei to Foshan and other suburbs to avoid police harassment. As Bork-Hüffer et al. (2016) observe, the social spaces of African migrants in China are characterized by transiency brought on by wider structural conditions.

In bringing together the food narratives expressed by Debbie in Guangzhou and Max in Wuhan, my goal is not to set forth a blunt comparative analysis of these cities or of African, Western and Chinese food. What is labelled as "African," "Western" or "Chinese" food by the research participants is in fact characterized by national or regional variations and flavours. Critical studies of food also underline the global traces detected in "national" cuisines through the pathways of colonialism, globalization and migration or diaspora formations (Thomas 2004; Tuomainen 2009; Chapman and Beagan 2013). As an example, Caffè Benne at Luoyu Road, one of the international brands that have changed the streetscape, sells "Western" coffee and pastries but it is in fact a chain that originated in South Korea and was inspired by Canadian coffee culture. Nonetheless, essentializing cultural frames used to describe gastronomic practices function as important ideological and cultural registers through which the African students in China reflect on their social status within China and the uneven geographies of development in which they are situated. Gastronomic practices and cultures function as means through which moral hierarchies and degrees of civility are reconstructed to assert personal or collective worth.

Conclusion

Through accounts of gastronomic practices and cultures, this paper has considered how African student migrants in Guangzhou and Wuhan experience urban space in China, and their attitudes towards the wider global geographies of power in which they are situated. Food not only reflects consumer culture but also social relations and evolving urban transformations. In Guangzhou, visible urban spaces associated with African migrants in China have come to be typecast as dangerous and damaging to the city's international image, accentuating social divisions between such migrants and Chinese residents. But another set of convivial social relations are evinced in the less visible spaces of the city, such as the unlicensed hometown restaurants where both the Chinese and Africans are brought together in relationships of economic interdependency. As Zhou et al. (2016) observe, despite negative perceptions of African migrants amongst Chinese residents, the latter have not "formed a collective xenophobic consciousness," leading the authors to urge instead for "greater contact [that] reduces social distance."

Nonetheless, the gastronomic practices and cultures discussed reflect how the African student migrants navigate social exclusion while simultaneously situating themselves as part of the internationalization processes in Chinese cities. As Chapman and Beagan (2013) suggest, food functions as a symbolic representation of identity, and it is both influenced by and constitutive of multiple identities. The African student

migrants are multiply situated social actors within actual geographical locations that span China and Africa, as well as whose desires for modernization and development are inflected by legacies and aspects of “Westernization.” Writing about westernization and modernity in post-socialist states, Smith and Jehlicka (2007) suggest that food “capture[s] some of the diversity and openness of processes of economic and political change” but there are diverse reactions to transition that suggest “irony, resistance, independence, or revisions in response” (Smith and Jehlicka 2007). By portraying themselves as international students with preferences for “Western” food, the African student migrants assert counter logics within global capitalism that seeks to displace China’s soft power maneuverers and cultural hegemony (Katz 2001). Yet even as such counter cultural assertions undermine Chinese hegemony, it simultaneously re-inscribes other forms of power geometries through Anglocentric or Eurocentric accounts of food.

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¹ The Mandarin rap lyrics have been translated into English by the author.

² According to Bodom (2012), the top five groups are Nigerians, Senegalese, Malians, Guineans and Ghanaians but almost every country in the African continent is represented in China through migration.

³ Several maintain that if they had known this is what life in China is like they would have persisted in their quest to study in 'Western' institutions instead. Others aspire to re-migrate once they complete their education in China, preferably to a Western country (Ho 2017).