

### **Between the Pearl River Delta and the US Midwest: Family Migration and Global Educational Aspirations**

The Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) Summer Fieldwork Grants allowed me to travel to Shenzhen—a metropolis located in the Pearl River Delta in southern China—to conduct follow-up interviews, observation, and focus groups for six weeks in the summer of 2019. This fieldwork was a part of my transnational ethnographic research on the co-constitution of class, space and race through higher education mobility. Specifically, I investigate how affluent Chinese international students and families respond to the market-oriented globalization of higher education in the US, and how these foreign students of color negotiate a predominantly white United States (US) Midwest in an era of reenergized racism and nationalism. In the summer of 2017, I conducted a two-month pilot study in Shenzhen and established contacts with Shenzhen families and students who actively pursued global higher education. From September 2018 to May 2019, I conducted an ethnographic study of these participants in a predominantly white university town in the Midwest US. I observed Shenzhen students at multiple residential and educational sites such as homes, classrooms, student activity centers, and social spaces, to investigate the various moments and contexts of interaction within which discrepant discourses of consumption of education, family migration, understanding of race and national identities were brought together. However, international student migration is not essentially about homeland separation, but connections that constantly reshape socioeconomic and racial relations across national boundaries. In order to understand these transnational connections, it is imperative to examine these international students' consumption practices, educational aspirations, and understanding of the race, racism and nationalism in the context of students' hometown. On June 1, 2019, I traveled to Shenzhen for the summer fieldwork. Before traveling, I contacted all participants and asked for their schedules, so that I could plan my research activities ahead. I made sure that I could get the chance to meet with most of the participants and their families when I was in Shenzhen.

I spent my first week in Shenzhen meeting with participants for a quick check-in and to schedule following-up home visits and interviews. Although my summer research was located in Shenzhen, the specific sites of research were never fixed, because the movements and networks of participants were usually not geographically

determined. Instead, participants directed me to the spaces that were indispensable part of their life in the city: malls, tea shops, restaurants, libraries, and homes. I met with their friends for social gathering, soccer games, and college commencement in Shenzhen. My involvement in these activities allowed me to see what life looked like for these young adults back home, what they had missed while in the US, and how they made sense of the transnational lifestyle across the Asia-Pacific. I have also interviewed students' parents, many of whom welcomed to their home for dinner. I was able to ask questions concerning family migration trajectory (almost all the participant families migrated to Shenzhen from elsewhere, or had family relatives emigrated overseas), educational expectation, perception of the US Midwest under Trump administration, understanding of the US-China trade war (particularly when many Shenzhen high-tech companies were the target), opinions about living transnationally, among others. Those conversations informed the historicity of transnationality in Shenzhen, and how cross-border mobility has always been considered a crucial means to obtain better educational opportunities and social upward mobility.

Besides the observation and interviews with students and parents, I also visited numerous public spaces in Shenzhen to document the contemporary economic, social and cultural landscape of the city. For instance, I visited Shenzhen Municipal Museum and multiple district museums to better understand how the formerly fishing village transformed into the fourth biggest cosmopolis in China within four decades. I visited a number of city parks, where monuments of Chinese presidents and murals of the stories of Shenzhen "pioneers" (such as engineers, construction workers, doctors, educators) attribute the city's economic prosperity to the central government's reform and open up policy. I spent time walking in the "urban villages" where Cantonese was mixed with different dialects from the north, sitting in the subway train where middle-class professionals and migrant workers stood next to one another during rush hours, and visited educational spaces such as libraries, book stores, and universities, where local residents read Chinese classics as well as English literature. Immersing myself in those city spaces is crucial to understanding my participants' upbringing environment, families' global educational aspirations, and the class stratification in the city.

In addition, I reconnected with some scholars at the Chinese University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen, whom I met during my pilot study in Shenzhen two years ago. Talking to them about the transformations in the city,

such as the urban infrastructure, the booming high-tech industries, and the city's geopolitical tensions with its neighbor Hong Kong, helped me understand the broader picture of the political-economic contexts in the Pearl River Delta region at the current political moment. Their constructive feedback to my research also helped me situate the transnational Shenzhen students' lived experiences within the global forces of market-economy, urbanization, and resurgent nationalism both in China and the US.

In this study, transnational multi-sited ethnography allows me to examine the movement and negotiation within and between educational spaces, populations, and ideologies. Following participants from the US to China offers an opportunity to connect participants' experiences in the US to their life back home. Therefore, I am sincerely grateful for IRIS for funding this summer fieldwork.