

## **Conflating Blackness and Rurality: Urban Politics and Social Control of Africans in Guangzhou, China**

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*In April, 2020, amid widespread fear of a second wave of infections of the novel coronavirus in China, local authorities in Guangzhou cracked down on the city's black population, resulting in mass evictions of Africans. The incident raises several questions about racism in China. How should we interpret this heavy-handed treatment of black people? Was this an isolated incident? What motivated such operations? In this article, I explain social control of Guangzhou's African communities as a problem of municipal politics. What underlies the government's heavy handed approach, I argue, are those communities' ties to rurality, which constitute a roadblock in the city's urban upgrade. Using Dengfeng Village, one of the best known African communities in China, as a case study, I show that efforts to upgrade the area by the local state and the real estate industry were frustrated by the community's status as an urban village. Africans, whom Chinese have historically associated with rurality, are seen as contributing to a space that has long been stigmatized as a spatial manifestation of rural people's lack of self-discipline. To better reveal the interconnection between social control and urban politics, I place official action in context of the history of the community's formation and the lived experience. This analysis of Dengfeng applies to various extents to other major African communities in Guangzhou.*

*Keywords: Racism, Africans, China, urban development, rural migrants*

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## 1. Introduction

In April, 2020, amid widespread fear in China that imported cases might lead to a second wave of mass infections of the novel coronavirus, local authorities in Guangzhou launched a crackdown targeting black people in the city. The two largest African communities, Guangyuanxi and Xiaobei, were heavily affected. Rental properties and hotels, likely under the order of local authorities, subsequently evicted all African renters. What prompted the operation was believed to be an incident few days prior where a Nigerian man who tested positive for the disease allegedly bit a nurse while trying to escape from the hospital and news that five other Nigerians had contracted the disease (Feng, 2020). The resulting images and videos of Africans roaming on the streets, sleeping under bridges, and being denied basic services in stores like McDonald's and in accommodation went viral on global social media immediately (Vincent, 2020).

In a podcast following the incident, Roberto Castillo, a migration scholar specialized in African communities in Guangzhou, accurately points to China's emphasis on social control as the cause of such heavy-handed measures (Olander, 2020). Yet, the question why the local government believed black communities required more social control than other foreigners still remains. The fact that many Africans violate immigration regulations only partly explains the government's motivation because Africans were not the only racial group that violated immigration regulations and Africans with valid immigration documents were also affected.

In this paper, I try to further elaborate on the issue of social control by examining the urban politics behind the experience of Dengfeng, an urban village in the Xiaobei area. While we have learned a lot from other scholars Africans' survival strategies, communal organization, and encounters with law enforcement, the urban aspect of their lived experience has yet to be adequately addressed, which prevents us from fully appreciating the connection between the city's urban history and politics and the excessive social control Africans experience. In fact, mass evictions like this happened before. In late 2014, the local government in Guangzhou launched a "clean-up" in Dengfeng that lasted till early 2015, resulting in a previous exodus of most African residents. So what motivated this state-sponsored racism that targeted large African communities like Dengfeng? The answer, I argue, lies in these communities' ties to rurality, which constitutes a roadblock in the city's urban upgrade.

The city of Guangzhou encompasses more than two hundred areas like Dengfeng that are commonly known as urban villages (*chengzhongcun*, see Du, 2018). Organized as rural collectives during the Maoist era, they still have strong historical, demographic, and political ties to the countryside. Local farmers and rural migrants are currently the main residents of these communities despite having been swallowed deep in the urban fabric of the giant city. Yet, these

areas maintain their rural land titles, which to a certain extent made them more impervious to the Municipal Government's planning than regular urban land (which belongs to the state). Because of these rural ties, people of low income and precarious status in the city such as rural migrants and Africans congregate in these communities, which also provide a safe space for informal businesses. Yet the local government seeks to fully incorporate these areas into the city because, as officials see it, their ties to the countryside, location in downtown, and underdevelopment damage the city's image and hurt property values. Since redevelopment takes a long time due to challenges such as funding, displacement, and prolonged negotiations, these communities are subject to constant clean-ups which inspect and evict undocumented residents and unlicensed businesses. The mass eviction during this coronavirus pandemic was just the latest one of these clean-ups.

Before proceeding, I must qualify my argument. First it is important to acknowledge that there is a significant number of Africans who do not live in semi-rural communities like Dengfeng. But thanks to the excessive news coverage which ties these communities to Africans, I contend those spaces and blackness have become mutual signifiers of each other. In other words, while communities like Dengfeng take on the meaning of blackness, blackness in Guangzhou carries the spatial connotation of the rural, which adds to the its stigma that denies Africans their space in the city. This, however, should not be taken to mean that Chinese see Africans completely the same as rural migrants, but rather, they see them as non-urban or anti-urban like rural migrants. Second, it is not my intention to reduce state-sponsored racism to simply a justification for urban development. I have discussed elsewhere how the institution of Public Security (*gong'an*) in China incentivizes police to target Africans (Huang, 2019). Any racist project is the result of multiple, sometimes conflicting, motivations, with race itself being the main one. What this article offers, nevertheless, is one dimension of racism in China.

## **2. Method and Outline**

This research is mainly based on my fieldwork in Guangzhou between 2014 and 2017, with informants who continue to furnish me with the latest information to this day. Within those four years, I traveled to Guangzhou three times, each time staying for about a month. I spent most of my time interviewing Africans formally and observing their life casually. My interviewees include itinerant traders on short term visas and well established merchants who served as community leaders for their fellow countrymen. Our conversations revolved around Africans' encounters with local authorities and the challenges they faced in Guangzhou. I also talked to Chinese people who came into contact with Africans on a daily basis. These include immigration agents who helped Africans apply for their legal documents and local officials involved in foreigner administration. I cross-referenced information from my interviews with the work of other scholars and other print materials.

Besides interviews, I spent part of summer 2017 residing in Dengfeng Village in order to gain a more accurate understanding of life in the community. The conversations I had with local landlords, business owners, and casual laborers shed light on the importance of this community to its residents and how it supports life in different ways. They also gave me insights into Dengfeng's local history and the urban politics that govern the neighborhood.

Moreover, some of the information presented in this article comes from different local institutions. In 2017, I researched at the Guangzhou's Office of Local History, perusing published materials on areas that later became African communities. These included the district records (*quzhi*) of Tianhe, Yuexiu, and Baiyun, which furnished me with basic information on changes in land use, local economies, and demographics. Besides, I also spent time in the Overseas Chinese Village located about a kilometer to the east of Dengfeng, surveying its architecture and visiting its museum in order to understand its history. The political context under which the Village was constructed and its historical legacy, as we shall see, resulted in the uneven developments in Northern Suburb of Guangzhou and have indirectly led to heightened social control in Dengfeng.

After a review of literature on Guangzhou's African communities and the connection between anti-black racism and rurality in China, I will discuss the recent history of Dengfeng, which shows the endogenous origin of its informal market and under regulated rental houses, two often cited justifications for clean-ups. These "social ills", as we shall see, are in fact caused by the rural-urban split in land ownership specified in the Chinese Constitution and a population control measure called Household Registration (*hukou*), which have led to increasing social polarization in post-socialist China. By looking at the formation of Dengfeng, I attempt to dissociate informality and its negative connotations from foreigners, especially Africans. Also, through discussing the uneven developments of the larger Northern Suburb, of which Dengfeng was part, I contend that the local state's real intention is to gentrify Dengfeng so that it better conforms to the modern urban image the state is after and matches its vicinity's real estate value. Finally, I discuss the role of race and racism in this process and how the stigma of Africans as illegal immigrants justifies such disruptive state actions.

### **3. Existing Scholarship on African Enclaves in Guangzhou**

In the past twenty years, traders from sub-Saharan Africa have formed multiple communities in the Chinese commercial hub of Guangzhou. First arriving in the late 1990s, these enterprising businesspeople sourced manufactured goods in China for export back to Africa. Operating mainly on an individual basis, most of these traders come from West Africa, especially during the early years. Countries such as Nigeria, Guinea, Senegal, Ghana, and Mali are particularly well represented (Li, Ma, & Xue, 2009), though nationals from every country of the continent can now

be found in Guangzhou. The exact number of Africans in Guangzhou is not clear because their frequent travels between China and Africa make an accurate count difficult. The fact that many overstay their visas also adds to the difficulty of counting. But scholars and local officials estimated there were about 15,000 to 20,000 Africans in Guangzhou in the 2000s (Li et al., 2009). Their significant number in Guangzhou has attracted scholars of various disciplines such as anthropology, geography, and sociology. The resultant scholarship is a thorough and accurate representation of these communities, which provides us with many insights into their lived experience.

Three of the most pressing concerns facing Africans in Guangzhou are how to succeed in a competitive business environment with little investment, how to reconstruct a sense of community, and how to manage their conflicts with local authorities. Anthropologists of global migration, for example, show the myriad ways in which these traders survive and become upwardly mobile despite their lack of capital by utilizing opportunities and services that the city offers such as illegal money exchange and underground banking, a phenomenon termed “globalization from below” (Yang, 2012) or “low end globalization (Mathews, Dan, & Yang 2018). Sociologists and cultural scholars (Xu & Liang, 2012; Haugen 2013; Castillo, 2016), on the other hand look at the social and religious network which Africans create and recreate to cope with different challenges in China and from which they derive a sense of meaning and belonging.

Well aware of the importance of institutions in structuring Africans’ life, some scholars are more critical. Instead of assuming the free movement of people, for example, Heidi Haugen (2012) argues that stringent immigration regulations can in fact trap immigrants in the host country as illustrated by Africans in Guangzhou. Making a similar argument, Haugen’s (2018) more recent piece investigates the implementation of residence registration, an immigration document foreigners must possess while in China, and shows how this document not only causes displacement of Africans in Guangzhou, but can also make it extremely difficult for the undocumented to leave China. Shanshan Lan (2015) is more pointed in her research on the productive disciplinary power of the state. By examining state regulation of undocumented African migrants in Guangzhou, she demonstrates how the idea of African illegality can be constructed legally by state actions such as passage of tougher immigration laws and drug busts which have much heavier impact on African communities. These conflicts with law enforcement, coupled with the unpredictability of the global economy, lead Zhigang Li, Michal Lyons, and Alison Brown (2012) to argue that Guangzhou’s African communities are a transient phenomenon.

In most of this work, the city and its history is usually relegated to the background. A few scholars, however, are more attentive to how the formation of African communities was embedded in the city’s history. Li Zhang’s (2008) study, for example, discusses the role of land development in attracting Africans to certain areas of Guangzhou. Some scholars have also noticed the significance of Dengfeng as an urban village. Michal Lyons, Alison Brown, and Zhigang Li (2008) correctly describe Dengfeng as a manifestation of increasing social stratification and urban segregation. Sijie Mai and Junyi Lin’s (2017) more recent work represents the most thorough

examination of Dengfeng's history. Planned urbanization during the socialist era, they argue, led to uneven development around the Dengfeng area, whose in-between geographic location and semi-rural status paved the way for the African traders to settle there.

Adding to this work, this article seeks to further put research of Guangzhou's African community in conversation with the much broader field of urban studies, particularly research in urban politics and policies. What Africans experience in Guangzhou is in fact the social impact of neoliberal urban development. Scholars have long discussed the role of urban growth as a main goal of economic development and urban politics. Harvey Molotch (1976) argues that cities, or even an entire nation, consist of a mosaic of land owning actors which both compete against and ally with each other. David Harvey (2008) in his seminal work "The Right to the City" points out that urbanization is a major absorbent of excess capital, resulting in widespread construction of infrastructure and residential areas, dispossessing urban poor of their land and widening wealth gap. In a broad overview, Mike Davis (2007) paints a grim picture of the rise of slums globally as neoliberalism becomes the dominant mode of development, which pushes urban poor to underserved communities like Dengfeng.

Scholars of Chinese cities have also expounded how this global phenomenon is playing out in China. Echoing Molotch, You-tien Hsing (2012) argues a "great urban transformation" is happening in China as a result of competition between the state and landowning institutions. Jiang Xu, Anthony Yeh, and Fulong Wu (2009) present a fine grained picture of policy changes in land market under urban development in China where de-regulation and re-regulation occur simultaneously. Chengri Ding (2004) on the other hand focuses the interconnection between land market and land uses in Beijing. He concludes that office and commercial uses concentrate in the urban center where land prices are the highest, a pattern shared by other cities in China. This is not surprising and provides further proof that centrally-located Dengfeng is no longer compatible with the direction of urban development in China. Basing my analysis on these scholars, I examine the role of race in lending itself to this development process. Despite not being a postcolonial situation, social control of Africans in Guangzhou nevertheless illustrates the racial capitalism elaborated by Andy Clarno (2017). Anti-black racism becomes more legible when we take into account Dengfeng's urban history. As we shall see, changes around the neighborhood since 1950 created the conditions for the formation of black communities and shed light on their ties to rurality. For many Chinese, these ties are interpreted with their historical association with blackness.

#### **4. Blackness and Rurality**

Anti-black racism in China has a long history and flares up from time to time. Scholars have attempted to explain it from various angles. While some (Dikotter, 1992; Wyatt, 2012) trace its origin back to ancient times, others look at more modern expressions such as anti-black demonstrations across university campuses in the late 1980s (Sautman, 1994; Sullivan, 1994) and the online attacks on a mixed race Chinese woman more recently (Cheng, 2011). Anti-black

sentiments and institutional racism resulting from recent influx of Africans into Guangzhou have also attracted much scholarly attention (Lan, 2017, 2019; Huang, 2019; Castillo, 2020). As anywhere else, racism in China is intimately linked to socio-economic status, but Chinese anti-black sentiments share part of their genealogy with anti-rural ones. In his exhaustive work, Frank Dikotter (1992) points out that Chinese have adored pale complexion since ancient times because it implies cultural refinement, while dark skin tone is associated with outdoor labor, especially farming. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this pre-colonial form of colorism fused with the racial hierarchy introduced by the West whereupon Chinese began to see different peoples of the world through a social Darwinist perspective.

In Chinese perception, blacks were less cultured and civilized (Cheng, 2011), a stigma shared by peasants. According to Barry Sautman, a survey conducted in 1992 among a diverse population including students, professionals, and intellectuals found that participants had a very similar attitude toward both Africans and peasants. Apart from the low scores in culture and intelligence among the two groups, what is worth noting is that they both ranked bottom in capacity to manage their own affairs (Sautman, 1994, p. 432). This understanding remains true today, which explains why the government in Guangzhou blames both groups for the problems in their communities. It also explains why state actions like visa raids and stop-and-frisk style inspections enjoy wide support from the general public, which often times use the phrase “low quality (*di suzhi*)” to describe Africans (Cheng, 2011, p. 563). This derogatory phrase is in fact frequently used by the state and urban elites to criticize rural migrants, furnishing a cultural foundation for their differential treatments. In his discussion of the term, Luigi Tomba argues that while urban middle class, the backbone of China’s consumer society, is entitled to privacy and self-government, “low quality” rural migrants are not to be trusted and need to be constantly disciplined. Guangzhou’s government is applying the same logic to Africans, which is made clear by news media’s frequent focus on African communities’ ties to rurality.

To many Chinese, Africa, like the Chinese countryside, is the opposite of the urban modernity embodied by the emerging middle class. Highly educated and completely enculturated into the modern – often implying Western – lifestyle, these elites contrast sharply with representations of Africans and Chinese rural migrants who are often portrayed as deprived, diseased, and uneducated. Johanna Wood demonstrates this point in her analysis of media campaigns against HIV in China. While published materials distance the disease from urban elites, they closely associate it with Africans, especially African women, who are described as “uncivilized, unruly, unhygienic, and of low quality” (Wood, 2013, p. 305). Interestingly, the only Chinese portrayed as prone to the disease are rural migrants and ethnic minorities, which reveal the subconscious conflation among urban Chinese of Africans and rural migrants in their potential threat toward a modern urban society. This conflation is reinforced in spatial terms. In news media and officially published materials, writers often refer to Guangzhou’s African communities as “African villages” or “tribes”. It was thus little wonder local authorities took immediate action to crack down on African communities when cases of coronavirus were confirmed there. It simply confirmed their long-held assumptions of those communities. This also explains why African

communities stand in the way of the city's urban upgrade because areas associated with rurality or blackness simply will not fare well in the real estate market.

## **5. Dengfeng Village**

In 2015, the Yuexiu District Government created a short video presentation of the successful clean-up of Dengfeng Village launched in late 2014 (Huang, 2019). Since it was meant to be circulated internally among local government institutions, the video gives us rich insights into the rationale behind the operation. Citing illegal peddling and the chaotic informal market as the main reasons for the clean-up, the narrator attributes these problems to the facts that the community is located in a "semi-rural area" and that African traders are supporting all the informal businesses there. The linkage of blackness and rurality is further highlighted by the title of the video, "The Past and Present of the African Village". This conflation, however, completely ignores the complex origin of the neighborhood and reduces the formation of this informal market to an issue of Africans' and rural migrants' lawlessness and lack of self-discipline.

Before the economic reforms in the 1980s, Dengfeng Village was a farming area located just north of the ancient city wall. Within two decades, however, urban sprawl completely redefined the meaning of center and periphery. Part of a vaguely defined area called Xiaobei, Dengfeng is now a residential neighborhood that occupies a prime location within the administrative district of Yuexiu. Despite its central location, Dengfeng remains marginal and rural in land ownership because of a clause in the Chinese Constitution (The National People's Congress, n.d.a). According to Article 10, which was first passed in 1982, rural and suburban land belongs to rural collectives (of which Dengfeng is one). Although the state has the right to expropriate rural land, it must be for public interest. As a result, despite losing most of its farm land to public projects, local farmers held onto their residential area and the remaining farmland for self-development. Moreover, the collective's leadership became a self-governing body with a high degree of autonomy. In the 1980s, free from government interference, local farmers began developing the area by themselves and constructed factory farms and hotels. As a result, it became a space that is, in Beibei Tang's (2015) words, not rural but not urban and hence the name urban village.

In the 1990s, Dengfeng's experience was very similar to other urban villages. Motivated by the new economic opportunities in the reform era, rural migrants from across China began flocking to the city. Dengfeng Villagers, who could no longer farm by then and failed to generate any sustainable income from their own industries, began expanding their houses to capitalize on this influx. The result was a construction frenzy, which led to the subsequent extreme density and irregular building shapes. Thanks to this population increase, the number of individual businesses grew from 381 to 1492 (Guangzhou Tianhe District, 2008, p. 107), most of which were run by migrants themselves and probably not properly registered. However, it is important not to look at informality as a result of individual flaws, but rather that of structural problems.



The origin of informality in post-socialist China is very complicated, but has little to do with Africans or rural migrants themselves. Initiated in 1978, the Reform and Open-up policy brought fundamental changes to employment patterns in China. To combat growing unemployment, stimulate economic growth, and above all re-establish the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy after the Cultural Revolution, the leadership aggressively promoted individual ventures, which had all but disappeared in the 1960s. Fueling this growth were marginal groups such as urban youths, housewives, retirees, and laid off workers who were not employed by the state. As can be expected, not all these individual ventures were fully legal. Some procured their products illegally, while others operated without a license (Ikels, 1996, p. 63). In other words, urban residents were in fact pioneers in the informal economy.

Adding to the mix of individual entrepreneurs in the 1990s were rural migrants, who were treated as foreigners in cities. Arriving in cities with high hopes, they found themselves barred from all the secure and well paid jobs because of their rural origin. The system of Household Registration, or *hukou*, instituted in the 1950s to monitor rural to urban movement, denied rural migrants access to basic rights such as housing and employment. While manufacturing and construction absorbed most rural migrants, many managed to avoid the two notoriously exploitative sectors to become their own bosses. According to Dorothy Solinger (1999, p. 227), in 1993 more than a hundred thousand self-employed individuals were observed in Beijing, most of whom were nonlocals. The legitimacy of these businesses was also questionable because the requirement of an urban *hukou* to start up a business was unobtainable for most. The government, well aware of the impossibility to have complete control over the now open market, decided to turn a blind eye (Solinger, 1999, p. 63). These informal hawkers and peddlers usually gravitate toward urban villages like Dengfeng where the state's regulatory power is weakest and housing is affordable. Even before Africans arrived, an informal economy run by rural migrants was flourishing in the city. While rural migrants, with no better alternatives due to their legal status, took advantage of the only opportunities available to them, Africans arriving in the 2000s receive from them much needed affordable services and products. My short stint as a resident was a testament to this point.

When I moved in, I purchased my cellphone SIM card from a handbag shop that doubled as a long distance call service provider. When my African friend needed money to pay for his purchases, he would go to a juice bar that also did money exchange. To transport the goods he ordered from a nearby wholesaler to a shipping agent in Dengfeng, he gestured to one of the porters – all females that could not speak any English – sitting by main plaza whose only tool was a flatbed dolly. After the shipping agent finished sorting out different orders and arranging for shipment, they would transport goods to warehouses by the dock by calling on the vans waiting on Heng'an Road. Throughout the day, there were slightly more formally dressed men approaching Africans to sell their business card making services. I myself lived above an African clothing shop, which was really the hallway of my building. Most of these businesses were run by rural migrants and either not licensed to sell the products or services they were offering or not licensed at all.

Municipal governments across China have always considered urban villages as hotbeds of crime because of all the unregulated commercial activities and thus applied heavy social control. As discussed earlier, the justification is often that rural migrants lack the *suzhi* to govern themselves. In essence, however, it is about filling a gap in state power so that the state has better control over those spaces, which explains why the state labeled rural migrants “floating population” that needed to be monitored constantly. One way this is achieved is to require migrants to apply for a Temporary Residence Permit which requires the support of a formal employer and controls migrants’ movements. Africans, who as discussed earlier have long been associated with rurality, have received similar treatment.

In China, foreigners are required to report to the local police station within 24 hours of their arrival and apply for a Registration Certificate of Temporary Residence. Similar to the temporary residence permit required of rural migrants, this document tracks foreigners’ movements and whereabouts. In Guangzhou, the enforcement of this rule has been quite lax for white foreigners. In recent years, however, it has become the main tool for the local government to control the African population. As mentioned earlier, in late 2014, the Municipal Government teamed up with the Yuexiu District Government and launched a major clean-up in Dengfeng that lasted till early 2015. While more than a thousand informal businesses were cleared away, most African residents were forced to leave under the stricter requirement for the Registration Certificate of Temporary Residence. Africans of other neighborhoods and communities were also constantly harassed by either the police or guards who often requested to see their registration.

As we can see, social control of Africans in Guangzhou has its origin in China’s administration of urban villages, which are in fact created by China’s economic reforms and institutional inequalities. While this knowledge challenges the state’s simplistic understanding of Dengfeng Village as a spatial manifestation of social ills, it alone does not fully answer the fundamental question why the state is so aggressive in implementing heavy social control in Dengfeng. To do so, we need to situate Dengfeng’s development within the history of the city’s Northern Suburb and the broader context of urban trend in China today.

## **6. Northern Suburb**

While the local government in Guangzhou has long hoped to eliminate all urban villages, the push to clean up Dengfeng is particularly strong because of its geographic location. As mentioned in the previous section, Dengfeng was once outside the city proper. To be more specific, it belonged to what was once known to locals as the Northern Suburb (*beijiao*), whose uneven development helps us better contextualize what motivates the government’s heavy handed approach in Dengfeng. To make my logic clearer, I divide the Northern Suburb into three sections, the west, the east, and the middle. Guangyuanxi, the first African community in Guangzhou, is located on the west side, as was the former venue for the China Import and Export Fair (commonly referred to as Canton Fair). Xiaobei is the mid-section that includes several wholesale malls devoted to the

African trade and two large residential neighborhoods (one of them being Dengfeng). The east side is Guangzhou's old Central Business District (CBD) and used to be the city's most luxurious commercial and office area. Once a undivided whole, the fates of the three sections have turned out very differently.

Developments of the Northern Suburb began in the mid-1950s, when the Communist government used the area to house some of its key institutions. But urbanization took off after the Central Government, eager to attract hard currency from abroad, selected a site on the west side to launch the Canton Fair in 1957, a major pull factor for Africans to visit Guangzhou and settle in the area in the late 1990s (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2007). The decision was made because the existing Sino-Soviet Friendship Building constructed two years earlier provided a perfect venue for the event. Meanwhile anticipating the increasing freight and passenger traffic, the Municipal Government constructed a new railway station just north of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building and a major east-west city ring road that cut across the entire Northern Suburb. Both projects were finished after the Cultural Revolution and provided a major infrastructural boost for the west side of the Northern Suburb to become a foreign trade zone in the 1990s. Between 1985 and 2005, wholesale markets mushroomed around the railway station. They, according to Mai and Lin (2017), did not target African customers. But disembarking at the new railway station, African traders were immediately drawn to the opportunities in the zone.

African markets like Canaan Export Clothing Market eventually opened around the Guangyuanxi area to the north of the railway station, forming a specialized section revolving around export to Africa. Entrepreneurs from all over China and African traders, particularly Nigerians, constituted the backbone of this community, whose success in turn attracted even more people and businesses to settle in the area. As later in Dengfeng, several urban villages in the area supplied housing and daily necessities for this community. The shops too were very similar to those that appeared in Xiaobei a few years later. Many were owned and run by rural migrants. Flexing China's new manufacturing power, they offered buyers a cornucopia of cheap and sometimes counterfeited products rather than a high-end shopping experience.

Such developments contrasted sharply with those in the east. Changes to the east side of the Northern Suburb were equally drastic since the Communist takeover. In the early 1950s, overseas Chinese were the main purchasers of Chinese products and accounted for 80 percent of the participants in the first Canton Fair (Li, 2017). To better accommodate these investors and even entice them to settle down in Guangzhou, in July 1954, the city's first congressional meeting passed a proposal to build a luxury residential community called Overseas Chinese Village (OCV) in Taojin, a hilly area on the east side of the Northern Suburb (Zhu, n.d.). Those who moved into the neighborhood were no ordinary people. Many were important politicians or successful entrepreneurs from Southeast Asia. Here, instead of connoting backwardness as in the case of "African village", the word "village" was meant to invoke a sense of idyll. (The Chinese translation of OCV is in fact Overseas Chinese New Village, differentiating it from rurality.) Indeed, descriptions of the neighborhood often focus on its natural landscaping and environment, which

resemble a large garden (Huimou Guangzhou, 2014). The establishment of the OCV sowed the seeds of rapid commercial developments in the years following the Cultural Revolution. In the 1980s, high-rise office towers and five-star hotels began to concentrate in Taojin, with the most famous being Garden Hotel designed by Ieoh Ming Pei. Unlike the wholesale markets in the west side, shops and malls of this area were retail spaces specifically designed to provide a high-end shopping experience similar to that in the Western countries. By 1990, Taojin had firmly established itself as the city's first CBD and a yuppie area with strong association with modernity, luxury, and cosmopolitanism and reflected a trend of urban development in Guangzhou and China.

Developments in Xiaobei were much less grandiose. Before the economic reforms, the Municipal Government did little to change its landscape. In the 1980s, they began demolishing old houses in the area and taking land from local farmers. By the late 1990s, the African market that started in the west side spread eastward to Xiaobei, at a time when overdevelopment in the city resulted in a lot of vacant buildings (Zhang, 2008). Several shopping malls in Xiaobei including Tianxiu Manison, a high-profile project built by a Hong Kong developer, had trouble filling its commercial spaces. Ironically, it was the government that designated Tianxiu Mansion as a Sino-Africa trade zone in order to revive the real estate market in Xiaobei (Qiu, 2013). More than revive it Africans did. By the mid-2000s, Xiaobei was one of the busiest commercial areas in the city. Across the street from Tianxiu Mansion, Dengfeng, Villagers opened two shopping malls to capitalize on the booming African trade.

To the government, however, Xiaobei was ready for a real estate upgrade. In the 2000s, the doldrums of the 1990s were in the past and land development in China had reached an unprecedented speed. In 1988, the first session of the Seventh National People's Congress had passed an amendment to the constitution, legalizing sale of land use rights. This is in fact a workaround for the socialist clause in the constitution which states that "no individuals or organizations can occupy, trade, lease, or transfer land illegally." (The National People's Congress, n.d.b) The amendment immediately triggered a frenzy of land development in China, for municipal governments relied heavily on sales of land use rights for revenue. Beijing also judges local governments by rates of land development and property prices. Local governments thus had incentive to prioritize development projects that could fetch the highest sale price. Urban villages, many of which occupy central locations in the city, were particularly desirable. Dengfeng, within walking distance to a luxury business district, was particularly so. Indeed, different redevelopment plans for Dengfeng have been floated before. One plan would have turned the area into a luxury condominium neighborhood (Wu, 2009). Another plan envisioned a high-end commercial area for white-collar professionals (Zhang, 2010). Evidently, the government wanted the property values and appearance of Dengfeng to match Taojin. In other words, the same pro-growth motivation that directly led to formation of an African community was now threatening to destroy it.

All this discussion of gentrifying Xiaobei took place while the Municipal Government was constructing a new CBD in the neighboring Tianhe District. Instead of causing decline in Taojin, however, this might have stimulated the zeal of its expansion. As land in CBDs is most coveted by developers, competition among district governments have resulted in multiple CBDs in major cities across China (Hsing, 2012, p. 52). The fact that the new CBD in Tianhe was built on a former urban village provided a perfect model for further development of Taojin by expanding it toward the nearby Dengfeng.

However, none of these redevelopment plans materialized. First, as mentioned before, Dengfeng Villagers enjoyed protection under the constitution, which helped them stave off the land grab faced by many other residents in the city. Second, possibly because of the enormous cost incurred by compensation for a relative small area, the government seemed to have trouble finding a willing developer to take on any redevelopment project. While this was going nowhere, the presence of Africans strengthened Dengfeng's vibrancy. Thanks to the increasing number of these global traders, Dengfeng Villagers benefited from increased competition over their rental property, which drove up rents in area. Africans' lack of housing options, due both to their preference of proximity to all the wholesale markets and their unfamiliarity with the rest of the city, also played to local landlords' advantage. On the other hand, their consuming power also attracted unlicensed street hawkers and vendors. The mutual reinforcement of rurality and blackness as discussed before thus further solidified the neighborhood's image as anti-urban. This not only suppresses property value in Xiaobei, but also threatens property value of the more developed Taojin.

As a result, the Municipal Government resorted to a compromised measure to make Dengfeng better conform to the orderly look it was after. Instead of forcing a thoroughgoing plan of demolition and redevelopment, the government has engaged in piecemeal beautification projects in the neighborhood since late 2000s. Global events like the Beijing Olympics (for which Guangzhou played a minor role) and the 2010 Asian Games, hosted by Guangzhou, provided major impetus. For example, a few months prior to the opening of the Asian Games, the government did a surface touch-up of several prominent buildings in the neighborhood. Then in 2011, as part of a water treatment project, the government repaved the main street in Dengfeng, renovated some storefronts, and added greenery to the neighborhood.

## **7. Social Control and Racism**

It was also during the late 2000s when Africans began to experience a steady increase of state control in Dengfeng, but Africans' experience cannot be fully understood unless we take race into account.

In 2007, the city's first Community Office of Foreigner Assistance, partially staffed with police officers, opened at the south entrance of Dengfeng Village. Claiming to assist foreigners as they settled in the neighborhood, the office was also tasked with registering and tracking Africans. It played a major role in the campaign to force Africans to leave in 2014 (Huang, 2019). Around the same time, the municipal government announced that foreigners were included in the category

of “floating population”, which also included Chinese rural migrants. The municipal police subsequently set up a special patrol zone in Xiaobei (Li et al, 2012, p. 67). Working alongside other departments such as the Bureau of Health and Bureau of Industry and Commerce, they launched regular inspections and crackdowns on Africans, their residences and their businesses.

While rural migrants had long experienced similar treatments, social control of Africans was much tougher. In Dengfeng, door-to-door inspections happened on a daily basis, the main reason so many left in 2015 after the clean-up. Raids in the western zone of Guangyuanxi happened so often that pent-up anger among Africans eventually erupted in mass protests in both 2009 and 2012. The protest in 2009, in particular, was triggered by the death of a Nigerian fleeing from a passport check (Africans Protest, 2009). (The leader of the Nigerian community later told me the person critically injured himself, but did not in fact die). While all foreigners are subject to the same immigration regulations, white foreigners were much less affected. On the one hand, many of them were professionals formally employed, which gave them a secure legal status. But more importantly, law enforcement specifically targeted black people, just as they did in 2020 amid the coronavirus outbreak. Pressure on officers from their superiors to improve the image of Xiaobei, coupled with monetary incentives, had resulted in Africans being inspected and arrested much more frequently (Huang, 2019). Once arrested, Africans were incarcerated indefinitely until they were able to pay steep fines.

The 2014 clean-up was a watershed event because it signaled a drastic intensification of social control in Dengfeng. As part of the clean-up, local authorities mandated that landlords must install access control systems in their properties. Only tenants who had registered with the Community Office of Foreigner Assistance could receive key passes that allowed them to enter their apartment buildings. Also as part of the clean-up, the Community Office relocated to a larger space, and the original site became a detention center. Since the clean-up, police enforced foreign renter registration much more strictly. Every day, all kinds of law enforcement personnel including the Armed Police, Special Police Unit, and Urban Administration, patrolled the neighborhood, and surveillance cameras were installed throughout the neighborhood. When I lived in there, it was not uncommon to see several Armed Police (a division of the military) guarding the detention center with assault rifles across their chests. No other foreign or migrant communities in Guangzhou has seen this level of social control. One has to question the necessity of such heavy policing for a neighborhood of less than one square kilometer.

Indeed, since 2007, as mouthpieces for the state, major newspapers had begun associating crimes and illegal immigration with Africans. Using Xiaobei as an example, writers grossly exaggerated the numbers of Africans in Guangzhou, which range from 200,000 to 300,000 (20 wan feizhou, 2007; Liu, 2014), and created a false sense of racial invasion. Worse still, they linked crimes like drug dealing, rape and mugging exclusively to Africans and supplied readers with sensational stories of arrests of Africans. The root cause of African crime, these writers claimed,

was the problem of “triple illegal (*sanfei*)”. Referring to foreigners who enter, stay, and work in China illegally, the term appeared more and more frequently in the late 2000s and gradually took on a racial meaning. Racially neutral on the surface, the term is mainly invoked in reportage of Africans in Xiaobei. The stigma of Africans as *sanfei* soon spread far and wide on the internet, so much so that Chinese netizens simply refer to all Africans as “*sanfei* blacks”. To many Chinese, the *sanfei* problem is familiar and believable because rural migrants have been labeled “*sanwu*” for many years. Like *sanfei*, the term refers to rural migrants who stay or work in cities without proper documentation. In other words, *sanfei* is a local adaptation of the global discourse of race that helps legitimize the gentrification of neighborhoods that are allegedly safe havens for *sanfei*. In the meantime, as this new racial discourse captures the attention of a large audience nationwide, the state began to diminish rhetoric that stigmatized rural migrants.

In response to former President Hu Jintao’s call to construct a “harmonious society”, social attitudes and policies toward rural migrants had begun to change in the 2000s. On the one hand, the media became more critical of the discriminatory treatments of rural migrants. In a typical example, in 2006 *Nanfeng News* interviewed Shiding Huang, the director of the Institute of Urban Management Studies of Guangzhou Academic of Social Science. An advocate for the further removal of institutional barriers facing rural migrants to help them better assimilate into the city, he argued the government should change from being an administrator to a service provider (Yan & Shan, 2006). In recent years, the central government has also been slowly phasing out the *hukou* system, purportedly in order to slowly eliminate the difference in official status of urban and rural residents (Zhou, Pan, Li, Wu, & Fang, 2016). Such a liberal attitude, however, was not extended to Africans. In a different interview a year later, Huang himself stoked racial fear by spreading the baseless claim that there were 200,000 Africans in Guangzhou and indirectly called for tougher regulation (20 wan feizhou, 2007). It is unclear at this point if race will eventually become a social structuring force as prominent as the rural-urban divide. Roberto Castillo (2020) also cautions us not to exaggerate the impact of institutional racism in China. But as the Chinese society becomes more diverse and immigration increases, it is not impossible that a racism that latches onto existing institutional discrimination against rural migrants could take root.

## 8. Conclusion

In 2016, QQ, a popular online news outlet, posted an article of *Southern Metropolis Daily* titled “Yuexiu District Dealt with Six Disorderly Phenomena, Dirty and Chaotic Dengfeng Village of Yesterday Transformed into Tourist Spot” (Qiu & Wu, 2016). Listed under the real estate section, the article celebrates the successful facelift of Dengfeng. Apparently appealing to investors and home buyers, it suggests that the once rowdy neighborhood is now a piece of hot real estate that is suitable for both living and working. Ironically, Dengfeng’s rural origin became a selling point – the area is described as an ancient village, in this case to invoke an idyllic image. Perhaps to reassure investors that things would not relapse, the article also mentions that over 7,000 rental houses have been registered and that door-to-door inspections are conducted regularly. What is more, in a not so subtle way, the authors use whiteness to symbolize progress and improvement in

property value. They claim that following the clean-up, more and more Europeans and Americans visit the area, not just Africans.

This news article perfectly illustrates Guangzhou government's logic behind its tough social control on Dengfeng Village. While the urban village's premium location promises an equally premium value, its ties to rurality, created by the Chinese Constitution and the *hukou* system, also constituted a major roadblock in its redevelopment. Caught in this web of historical and political forces, Africans found themselves battling a form of state-sponsored racism which casts them as lawless nuisance that negatively affects property values. This racism is rooted in Africans' long association with rurality in Chinese imagination and the state's discriminatory treatment of rural migrants. While white foreigners visiting Dengfeng "uplift" its image and add to its value, Africans detract from both. All the efforts to document, inspect, and evict Africans can thus be seen as attempts to undermine Dengfeng's autonomy and its rural ties so that both of its appearance and value can better match its vicinity. Guangyuanxi, the other major African community, itself made up of several urban villages, has also been subject to incessant crackdowns and inspections.

Rural migrants across China might find Africans' experience very familiar. Eerily similar to the mass evictions of Africans amid the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the Beijing government in late 2017, in the dead of winter, evicted thousands of migrant workers of a suburban town following a large fire. Despite official denials, people inside China as well as global media suspected the fire was a pretext for the government to clear away the city's "low end" population, in order to create more space for high income professionals (Chu, 2017). In other words, this kind of social control is in fact part of China's urban upgrade that happens at the expense of the most vulnerable people in cities. The difference is that while the 2017 incident generated a huge outcry among the Chinese public, Africans evicted during a pandemic enjoyed little sympathy. As we can see, partly sharing its genealogy with anti-rural sentiments, anti-black racism has become a powerful political tool in the urban development of Guangzhou. Understanding this connection is crucial in our critique of anti-black racism in China.

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