Urbanization, In-Migration, Innovation: Shenzhen as China’s Silicon Valley and Most Dynamic Global Megacity

A Summer Field Study Course in Shenzhen and Its Neighboring Cities of Dongguan, Huizhou, and Hong Kong

In 1979, China established its first special economic zone in the small fishing village of Shenzhen bordering Hong Kong. Over four decades, Shenzhen has grown into China’s Silicon Valley, known for its widespread immigrant entrepreneurship and leading industrial innovation. Shenzhen also has become China’s most dynamic global megacity, approaching Shanghai in population (more than 20 million) and catching up to Hong Kong in GDP. Thus, Shenzhen is known as a miracle city that deserves in-depth investigation as an instructional case for understanding the origin and critical outcomes of China’s historically unprecedented urbanization through massive rural-urban migration and its global rise via rapid economic development and technological innovation.

Shenzhen’s miraculous development has occurred partly as China’s most popular destination for rural and urban migrants from all corners of the country. Shenzhen drew the earliest and largest population movement in post-reform China toward its unprecedented opportunities associated with the newly opened frontier economy, large-scale infrastructure construction, and plentiful factory employment. The earlier and subsequent migrants’ stories are that of a boomtown that has allowed many to succeed or even prosper and others to survive in a vibrant but competitive environment. As many successful migrants have become new wealthy Shenzhen residents living in luxury high-rise buildings, the ones who continue to struggle eke out a living in the city’s many but shrinking urban villages due to urban redevelopment. This uneven migrant experience aside, Shenzhen has earned the moniker of the “city for immigrants” that welcomes newcomers and features a prevalent immigrant youth culture.
Like Silicon Valley in California and other cities dominated by immigrants, Shenzhen has become China’s most entrepreneurial and innovative city. More than 90 percent of Shenzhen’s companies are privately owned. Shenzhen has led all Chinese cities in the number of international patents applied and granted and consistently has accounted for about half of China’s applied patents. This disproportionate innovative prowess stems primarily from R&D by major private companies such as BYD, Huawei, Tencent, and DJI. While BYD is the world’s largest electric vehicle manufacturer and accounts for more than 25 percent of the global market for rechargeable batteries, DJI makes and sells about 70 percent of the world’s consumer drones. These dynamic global companies were started by risk-taking entrepreneurs who have migrated to and found a home in Shenzhen. Like Silicon Valley in California and other cities dominated by immigrants, Shenzhen has become China’s most entrepreneurial and innovative city.

The combination of immigrant entrepreneurship and innovation has turned Shenzhen into China’s Silicon Valley and a global leader in local innovation.

In summer 2019, under the aegis of the Center for Urban and Global Studies (CUGS), in collaboration with Shenzhen University, and with primary financial support from the Thomas Urban China Studies Endowment, Trinity College will launch a new field study course in Shenzhen.

The course will focus on the dual theme of immigration and innovation. We will examine migrant life in Shenzhen from both cultural and spatial perspectives. To understand the city’s dominant immigrant culture, we will read academic and popular writings and interview both older and younger migrants. We will use selected urban villages as microsites to probe and understand the residential experience of immigrants in relation to their work locations, commuting times, and access to other urban resources such as consumption and entertainment outlets.

For the focus on innovation, we will visit a number of large and small firms and factories, either established or starting out, located in a government-designated, dense high-tech district vs. anywhere else in the city.

We have already secured the participation of a diverse and complementary team of professors in cultural studies and sociology of Shenzhen University, urban planners, business executives, and community activists who will help us teach locally. They will give guest lectures, serve as field-visit leaders, help guide Trinity students’ course projects, and potentially participate in collaborative research with Trinity’s course instructors. This will set up a new and more integrated approach to urban-global studies through field-based experiential learning and acquisition of local knowledge.

The course will carry 1.0 credit through classroom instruction at Shenzhen University and field visits in Shenzhen and three nearby cities. The course will run from June 8 to 26, 2019.