

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

Understanding *Shiminhua* in Chinese Greater Bay Area: Internalizing urban identity and negotiating place attachment

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the following question: How does the process of urbanization of rural–urban migrants (*shiminhua*) unfold in Chinese cities? It focuses on the urbanization of people in the contextualized concept of *shiminhua*. This paper mainly adopted qualitative methods of focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews in three cities in the Greater Bay Area of China (GBA). The results indicate that *shiminhua* is an incremental process of gaining internalized urban identity and negotiated place attachment. It implies that successful *shiminhua* process in the GBA consists of efforts from multiple levels of stakeholders. Regional policy and urban governance strategy should understand *shiminhua* more comprehensively to facilitate successful *shiminhua* process.

KEYWORDS

internal migration, rural–urban migrants, *shiminhua*, the Greater Bay Area of China, urbanization in China

JEL CLASSIFICATION

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Chinese internal mobility has increased significantly over the last four decades since the Reform and Opening-up of the 1980s and as a result of a rapid process of urbanization (Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Islam & Yokota, 2008;

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Zhang, 2002), particularly in migration hub such as the Greater Bay Area (GBA) located in south China (Yu, 2021). This process is accompanied by huge changes in city and rural landscapes, socioeconomic institutions, and individual lifestyles (Chan, 1994; Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Guldin, 2001; Wang & Liu, 2015; Wirth, 1938; Zhang, 2005). However, the evolving human aspects of the urbanization process are less emphasized and the contribution of rural–urban migrants in urban and regional development under-recognized (Feng, 2017; Sun, 2019). However, regarding problems arising from urbanization, including congestion, rising unemployment and information, increasing crime rate, etc., governments at different levels tend to point to the failure of rural–urban migrants, thus stressing the necessities of the *shiminhua* process, that is, the urbanization of rural–urban migrants as both policy remedies and mitigation strategies (Central Government of China, 2022; Liu, 2016; Nolan & White, 1984). As a result, *shiminhua* has been studied as an effective process to address contemporary urban problems on a national level (Zhang & Lei, 2008; Zhu, 2020), though little research has so far investigated how the process occurs at the individual level and how the rural–urban migrants themselves perceive the *shiminhua* phenomenon.

This paper asked: How does the process of urbanization of rural–urban migrants (*shiminhua*) unfold in the cities of the Chinese Greater Bay Area? The underlying hypothesis is that urbanization of migrants does happen, and the rural–urban migrant as an individual can perceive the process (Friedmann, 1986; Gwynne, 1985; Jacobs, 1962; Sassen, 1991). Investigating this question has specific significance on the GBA and beyond. First, it will help to understand experiences of the rural–urban migrant as an individual in a specific region that has undergone rapid urbanization in the past several decades; second, it will contribute a more comprehensive conceptualization of *shiminhua* to capture the complexity of the dynamic process of urbanization; and third, it will provide a potential alternative discourse aside from the government’s mainstream perspective, therefore shedding light on regional policy-making in the GBA and other regions (Wu, 2013). Overall, the term *shiminhua* in this paper is adapted not only as a policy approach, but also an analytical concept (Mobrand, 2015).

In the following sections, the creation of *shiminhua* is first presented, followed by the background of the GBA region and the research methodology of this paper. Qualitative analysis drawing on relevant quotations are then presented, corroborated with existing literature and leading to the final discussion and conclusion.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Conceptualizing *shiminhua*

Although many theories have studied the process of one group’s adjustment and adaption to a society with different cultural norms, including theories of assimilation (Alba & Nee, 1997; Broom & Kitsuse, 1955; Glazer, 1993; Portes et al., 2005; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018), theories of acculturation (Berry & Sam, 2016; Padilla, 1980), and theories of social integration (Glazer, 1993; Wang & Fan, 2012; Wang & Ning, 2022), the concept of *shiminhua* still has its unique merits over the other theories when it comes to the study of Chinese rural–urban migrants.

Firstly, *shiminhua* is based on the understanding of rural–urban division on a continuum. This understanding of the rural–urban nexus challenged the traditional view on urbanization process based on the dual sector of rural–urban dichotomy where the integration process ends once the rural–urban migrants become full urban residents (Chen, 2019; Feng, 2017; Gui et al., 2012; Lewis, 1954). The pitfalls of this dichotomy model are threefold: that urban residents are not homogeneous (Fields, 2004); that urban natives may not be equivalent to the ‘mainstream society’ defined by ethnics and dominating culture, as in acculturation and assimilation theories there are no visible ethnocultural groups either (Glazer, 1993; Sam & Berry, 2016; Zhang, 2005); and that there is no existing, perfectly urbanized person – as pointed out by Xiaotong Fei – Chinese society, including the modern, urban sector, is essentially earth-bound with certain rural characteristics (Fei, 1943, 1992). In Figure 1, The alternative rural–urban continuum model views urban-ness and rural-ness on a spectrum: the nation, and most new urban residents, are moving toward the more urban end of the continuum. This depiction also

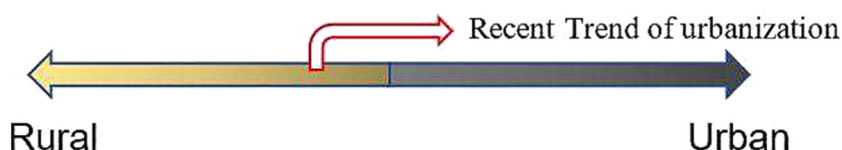


FIGURE 1 The rural–urban continuum in China. *Source:* author creation.

resonates with two phenomena: firstly, cities of different tiers may have different levels of urbanization; secondly, *shiminhua* level for a city or for an individual can be interpreted in multiple aspects (Zhang, 2005).

The second feature of *shiminhua* is that it is a contextual concept that bridges the studies of Chinese urbanism to studies of internal migrants, which could lead to a wider discussion on institutional reform; the most well known being Chinese household registration, that is, the *hukou* system (Chan, 2009; Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Chan & Zhang, 1999). The *hukou* system traces its origins back to ancient imperial Chinese dynasties with census and taxation purposes, while in the socialist era (1950s–1980s), it served as an essential part of the state planning mechanism to manage human mobility by confining urban and rural residents to their geographical location of birth, bounding individual welfare and state obligation to administrative territories. It remained stringent from its establishment in 1952 until the 1978 Opening Up and Reform (Wu, 2013). Although *hukou* system has experienced several rounds of reforms at the national, provincial, and city levels since the 1990s, at the time of this research, it has yet to be abolished. Obtaining a local urban *hukou* was conventionally considered one important milestone in the *shiminhua* process (Chan & Buckingham, 2008; Tyner & Ren, 2016; Zhang & Chen, 2013).

The third merit of studying *shiminhua* is that it is well known to the public. Several studies challenge *shiminhua* as a discourse adopted and propagandized by Chinese government influenced by Lipton’s (1977) argument of urban bias (Lipton, 1984; Mobrand, 2015; Nolan & White, 1984), but no one can deny the fact that *shiminhua* has long been used in policy language since the 1990s, and continues to appear on government policy paper. The implication is that academia, policymakers, and the general public, including the migrant communities, are familiar with the terminology of *shiminhua* (Liu & Cheng, 2008). Rethinking and potentially redefining the connotation of *shiminhua* in the GBA is likely to create large research impacts on policymaking, as familiarity makes it intuitively easier to accept and implement new types of *shiminhua* (Wang et al., 2014).

While acknowledging the merits of adopting *shiminhua* as a key concept of the paper, it is helpful to explore its creation as well as its theoretical connotations.

2.2 | The creation of *shiminhua*: the urbanization of rural–urban migrants

Shiminhua, as a direct Romanization of the Chinese Mandarin term 市民化, first appeared in academic discourse and the realm of policy in response to the debates on *chengzhenhua* and *chengshihua*. It became frequently used after an article was published on *Jingji Yanjiu Cankao* in 2003 (Mobrand, 2015, p. 109). In general, in the related literature, the term *shiminhua* can be used as a broader concept making up former peasants who moved and changed in the city, the adjustment of the new generation of migrant workers who were born in the city, and villagers associated to land that converted to being urban used. While the more recent definition has become narrower, specifically referring to the first category, when it comes to the discussion of second-generation migrant children, the term usually specifies as *shiminhua* the new generation of rural–urban migrants – *xinshengdai nongmingong* in Mandarin Chinese.

Shiminhua was given significance in the policy realm at the national level in the 2010s. In the *Chinese National Plan for New Urbanization 2014–2020*, the State Council of China regarded *shiminhua* as a one of the ‘key tasks’ in the transformation to New Type Urbanization (Chinese National Plan for New Urbanization, 2014; 2:2).



The definition of *shimin* has a lexical root that can be traced back to the China's Republican Era (1929–1949), or even further back to the vernacular novels of imperial Ming and Qing dynasties (Rabut, 2014) – directly translated as ‘people of the market town’ (Wang et al., 2008). In contemporary studies of *shiminhua*, it has been popularly translated as ‘citizenization’ by most China-based scholars when conceptualizing this phenomenon (Liu et al., 2012; Zhang & Chen, 2013), whereas the author contends that the words ‘citizen’ and ‘urban dwellers’ are of very different connotations in the English language. The term ‘citizenization’ fails to capture the essence of *shiminhua* as a multi-level process, as it overemphasizes the aspects of gaining political entitlement in local *hukou* of the migrant individual, and is less capable of revealing other sociocultural aspects of the process. In fact, a more suitable analogy of *shimin* in Mandarin Chinese is made for new urban inhabitants, as discussed by Lefebvre (1991) in the French language as *le citadin*, in contrast to *le citoyen*. The working definition of *shiminhua* in this paper is the adaptation and adjustment of rural–urban migrants as a result of moving to and living in cities.

Discussion of *shiminhua* can further contribute to debates on urbanization of the people to construct a more comprehensive understanding in urbanization, as Mobrand argued that ‘Urbanization is, in fact, the *shiminhua* of people, not the urbanization of land’. (2015, p. 111). Similarly, Okamoto (2019) proposed that accompanying the spatial urbanization process, there is also an institutional urbanization process where economic and social systems have been reformed to promote urbanization in China. Zhao (2001) brought the discussion into Chinese context by contending that the experience of urbanization of people in small towns is distinct from the mainstream urbanization of China in large cities. Guldin (2001) further differentiates two modes of fundamentally different individual urban experience – ‘urbanization by immigration’ and ‘urbanization in place’ – with the latter occurring more often in rural areas near the suburban fringe of mega-cities accompanied by urban sprawl and change of land use (2001, p. 18). Liu et al. (2010) added that people living in village-like precincts of Chinese mega-cities experience more ‘transitional state’ urbanization (2010, p. 135) compared with those in smaller cities. To summarize this subsection, *shiminhua* is a useful concept with the potential to address the identified issues amid urbanization experiences from the rural–urban migrants’ perceptions.

2.3 | The importance of studying *shiminhua* in the GBA

Established as a nationally initiated regional development strategy in 2016, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area, or GBA, covers the geographical area previously known as Pearl River Delta. It consists of two special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau with nine cities in Guangdong provinces, including the two mega-cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen. As one of the three most economically vibrant major megalopolises, along with Yangtze River Delta and Jing-Ji-Ji Megalopolis, GBA occupies an area of 56,000 square kilometers, with a total population of 70 million (Local Gazetteers Editing Committee of Guangdong Province, 2014). Studying the *shiminhua* process in GBA is important because of its long trajectory of internal immigration, special characteristics in urbanization, and representative city system of different tiers (Hui et al., 2020; Yu, 2021).

Vogel (1995) described the South China Pearl River Delta Economic Zone (now GBA) as ‘One Step Forward’ (1995, p. 2), blessed with its strategic location, rich historical links to international trade and commerce routes, and the Opening-Up policy of the 1980s, which utilized GBA as an experimental field for market mechanism. The first wave of rural–urban migrants came to GBA for economic opportunities in the manufacturing sectors – factories thrived in GBA in the 1980s with large-scale investment from Hong Kong and overseas. GBA is arguably the earliest region in China in which *shiminhua* ever happened. The history of four decades of rural immigration has already transformed GBA into a region of economic dynamics and cultural fusion, also indicating that there are varied *shiminhua* pathways and multiple scenarios owing to migrants’ different geographical and generational backgrounds, presenting abundant empirical data for studying the *shiminhua* process and its evolution.

GBA is also thought to be a typical region where ‘urbanization by migration’ rather than ‘urbanization in place’ occurs, compared with Yangtze River Delta and Jing-Jin-Ji region (Haas & Ban, 2014; Wang & Shen, 2017). This



feature makes it feasible to sample more migrants with adequate exposure to the *shiminhua* process. Furthermore, GBA has a relatively straightforward city hierarchy, with Guangzhou as the provincial capital and Shenzhen as the most successfully national special economic zone and as a major migration center. Tier 2 cities such as Dongguan or tier 3 cities such as Zhongshan also have their intriguing features in migration patterns and features. Moreover, GBA was the first region to launch national-level initiative experiments of *hukou* reform; for instance, Zhongshan is the first Chinese city to introduce a point-based *hukou* registration scheme in 2013, and the scheme was considered successful and is being adopted in numerous Chinese cities including in GBA (Chen et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2016). These reforms provide more dynamics in constructing comparisons among *shiminhua* in different periods. In summary, studying *shiminhua* process in GBA will not only cast light on regional policymaking, but will also possess the potential to provide insights for understanding *shiminhua* in more generalized contexts (Lin, 1999).

3 | METHODOLOGY

To unfold the dynamics of the *shiminhua* process using a case study of the GBA, this paper adopted the qualitative methods of focus group discussion (FGD) and semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2012; Crinson & Leontowitsch, 2016). The FGDs were designed to elicit the rural-urban migrant individual's perspective on the *shiminhua* process, and is based on the studies by Wang et al. (2008) and Yang (2010, 2013). A research guide of six aspects of the *shiminhua* process were retrieved and summarized from the preliminary FGD analysis. Those six aspects were subsequently developed into guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews, including: When did *shiminhua* start? What is *shiminhua*? Why participate in *shiminhua*? How does *shiminhua* work? Who participates in *shiminhua*? And finally, whose is *shiminhua*?

The fieldwork took place from December 2020 to May 2021 in three cities of different tiers in GBA: Guangzhou, Dongguan, and Zhongshan (Hui et al., 2020). Stratified snow-balling sampling was used to recruit 13 focus group participants and 30 interviewees – all rural-urban migrants defined as those who used to hold rural *hukou*, moved for economic motivations, and have resided in the destination city for longer than half a year, with a balance of occupations in the construction, manufacturing, and service sectors (Bryman, 2012; Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016). There was also an effort to cover each administrative district and township under the prefecture-level cities of Guangzhou, Dongguan and Zhongshan to have a representative sample of participants, as listed in Table 1.

The recruitment of participants has followed a rigorous sampling and ethical procedure. The migrants were contacted first via a gatekeeper, who was usually the owner of the business or the supervisor of a workshop, factory, or construction site. The sampling procedure with relationships of the interviewees were mapped in the diagram drawn in NVivo 12 program.

In Figure 2, please note that the numbering of interviewees follows a chronological order, and participants are in general colleagues of same working unit, as indicated by arrows connected to each individual and rectangle of the same color, but they usually do not interact with each other on a daily basis; except for interviewee 5, who is the factory supervisor of interviewees 2, 3, and 4; and interviewees 18 and 19, who are a couple.

For the research ethics, a copy of the research guidelines and informed consent form was prepared in English following the procedure approved by the University of Cambridge Research Ethics Board and then translated into Chinese. The researcher on site always makes sure that the participants are fully aware of the intentions, recording, other risks, and data use policies when participating in this research. The informed consents were given by participant signature. Plain oral Chinese language was used in asking questions that were carefully tailored to deliver the message clearly. All FGDs and interviews were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese Chinese and recorded on site, transcribed on the computer, translated into English by the researcher manually, and then cross-checked by experienced colleagues. All participants' personal information was numbered for identity masking. The NVivo 12 computer program was utilized to conduct thematic analysis in the data analysis process that was based on the qualitative data analytical strategy of building grounded theory (AlYahmady & Al Abri, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

**TABLE 1** List of FGD participants and interviewees.

City	Group	Location	Code	Gender
Guangzhou	A	Guodi planning and consultant co.	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Female
			Participant 3	Male
			Participant 4	Male
	B	China metro no.10 bureau Dashadong Station construction site	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Male
			Participant 4	Male
	C	Fuai early education and nunnery	Participant 1	Female
			Participant 2	Female
			Participant 3	Female
			Participant 4	Female
	D	MacDonald near Guangzhou Textile City	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Male
			Participant 4	Male
	E	Jubao house delivery dispatch Dentre, Sun Yat-sen University south campus	Participant 1	Female
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Male
			Participant 4	Male
	F	706 Zhujiang Dijing youth Hostle and co-living space	Participant 1	Female
			Participant 2	Female
			Participant 3	Female
			Participant 4	Male
Participant 5			Male	
Participant 6			Male	
Dongguan	A	Jibao factory, Liaobu, Dongguan	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Female
			Participant 4	Female
	B	Construction site near Shangdi Village, Liaobu town, Dongguan	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Male
			Participant 4	Male
	C	Ruiyang paper company office, Huangjiang town, Dongguan	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Male
	D	Jiadi rubber Shixin industrial zone, Zhangmutou town	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Female
	E	Yonghang Factory, Songbailang Village, Dalang town, Dongguan	Participant 1	Male



TABLE 1 (Continued)

City	Group	Location	Code	Gender
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Female
			Participant 4	Female
			Participant 5	Female
			Participant 6	Female
Zhongshan	A	Shangtang arch near garment factory, Zhongshan	Participant 1	Female
			Participant 2	Female
			Participant 3	Female
			Participant 4	Female
	B	Construction site near Huajie, Shiqi town, Zhongshan	Participant 1	Male
			Participant 2	Male
			Participant 3	Male
			Participant 4	Male
Interview no.	City	Occupation	Gender	
Interview 1	Zhongshan	Private business owner	Female	
Interview 2	Zhongshan	Construction worker	Female	
Interview 3	Zhongshan	Production worker	Male	
Interview 4	Zhongshan	Production worker	Female	
Interview 5	Zhongshan	Production manager	Male	
Interview 6	Guangzhou	Private education tutor	Male	
Interview 7	Guangzhou	Private education tutor	Female	
Interview 8	Guangzhou	Project manager	Male	
Interview 9	Guangzhou	Junior programmer	Male	
Interview 10	Guangzhou	Buyer	Female	
Interview 11	Guangzhou	Web community manager	Female	
Interview 12	Guangzhou	NGO worker	Female	
Interview 13	Guangzhou	NGO assistant librarian	Female	
Interview 14	Guangzhou	Warehouse worker	Female	
Interview 15	Dongguan	Clerk	Male	
Interview 16	Dongguan	Clerk	Female	
Interview 17	Dongguan	Real estate clerk	Male	
Interview 18	Guangzhou	Freelancer	Male	
Interview 19	Guangzhou	Freelancer	Female	
Interview 20	Dongguan	Construction worker	Male	
Interview 21	Dongguan	Construction worker	Male	
Interview 22	Dongguan	Factory worker	Female	
Interview 23	Dongguan	Construction worker	Male	
Interview 24	Dongguan	Worker	Female	
Interview 25	Guangzhou	Salesperson	Female	
Interview 26	Guangzhou	Kindergarten teacher	Female	

(Continues)



TABLE 1 (Continued)

Interview no.	City	Occupation	Gender
Interview 27	Guangzhou	Primary school teacher	Female
Interview 28	Dongguan	Worker	Unknown
Interview 29	Guangzhou	Middle school teacher	Female
Interview 30	Guangzhou	Freelancer	Male

Source: Collected from fieldwork by the author.

The findings are presented according to six major themes in the following section, with *shiminhua* as an incremental process.

3.1 | When did *shiminhua* start?

Shiminhua is believed by previous studies to have started shortly after migrants moved and temporarily settled in the city (Guo, 2014; Liu et al., 2012). Interview data demonstrated that a commonly acknowledged initiation for *shiminhua* at the individual level can be observed when migrants realize the huge development gap between their rural hometown and the city, typically when experiencing the vibrant vibe and highly urbanized landscape, as demonstrated in Figure 3, often described as ‘light from the city’ as shown in Figure 2.

Amazed by the cityscape of Guangzhou, Miss Chen, in her early 20s, describes her first encounter with the urban life vividly:

There are huge differences. My hometown is a small city, in the mountainous area, thus no matter whether it’s the physical landscape or the human landscape, in the city it’s much, much better. Guangzhou is a city of color! There is basically no such thing back in my hometown at all. (Interview 6)

While acknowledging the economic motivation, Chen accentuated the attractiveness of the urban lifestyle and the richness of culture activities. By describing Guangzhou as ‘a city of color’, she presents the huge visual and sensory attractiveness of the city for the newly arrived rural–urban migrant. The first encounter with the city’s glamor also blatantly reveals the disparity in development between her rural hometown and imagined ‘world cities’ (Friedmann, 1986; Graham, 2008). This feeling of discrepancy initiates a sense of inferiority and alienation, which may form part of the motivation to *shiminhua*.

While the astonishing cityscape is often the official trigger for *shiminhua*, evidence from the interviews also implies that the *shiminhua* process can be traced back even earlier – to when the migration decision was made. Before the person physically moved to the city, *shiminhua* could have begun. As people hear from, think about, and dream of the city, the lights from the city do not need to be physically present to be a strong pulling factor for immigration (Lee, 1966; Vogel, 1995). When recalling his decision to move to Dongguan as a manufacturing worker in the late 1980s, this middle-aged participant recalled Dongguan’s famous nickname of ‘little Hong Kong’:

... then why did you specifically choose to come to Dongguan?

Because I have heard from other people that Dongguan is nicknamed *little Hong Kong*, right? I immediately had the intention to come here. (FGD 10 Dongguan)

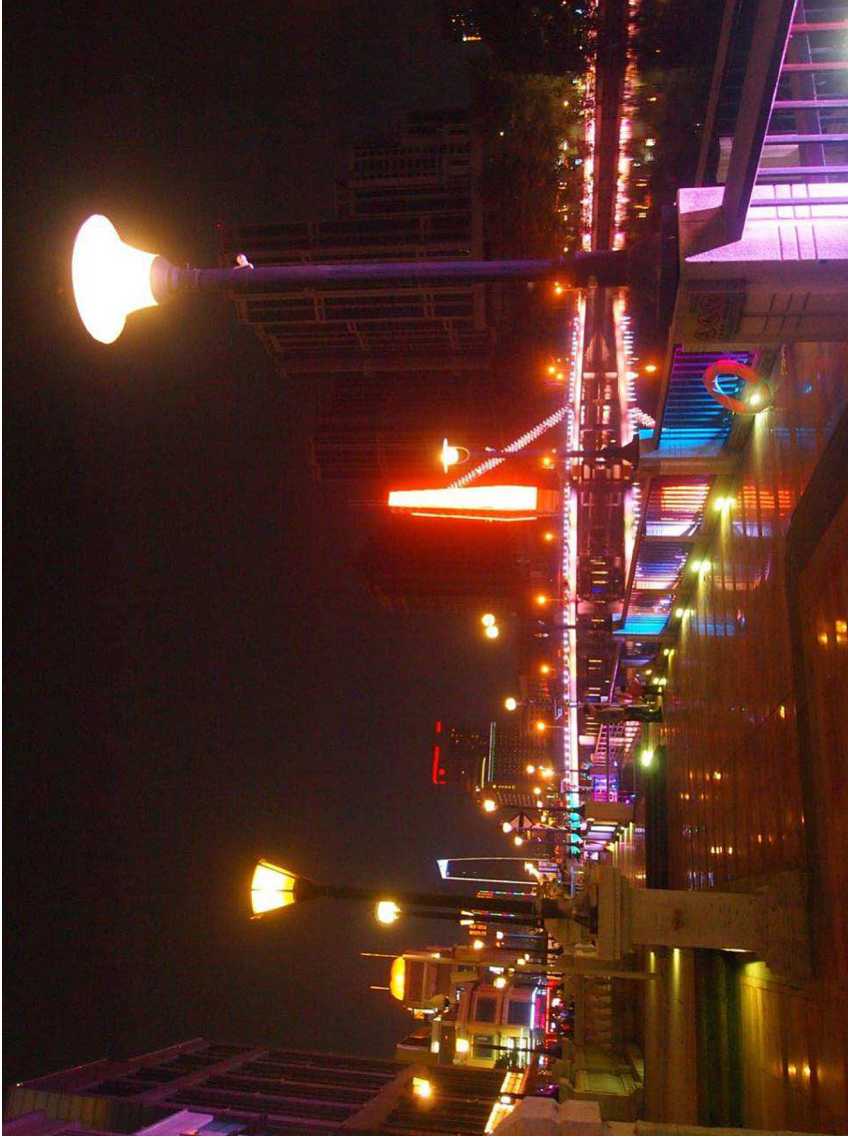


FIGURE 3 “Light from the city” the riverside walk near Zhongshan city CBD. Source: photo taken by author in fieldwork.



He specifically paused and emphasized the words ‘little Hong Kong’ when responding to the question, with eyes lighting up amazed by Hong Kong’s economic success. In the 1970s, Hong Kong attained the status of ‘Four Asian Tigers’, alongside Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea, for having flourishing manufacturing and service sectors. By the 1980s, Hong Kong had already established its reputation as a prosperous regional hub, an emerging global city. Hong Kong’s investment flowed into Dongguan’s factories in the new era of Chinese economic transformation, contributing to the blossoming of Dongguan’s economy. The very name ‘Hong Kong’ was interpreted as a synonym for ‘city of wealth and opportunity’ (Sharif & Chandra, 2022; Yu, 2021). While the abovementioned participant had not been to Dongguan before making the decision to migrate, he heard about Dongguan’s affluence and abundant work opportunities from friends and acquaintance who had migrated and worked there, and was well aware of the gap of quality of life between his rural hometown and Dongguan. This indicates that before making up his mind to move and work in Dongguan, he had already embraced the beginning of *shiminhua*.

For those migrants who were uncertain about the *shiminhua* process after arrival, some could have acknowledged the necessity of going through bitter discrimination and exclusiveness experienced from urban natives. Hostility made the migrants uncomfortable and prompted them to start reevaluating the necessity of adjusting and adapting to the challenging environment. For example, one participant in Zhongshan recalled her earlier unpleasant interaction with one local father with a daughter:

... (urban native) look down upon us, when we first arrived, they call us, the migrants *laomei* – that is to say, this girl is here only for money, like *laozai* is the male equivalent ... there are fewer cases these years. When we first arrived, we were heavily discriminated against by the urban locals. For example, a local guy was with his kid, his kid called me ‘auntie’, he went into a rage: that’s because he does not count us as human being, he shouted at his kid: ‘DO NOT EVER CALL THESE FOLKS AUNTIE!’ (FGD 12 Zhongshan)

There seems to be an abrupt switch from the participant’s normal tones of indifference to a hateful voice – she was somehow, for 1 s, frightened by her own voice with profound sorrow and sadness, then burst into laughter, partly to cover her embarrassment of making a gaffe, partly as a relief that these discriminating experiences are not likely to happen any longer – as she transformed herself into an urban lady after a successful *shiminhua* process.

It is interesting to note that the discriminatory and alienating nicknames *laozai* and *laomei* originate from local Cantonese *loujai* and *loumui*, indicating the pride of people being both local and urban, while differentiating themselves from ‘the other’ – those who are neither Cantonese local nor urban natives. They perceive migrants as being lucrative and rooted in austerity, thus associated with immoral actions and in human identities. In other words, when that urban native person’s anger and xenophobia manifested, he might not have been particularly angry toward that particular female migrant, but toward the group labelled as incoming competitors who are different from ‘us’ and who deteriorate the urban living quality. These situations are less likely to happen to those who have gone through the *shiminhua* process and have become qualified to be ‘one of us’.

To summarize this subsection, rural–urban migrants start *shiminhua* with active and passive motivations. Though individual circumstances vary, the *shiminhua* process of rural–urban migrants is rooted in the migration decision-making period. *Shiminhua* is motivated by acknowledging the development disparity, bestowed by motivations pulling them into the superior urban realm, while discrimination pushes them toward a rural and deviant stereotype (Foucault, 2011).

3.2 | What is *shiminhua*?

The narratives retrieved from qualitative data also help to reveal the nature of the *shiminhua* process, that is, what *shiminhua* means to a migrant as a person. While living with their coworkers of similar background and urban



experience, the urban identity might not be obvious, but this intangible process of internalizing urban identity can build up a huge contrast compared with those relatives back in the rural hometown. One middle-aged female migrant from Sichuan describes the indelible scene when she went back to rural Sichuan from Guangzhou during the first Lunar New Year:

When I went back home, as I was back from metropolitan Guangzhou to my rural hometown, my family saw me changed from a rural girl into an urban lady. From the way I dressed up, they see me in an envious way, that's a huge change for me. But here in the city, even though I have a proper job – because I was a young and inexperienced migrant, I had tasted much bitterness ... (Interview 19)

This is a particularly interesting piece of dialogue especially when presented on site, sitting on her cozy balcony bench in one of the middle-class neighborhoods in Baiyun District. Ms. Xiao recalled her early experience as a rural girl migrating to work in the factory of Guangzhou, a common decision by many but a life-changing experience for her. She realized later that changes in dressing style could indicate an affinity and inclination to imitate her urban native coworkers, and is an important, internalized, cultural-psychological aspect of *shiminhua*.

The discourse also resonates with the rural-urban continuum constructed in the literature review section: Ms. Xiao's position on the continuum causes her to be perceived differently from her urban native coworker and rural relatives. Ironically, the first outcome of an internalized *shiminhua* is demonstrated by external changes such as dress. Relatives and rural friends' envy have strengthened the urban-rural hierarchy that initiated the process of *shiminhua* for the individual. To some extent, it also justifies the values of gaining an urban identity by living and working in the city. The 'bitterness' owing to inadequacy in the eyes of urban locals could have been more bearable with the anticipated compensation of elevated status through *shiminhua*.

Apart from being urban, *shiminhua* is also interpreted as connected to a specific place, also known as 'place attachment' (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Lewicka, 2005; Wu et al., 2019). Taking into account the strong attachment to the earth in Chinese social structures, the new place attachment to the city is in fact a negotiated place attachment. This is particularly true for second-generation migrants. Nan moved to Guangzhou from Chongqing together with her parents at the age of six, and describes her complicated sense of attachment to Guangzhou as well as her rural hometown:

To be fair, I only lived a short time in Chongqing. If you are asking me like that, I would say I sense more humanity back to Chongqing every time I go back. But life here (in Guangzhou) is definitely more convenient, because of the familiarity. But in Chongqing, despite the inconvenience, as you are walking along the street and you catch up with someone, ask him or her question in local dialect, he will enthusiastically send you to your destination or anywhere you would like to go. (Interview 27)

As a second-generation migrant, Nan's answer is highly reflective and she articulates rather well the elusiveness of being at the border of rural and urban even though she has not lived for any substantial period in her rural hometown. On the one hand, Nan appreciates the convenient amenity and infrastructure in the modern city of Guangzhou, which she described as 'her home, more connected to real life' in the following part of the interview. On the other hand, her rural hometown of Chongqing is described as a utopian environment replete with the comforting interpersonal relations of *renqing wei*, a taste of hospitality, generosity, and friendliness.

It is also noticeable that she mentioned *xiangyin*, referring to the local Chongqing dialect – it reveals a place identity, as people speaking Mandarin are considered as nonlocal, and the hospitality aspect is therefore emphasized as it could be extended to Mandarin-speaking nonlocals, in contrast to the urban GBA. From the analysis it is apparent that Nan possesses a strong place attachment to her rural hometown but it is unclear how this attachment developed. For Guangzhou, Nan seems to develop a sense of place dependence, but for Chongqing more of a place



identity; both contribute to her negotiated place attachment in the *shiminhua* process (Belanche et al., 2021; Lewicka, 2005; Proshansky et al., 1983).

Besides urban identity and place attachment, settlement intention is another theme mentioned substantially by participants. Settlement intention refers to the willingness to settle and reside in the new city for a relatively longer period after initial migration (Chen & Liu, 2016; Connelly et al., 2011). When asked about settlement intention, one participant from FGD admitted that it was a calculative decision:

I set off to Guangzhou to seek my fortune after graduating from middle school. I have relatives in Guangzhou. I have been 4–5 years here, and I have become sentient attached to the city. I come from Zhanjiang, not far from here, and left my hometown again because of economic considerations, as well as missing our personal networks and fellow workers in the city. (Interview 30)

Despite personal major life events such as getting married and going back to their rural hometown, which may interrupt the *shiminhua* trajectory, there does not seem to be adequate evidence to establish causal relationship between the intention to settle and *shiminhua* or vice versa. As settlement intention could be influenced by many other factors, it exceeds the scope of the study of *shiminhua* by focusing on the receiving city.

The essence of *shiminhua* in GBA is, therefore, an internalized urban identity with negotiated place attachment. It is through association with the city that they gain an urban identity, but it is the maneuvering of relationship to rural hometown that constructs their new attachment after *shiminhua*.

3.3 | Why participate in *shiminhua*?

The negotiation of identity resembles an internal revolutionary process for the individual. The process can be painstaking and time-consuming. So what are the reasons and rationales for *shiminhua* in the first place? While individual migrants might have different answers to this question, the common view from the qualitative data is that *shiminhua* helps to maintain an improved quality of life after settling in the city. This enhanced quality of life can be conveyed from daily routine, for instance, shopping for groceries, as Ms. Liang recalls the inconvenience of grocery shopping in her rural hometown and instant delivery in the city:

... back to my hometown even going for groceries can be painful experience. Every morning we need to get up around five so that we can wait for the vendor of pork and chicken to come. But if you live in the city, there are no such limitations, it's even like you can order and the goods will be at your door in several minutes. That's an improved living condition. As for life habits, in Guangzhou, no matter where you go, whether social or study, (life experience here), it is much richer than back in my rural hometown. (Interview 13)

She highlighted two characteristics of modern urban life: convenience and more options, which is further enabled by China's thriving e-commerce and express delivery network that began in the 2010s (Liu & Chen, 2021). As Ms. Liang depicted, being a consumer of these services, including online and mobile shopping, contributes significantly to the *shiminhua* process.

Striving to maintain a richer lifestyle in the city, migrants need to overcome economic, institutional, and sociocultural barriers, which happened concurrently with the *shiminhua* process. A better quality of living also results from the removal of traditional social and moral pressures imposed by rural society and the clan family back at the rural home, which will lead to a more tolerant social atmosphere and personal freedom. One commonly mentioned example is parental pressure to marry:



If you go back to your hometown, after reaching a certain age, you will be urged to get married, here (in the city) you never get urged by anybody. (Interview 7)

Ye smiled unnaturally when mentioning the possibility of being urged to marry if not settled successfully in the city. This represents several other participants, who regard cultural differences as the largest division between rural hometowns and GBA cities. Thus, the *shiminhua* process is also one of realizing individual pursuits and freedom for some migrants, reclaiming their own privacy and decision-making, which helps construct a better life in the future.

Apart from active reasons, *shiminhua* can be the result of path dependency. Ms. Gao describes her family's experience of staying and adapting to life in Dongguan, even giving up subsequent opportunities to move to larger cities such as Guangzhou or Shanghai for the following reasons:

There are numerous reasons (for settling in Dongguan and not moving), the major one is that we have been living here for a long while. Now we have more familiarity with the city, children who have become accustomed to the environment here in Dongguan ... Therefore, if we could get stable work here, it's a facilitating factor in settling down. (Interview 24)

This narration may be due to more sophisticated sociocultural considerations. Stability brought by a contracted formal-sector job was the word that had been heavily emphasized by the participant when it came to the topic of settlement intention. Moving to a new city means interruptions to the social circle, career progress, and familiarity with the former city, which could lead to the degradation and stagnation of social capital (Bian, 2021; Conway, 1980; Schultz, 1961).

In addition to the previously mentioned reasons for *shiminhua*, a deep-seated mentality of justifying previous migration decisions is identified among 5 out of the 30 interviewees. In other words, whether the migration decision is 'appropriate' somehow depends upon whether the *shiminhua* process is successful. For example, one young female migrant with a negative experience of the city doubts her former decision of moving to Guangzhou:

The impression of Guangzhou for me is really bad, maybe that's caused by my first job, which is bad; then I get tricked and lost all my money, I feel like very sad and depressed ... there are many defraud here to live with – thus I regret migrating to this city. (Interview 25)

This young lady has expressed disappointment in city life. Neither internalized urban identity nor place attachment to the city are likely to develop under this circumstance. Conversely, other interviews show that if the rural-urban migrants did manage to adapt and settle, they usually praise themselves or their family's decision to move out of the rural village. As reiterated by the literature, 'being successful and urban' also contributes to the migrant's happiness and well-being (Meng, 2017). While the causality between successful *shiminhua* and justification for relocating might not have been accurately understood by the migrant, some work very hard in the *shiminhua* process to fortify themselves from hardships and discrimination, as demonstrated in the quotation from FGD 12.

Therefore, the reasons for individuals to participate in the *shiminhua* process can be described as threefold: to maintain quality of life, owing to path dependency, or to avoid discrimination. With that being said, rationales that sustain the motivation for *shiminhua* can be found in traditional Chinese culture and values and neoliberal capitalism, which are worthy of more in-depth investigations (Bian, 2021; Fei, 1992).

How does *shiminhua* work?

Knowing the underlying mechanism of *shiminhua* can be intriguing but inadequate in practice. The essential procedures for *shiminhua* are not clearly instructed by the national, regional, or city governments. Similar to muddling through the rigid *hukou* registration in the early years, migrants have developed tactics to *shiminhua* with features including incrementalism, specific socio-institutional milestones, and cultural-psychological strategies.



When asked about how to *shiminhua*, the common view is that the process occurs in daily life, being such an unconscious proceeding that it is nearly undetectable. Some of them, including Ms. Huang from Zhongshan, decline to declare any events as milestones of the *shiminhua* process, but concluded that it is more of a ‘seeping-through experience’:

(The process of *shiminhua*) is drop by drop, little by little, not like suddenly. It is like the local urban identity is seeping through, very slowly. (Interview 4)

This incremental feature of *shiminhua* is further underpinned by the fact that those who have been living in the urban area for more than a decade can also feel that they have not ‘fully adapted to urban life’, while those who have been living there for a short period of time have already gained some degree of an urban identity.

Apart from its ambiguous nature, when prompted, some participants would regard obtaining their first table job, acquiring a local *hukou*, and owning their first apartment in the city as milestones in the process of *shiminhua*. According to the participants, those are achievements that often occur after years of accumulation of social capital to the new city. Mr. Jia, a semi-skilled migrant who reached a managerial level position, emphasizes the importance of realizing economic independence in the city as a symbol of establishing himself, thus completely separating himself from his rural hometown as a major milestone in *shiminhua*:

for most common people striving by yourself and achieving a respectable life is not that difficult. You can make 10,000 RMB per month, which I do not think is too difficult ... You can at least afford to rent a place. You can make yourself more comfortable But many people rely upon their families, and they cannot leave their family. That sense of security is a mirage. (Interview 8)

Mr. Jia speaks with confidence, considering himself a real example of those who have migrated, strived, and thrived in the city. He also pointed out that multiple sources of income and an alternative lifestyle have given him ‘a sense of real security’, in contrast to a sense of security dependent on rural family.

Even though economic independence can mark the solid standing of an urban person, it is cultural–psychological factors that form pathways to *shiminhua* in the long run. One respondent in Dongguan realized that a self-perceived, high-level *shiminhua* is still not accepted by local friends despite economic success, so she made great efforts to familiarize herself with Dongguan’s food culture:

I currently think that I am local, but the *real* locals don’t consider me as a local. I wish after a while I will become a true local one day after familiarizing myself with the culture. (Interview 29)

Owning a home in the city is also considered as an important pathway to *shiminhua* by several other participants. It is fair to conclude that economic and institutional achievements are foundations for *shiminhua* in the initial phase of settlement, but it is the incremental seeping-through of cultural–psychological aspects that lead to continuous progress in *shiminhua* in the long run.

3.4 | Who participates in *shiminhua*?

Although the pathways share some similarities among rural–urban migrants, the *shiminhua* experience differs in accordance with demographic features. Age is the most obvious hurdle when it comes to *shiminhua*. Older migrants, usually in their 50s by the time of migrating, are regarded as having a hard time adapting to new environments and becoming outliers of urban ambience by younger migrants and urban natives, but even the older migrants themselves have a negative expectation of their *shiminhua* results:



Do you think you will have the possibility to become one of the urban native Dongguan people? Like after living here for 10 or 20 years?

– one participant said:

This is tricky, you know, we are old people. The future depends upon the younger generation, we have no say and no control over our future. (Interview 21)

While holding a pessimistic view toward his own *shiminhua* process, Mr. Fan, a migrant worker in his late 50s, has a high expectation for his daughter and son to earn a bright future in the city, and he also trusts their ability to figure out their own pathways to becoming well-established urban residents. From this perspective, *shiminhua* expectations can vary a lot for different generations of rural–urban migrants. Though lacking clear-cut line between the young and the old, people in their late 40s or 50s are generally considered as elder migrants in GBA from the interviews conducted. In other words, ‘the aged’ becomes a subjectively constructed group that was excluded from the ideal adherents to *shiminhua*.

Apart from age, gender matters when it comes to strategies in *shiminhua*. On obtaining a local *hukou*, 8 of the 17 female interviewees demonstrated flexibility in prioritizing family needs over individual interests. For Ms. Dai’s case, she prioritizes both family and her company over her own willingness:

According to my values, in our generation one thing is my individual willingness, one thing is the family, as in a typical Chinese family you may find that, most of the time, the *hukou* factor is closely related to family conditions. If I have thoughts like having local *hukou* later on, once I get married, I might need to change *hukou* for family reasons ... it does not need to be after the family is formed, maybe once the company need me to change *hukou*, I will transfer my *hukou* to local registration. (Interview 26)

The more flexible attitude of female participants on *shiminhua* compared with their male counterparts could be partly attributed to the traditional gender-based role, particularly in rural society, wherein ‘men deal with affairs out of the household, women deal with internal chores’ (*nanzhu wai nvzhu nei*). Simultaneously, it is also observed that males are greatly expected to provide the major income source for a migrant household. Previous research indicated that, for a household, securing the husband’s job as major source of income is the first priority (Luo, 2006). Since job security is often linked to *hukou* in the *shiminhua* process, the wife’s *shiminhua* pathway needs to cater to the demands of the husband’s job in the name of the whole household’s benefits.

In addition to age and gender, skill level also forms an important threshold in determining who is required and who is eligible for *shiminhua*. What has been observed in GBA is that unskilled labors are heavily engaged as construction workers or in the service or manufacturing sectors. Due to the nature of the construction industry, workers are constantly mobile according to the project’s location. Consequently, migrants who work on construction sites lack the conditions to develop attachment to a certain city, which is regarded as essential in the *shiminhua* process. This is pointed out by a male migrant construction worker who had worked in ‘cities in nearly all provinces in China without staying at a single location for more than two years’ (FGD 8 Dongguan). It is interesting that he mentioned other unskilled workers working in the manufacturing sector, rather than the construction sector, as having a more stable life, and thus being more inclined to settle. In reality, when interviewed, those factory workers in fact do not possess the skills and channels to earn enough to afford an urban apartment.

In contrast, several rural–urban migrants have managed to level up their knowledge and skills to be categorized as skilled workers in our participant sample, namely by pursuing further education or strategically accumulating working experience. They often value the choices of mobility and refuse to be attached and settled to a specific city:



I was on business trips to many cities including Shanghai and Hangzhou. Those cities are all very urbanized. ... last Friday I was at Hangzhou and last Saturday I was in Shanghai: I didn't feel that I had ever switched cities. They feel all the same, without identifiable senses of place. (Interview 10)

Working in the marketing sector, Miss Tan lived a rather urbane life despite her rural origins. She used the word placelessness when describing other Chinese mega-cities when compared with cities in GBA. The homogeneity in cityscape could be explained by the fast pace of development, while the urban experience intertwined with a lack of place attachment to a specific city. In the previous dialogue before the passage, Miss Tan also revealed that she managed to obtain a local *hukou* by attempting the local Hukou Transferring Scheme for Talents. After failing several times, Miss Tan finally recently had a successful application for local *hukou* after being promoted to her current position.

Being qualified for the *Hukou* Transferring Scheme for Talents also makes it much easier for skilled workers to settle down in a city. From the analysis, it seems that the result of *shiminhua* depends upon the migrant's demographic features as well as skill level. Older migrants are usually deprived of vision and motivation to *shiminhua*, female migrants tend to sacrifice *shiminhua* opportunities for household, and recognized talents are not obliged to *shiminhua*, particularly lacking intention to be bounded by specific city. Or in other words, skilled labors who are regarded as expert or talent by regional and city governments focus their *shiminhua* process on gaining urban identity rather than place attachment. As a result, they feel more of a sense of placelessness.

3.5 | Who is *shiminhua* for?

When stepping back from 'who participates in *shiminhua*' to 'who is *shiminhua* for' we start the analysis on an individual level. Most participants consider *shiminhua* in a particular city as beneficial to their further development, especially at the earlier stage of settlement after migration. The perceived benefits of *shiminhua* are usually attached to attainment of a local *hukou*, thus getting access to local welfare and with provision of social security to alleviate unexpected crises, as pointed out by one middle-aged female participant:

If you have Guangzhou *hukou*, you can buy Guangzhou medical insurance even though you are not employed ... (FGD 3 Guangzhou)

She does not have Guangzhou urban *hukou*, nor does she consider getting it due to precarious job status. She is aware of potential advantages of a local *hukou* for individual medical circumstances though most participants in the sample regard local *hukou* as a necessity in enrolling children to state school (Murphy, 2020).

Although *shiminhua* is regarded as a necessary process, in the interviews participants rarely attributed their achievement and established life to achievable *shiminhua* pathways as a major factor; they tend to emphasize their personal resilience and striving (Li, 2006). Several respondents even expressed anger and disappointment that the benefits of *shiminhua* could not compensate for the bitterness that they have suffered working in the city in dealing with institutional and other invisible hurdles:

We are getting old and do not have opportunities to enjoy all the welfare of going out to *dagong*. I left my hometown at the age of 19, and I am over 50 years old this year. I have been living in Guangzhou for more than 20 years; I spent about one-third of my time living here, accounting for almost half of my lifetime. But I do not think it has given me something very beneficial ... my whole life is basically devoted to the city without being appreciated. (Interview 12)



Working as a casual babysitter for several years, Ms. Chen, in her late 50s, thinks that she deserved better social welfare, including a granted urban *hukou* from the city government. After an arranged marriage back home and several miscarriages of pregnancy and exhaustion, she returned and settled in the city and ‘tasted [even] more bitterness’.

But why have the participants stayed and coped with all the difficulties? A total of 28 of the 30 respondents invoked the major motivation of education and career development for the next generation. This sentiment was incisively captured by Mr. Liu, a delivery man with a rented tricycle motorbike, working more than 12 h per day without a formal labor contract:

I do not really have any thoughts besides working, my idea is to work hard for the next generation to thrive – you know, a Chinese man is like that, am I wrong? (Interview 30)

He squeezed a smile out of his smoke-worn teeth after saying this near-fatalistic sentence, with an exhausted outlook after working in the sizzling weather all day long.

In general, most rural–urban migrants choose to accept the pain involved in the *shiminhua* process, partially active and partially passive, to internalize urban identity and develop negotiated place attachment, with the expectation that the generations coming after them will live a dignified urban life. This discourse resonates with Fei’s point in China from the earth. Traditionally, the peasants strive to work on the land through all the difficulties, including unpredictable natural disasters, unbearable taxation loads, and uncomfortable living conditions, only to achieve the self-evident mission of succession to the next generation, or in Chinese *chuanzong jiedai* (Fei, 1992). Nowadays, they are still striving as their ancestors did, though not as peasants but as migrant workers: they no longer work on a small plot of land but in a big city. The bitterness to taste by a peasant-turned-rural–urban migrant includes all the efforts it takes to participate in *shiminhua*. Therefore, the abovementioned quotation revealed that *shiminhua* as a term was invented to capture a phenomenon of China on the move, and is in fact closely connected to the cultural tradition of China from the earth. What gives relief to the striving generation could be attested by several other interviews: in interviews with second-generation rural–urban migrants, their parents’ *shiminhua* goals seem to be achieved to some extent: both have secured decent and well-paid salaries after tertiary education. One of them has studied for a master’s degree supported by the accumulated wealth of her migrant parents.

It is revealed from the individual or household levels in GBA that the ultimate goal of *shiminhua* is not only for personal benefits, but also for the next generation’s welfare, strongly influenced by traditional Chinese values. On the basis of the argument embodied in the section ‘who is *shiminhua* for?’, or *shiminhua* as a national-level strategy, that rationale supports the actions of central, regional, and city governments when *shiminhua* is defined as a ‘central goal of urbanization and national development’ (National People’s Congress of China, 2016), designated and distributed as a political task for the local government (Wang et al., 2014). Some migrants may take it for granted that they will adapt to city life, while some city governments may have their own considerations. Some may blame the rural–urban migrants for their plight and inability to adjust, thus the state and city governments avoid taking responsibility. To keep cities energized, it is essential to maintain a constant inflow of labor with different skill levels. But what it costs to provide basic welfare for migrants requires a well-defined balance. Studies of varying governmental rationales for *shiminhua* might provide further insights and corroboration with individuals’ accounts on the *shiminhua* experience.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In response to the research question ‘How does the phenomenon of *shiminhua* unfold in Chinese cities in the GBA?’, this analysis demonstrated that the *shiminhua* process in GBA is understood by two grounded-level concepts, coined as internalized urban identity and negotiated place attachment. It is an incremental process that started before the



migrant arrives the city. The *shiminhua* process is initiated by the motivation to maintain a decent living standard in the city as well as the intention to avoid discrimination – under most circumstances, a combination of both factors. Successful *shiminhua* will not only secure a solid basis for further development in the city, thus ensuring an established urban status for the second generation's progress, but it also justifies the original individual or household decision for migration. Furthermore, groups with certain demographic features, such as those who are older, female, and lowly skilled, tended to experience more challenges in the *shiminhua* process and are believed to be less likely to achieve a favorable *shiminhua* result. While *shiminhua* at the individual level is intrinsically motivated by improved welfare and living quality for the next generation, some migrants perceive that the potential benefits may not compensate the efforts expended in the *shiminhua* process by the first-generation rural–urban migrants – themselves.

These features of the *shiminhua* process are proof that there could be an alternative understanding of the *shiminhua* process different from the mainstream government discourse: regarding *shiminhua* essentially as economic *shiminhua* to 'incorporate former farmers into the urban labor market and extend benefit programs to them' (Mobrand, 2015, p. 117). This alternative finding also posits that *shiminhua* can be interpreted not only as a socioeconomic phenomenon, but also a highly individualized cultural–psychological process that potentially contributes a bottom-up policy approach. The most significant difference is that the process of *shiminhua* is understood as dating back to before the migration initiative, thus requiring more research on the sending area: the rural hometown to form a more comprehensive perspective, resonating with previous studies on rural–urban migrants' rural connections in shaping their urban identity (Huang et al., 2014; Meng, 2017).

These findings have three policy implications for national, regional, and city governments, as well as posited strategies for rural–urban migrants as individuals. From the nation level, apart from carrying on the top–down, instructive *hukou* reform and promoting socioeconomic *shiminhua*, efforts could be channeled into developing a more holistic index in measuring and evaluating *shiminhua* level by considering cultural–psychological aspects and switching the policy target from economic integration to a more 'human-centered' approach. For the regional-level policymaker, it is essential to coordinate urban and rural sectors, particularly in collaboration with other regional or provincial governments of the sending areas, so that adequate resources could be prepared proactively to cater to the demands of *shiminhua*. Resources could be directed into areas that initiate longer-term effects, including cultural amenities and providing educational bursaries specifically targeted at rural–urban migrant children without local *hukou*. For urban-level governance, city branding that incorporates identity- and attachment-based elements are important, a good practice that was found in Dongguan's promotion of the title '*xin guan ren*', or new Dongguan residents, to facilitate immigrants' development of place attachment. More specific support includes community-based organizations for supporting learning of the Cantonese language and culture, etc.

This study provides an insightful perspective in understanding the *shiminhua* process in the GBA by focusing upon the process of individual migrants in gaining internalized urban identity and developing place attachment. Due to the institutional restriction of Guangdong Province with Hong Kong and Macao, the selection of cities focuses on the three cities selected. Future research directions are proposed for engaging perspectives from a wider stakeholder, including local urban natives, on their perception of *shiminhua* of rural–urban migrants. Comparative research could be conducted on *shiminhua* experiences in cities in the Yangtze River Delta and Jing-Jin-Ji area to corroborate the findings in this paper. It is time that the process of *shiminhua* is more comprehensively understood to make cities more inclusive in GBA, China, and beyond.

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