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Class Formation and Consumption among Middle-Class Professionals in Shenzhen

Jacqueline ELFICK

Abstract: This paper explores the role of consumption in defining Chinese middle-class identity by examining the consumption practices of urban professionals. It is widely agreed that China has a thriving middle class. The exact definition of this middle class, however, is disputed by scholars and the Chinese popular press. Debates about class are also manifest in the daily lives of urban professionals. One of the most interesting areas in which identity is contested is that of consumption. The research is based on 60 in-depth interviews among professionals conducted in Shenzhen in the period 2004-2010. New wealth means that the myriad of goods on offer is accessible to large sections of the urban population. Professionals have become keen and selective shoppers. Many describe their consumption practices as informed by their own highly individualistic taste. This paper argues that professional consumption practices sometimes express individual taste but, more importantly, serve to articulate a collective social identity.

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Introduction

It's much better in England; they have a long-established class system. People know where they can and can't go, like private clubs for the upper class. Everyone knows how to behave. The communist party abolished the class system, so people have no manners, even rich people. In China you can walk into a shop wearing slippers and buy a Mercedes as long as you have cash. It's embarrassing that just anyone can buy luxury cars. Such a pity, it's so embarrassing especially if foreigners see this [, ...] people here don't even know how to queue (Feng, 37 years old, manager).

Feng, the manager of a textile company, had visited the UK several times for work. He had mixed views about the place. The food was indigestible, the hotels a rip-off – no flasks of hot drinking water for guests, and English women were unattractive (很难看, *ben nankan*). Feng did enjoy the cleanliness and general sense of order. Car drivers did not stray from their lanes, and intersections were clear when the lights turned red. He also recounted a fire alarm going off during a visit to the Museum of Natural History and that people had evacuated the building in a calm manner. This contrasted sharply with life in China, which Feng described as chaotic (乱, *luan*). He felt that order in the UK was due to a national trait of individual discipline and strong social hierarchy. Individuals behaved properly because they knew their exact place in society.

The egalitarian social structure of socialist China has crumbled under the development of a market economy; social mobility has become an indisputable fact, and people are jockeying for position in the new social order. Feng's longing for social hierarchy and order was not an uncommon sentiment in Shenzhen.

Feng is one of a growing number of middle-class professionals in Shenzhen. Originally a fishing village, Shenzhen became an economic boomtown and now has a disproportionately large middle class due to the numerous business ventures and enterprises located in the city. People pour in from all over the country, mainly for work, and often leave after just a few years with new skills and valuable experiences for their resumes. It is also a city of social transformation. Bright individuals arrive from less wealthy areas armed with tertiary degrees and leave as polished middle-class sophisticates. Although many people have lived in large cities while studying at university, most have done so as poor students. Shenzhen is where careers start, earning power kicks in, and upward mobility rules.

Feng's candidness about class reflects a new openness. In pre-reform China, intense class struggle meant that class identity was a delicate issue. In the past decade, Chinese people have become fascinated by social distinction. There is little agreement, however, on how to define class, especially membership of the middle class. Some individuals classify themselves according to income or home ownership, while others classify themselves according to family background. This is often related to their parents' class status and membership of the communist party. This lack of consensus on how to define and view the Chinese middle class is also present among scholars. Nevertheless, many agree that the Chinese middle class is markedly heterogeneous (Goodman 2008; Cheng 2010) – hence the widespread use of the term “Chinese middle classes” (plural) – and that these middle classes differ from middle classes elsewhere in the world (Goodman 2008).

This study does not aim to furnish a detailed definition of “middle-classness” or to challenge existing definitions of the Chinese middle class. Instead, it focuses on how individuals within this large heterogeneous group use consumption to define themselves and to distinguish themselves from other groups. Understanding class entails examining how subjective identity is formed (Bourdieu 1979). Symbolic classifications and their associated identities are important because they are linked to class-based differences in life chances, lifestyles and collective identities.

The subjects of this study are young, middle-class professionals. By “middle class”, I refer to the new class of people that has emerged in China with medium incomes, distinct from the two traditional classes of workers and farmers (Zhou 2008: 110). (Medium incomes are defined here as those that fall in the 30,000-120,000 CNY per annum bracket.)

In this paper, the term “young professionals” refers to middle-class individuals under the age of 40 who are employed and have a university degree. These individuals have carved out a new cultural space which they explicitly delineate, in language and material practice, as distinct from other middle-class groups and are similar to Gramsci's “cadre of professionals” (1971).

The literature reveals that identity formation in China is studied using a variety of approaches including social identity as discourse, state policy, income, wealth, and intergenerational transfer of social status. New social identities are emerging in China due to the transition from a centralized to a free market economy. Viewing social identity formation

as process and practice is far more useful than merely applying material definitions. Reality reveals a wide range of vastly different social strategies, modes of social capital and competing hierarchies of value. A dynamic approach is required that is both material and discursive, encompassing material practices on the one hand and narrative and linguistic strategies on the other (Liechty 2002). To this end, this research focuses on the construction of self and collective social identity.

Over the past three decades, China has experienced far-reaching social and economic change and now has the world's fastest-growing economy. This immense economic growth has enabled a significant portion of the Chinese urban population to transform their lifestyles from ones of socialist frugality to consumption-oriented ones (Yan 2000). Rapid economic growth has been accompanied by the emergence of mass consumption, including fashion, advertising and luxury goods.

This paper takes Feng's comments as a starting point and asks what the relationship is between consumption and the formation of urban middle-class identity in China. The research examines the role of consumption practices in forming social identity among a specific middle-class group – that of young Chinese professionals. This definition is based on the idea that professional middle-class status and identity are increasingly shaped around a new set of collective interests relating to access to resources and modes of consumption (Tomba 2004).

This paper views consumption as a key cultural dynamic. Two useful ways of conceptualizing consumption are, first, consumption as self-identity and, second, consumption as communication. Modernity has spawned a mass crisis of identity (Zukin and Smith Maguire 2004). Everything is up for grabs and life has become a free-for-all; a specified style of clothing is not necessarily associated with a particular social group. Each of us is confronted with the need to “become what one is” (Bauman 2000: 32). In other words, the individual is obliged to create an identity by assembling a lifestyle through consumption.

Associated with this idea of consumption is the concept of agency. Consumption requires the exercise of choices in which the consumer plays an active role (Jackson 1993). The idea of the consumer as an active decision-maker and the accompanying notion of choice suggest both freedom and subjugation (Andrews 2006: 218). On the one hand, individuals are free to choose which goods to consume. On the other hand, individuals are not free to choose whether they want to consume goods

in the first place. In other words, there is no escape from consumer society or the capitalist system (Baudrillard 1970).

Consumers and their consumption practices are a means of understanding identity formation (Appadurai 1996; Douglas 1996; Bauman 1998). This perspective views consumers as shaped by the material restrictions and politics of the workplace but also attributes them with individual agency (Davis 2005). Although embedded in a framework of limits and capacities strongly shaped by market conditions, social relations and state policies, the consumer has the power to act, imagine and resist.

Research Methods

The research is based on 60 in-depth interviews with middle-class professionals and participant observation conducted in Shenzhen in the period 2004-2010. Short interviews were also conducted with 15 individuals who have frequent contact with middle-class professionals through their work. These include real estate agents and store managers. Of the 60 subjects, 46 were female and 14 were male. The average age was 32, with nearly three-quarters of the subjects in the 28-34 age group. All subjects had graduated from university, and 23 had a master's degree. Just 6 of the subjects were "only children", and 14 grew up in urban areas. Half of the subjects had reached middle-level management positions. Only 9 subjects were self-employed.

These research subjects constitute a minority in several different ways. Reform has seen the economic gap between urban and rural populations, created by Mao Zedong, increase at an alarming rate. University graduates are estimated to make up less than 5 per cent of the population (UNESCO 2007), and of this number not all will end up working in cities. Despite this, I feel that the research findings are relevant. The consumer practices observed are likely to be adopted by a larger number of individuals in the near future. As the professional middle class grows in China, more people will aspire to join it and embrace what are perceived to be modern values and behaviours. In addition to this, Shenzhen functions as a disseminator of consumer trends. Shenzhen's status of Special Economic Zone and its close proximity to Hong Kong mean that the city is a cornucopia of consumer goods. The high turnover rate of Shenzhen residents translates into a constant flow of people entering from and returning to less-developed areas. When these individu-

als leave Shenzhen, they take newly learned values and consumer practices with them.

Following this introduction, the paper consists of five main sections: Section 1 briefly examines the Chinese consumer revolution, Section 2 discusses the Chinese middle class and delineates the debates surrounding it, Section 3 examines consumption in Shenzhen, Section 4 discusses the emergence of individualism as a cultural ideal and gives a detailed description of the research findings. In Section 5, the paper concludes that Shenzhen professionals articulate a collective social identity through the consumption of goods.

The Consumer Revolution

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), goods and services were made available by work units (单位, *danwei*) on the basis of their sector, ownership type and bureaucratic rank. The state mandated that the workplace, or *danwei*, should distribute social welfare benefits, allocate apartments, and provide many consumer items such as a weekly movie, fresh fruit at holidays, plastic sandals for the summer, or a cake to celebrate a baby's birth (Davis 2000: 3).

Although there were some inequalities, the most striking of which being the urban-rural divide, Mao's policies reduced socio-economic inequalities (Parish 1984). China under Mao was one of the most egalitarian developing countries in the world (Whyte and Parish 1984: 44). It follows that consumption during this period was uniform. Most of the population wore similar clothes, sported similar hairstyles, and rode the same bicycles. Earning power was generally even, and the consumption of goods was highly regulated through the use of government quotas and ration coupons (Chen 1998; Lieberthal 1995 in Liou 1998).

In 1999 new policies were launched to kick-start consumption (Yan 2000). Chinese banks were directed to make more personal loans, thus stimulating the purchase of consumer goods, education and travel. This was reinforced by a propaganda campaign and a slogan – *jieqian yuanyang* (借钱圆梦, "Borrow money to realize your dream"). A buyer's market subsequently emerged, and goods became plentiful. Shopping became a quotidian activity, and the expenditure of urban households significantly changed. Urban residents found themselves in a financial position where over half of their income was available for expenditure on non-food items. In 1994 the average expenditure per capita had increased fourfold

since 1984 (figures from 1994 statistics released by the Chinese Consumer's Association, as quoted in Yan 2000). In China, the ratio of "hard consumption" (food, clothes and other daily necessities) to "soft consumption" (money spent on entertainment, tourism, fashion and socializing) changed from 3:1 in 1984 to 1:1.2 in 1994 (figures from *China Consumer News* (中国消费者报, *Zhongguo xiaofeizhe bao*) 12 September 1994, as quoted in Yan 2000).

Consumption has become a motor of the Chinese economy. The government has adopted a number of measures to encourage domestic spending. These include increasing the number of public holidays. In 2004 China was the world's third-largest buyer of luxury consumer goods, constituting 12 per cent of global demand (Goldman Sachs report 11 December 2004 as quoted by the World Watch Institute 2005). It is interesting to note that while the wealthiest 20 per cent of the population accounts for half of total consumer spending, the poorest 20 per cent accounts for only 4.7 per cent (United Nations 1996). Prolonged economic growth, a sharp increase in discretionary consumer purchases, and unequal income distribution are defining features of the consumer revolution (Davis 2000).

Consumption as Social Palliative

It is often argued that consumption and legitimacy are closely intertwined in post-Mao China. Wu (1994) writes that after the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elite were aware that the population was disillusioned and questioning the CCP's leadership. This forced leaders to rely on what Wu terms "the universal legitimating mechanism": the improvement of people's living standards. This shifted the basis of legitimacy of party rule from ideology to economic performance.

Economic reform has seen massive layoffs, the disappearance of the iron rice bowl, and for many, life has become a lot more precarious. Consumption is often viewed as a "social palliative" – a means of both keeping the population docile during the difficult reform era and filling the large ideological void that followed the death of Mao. Latham (2002) questions this view, which he labels simplistic and materialistic and calls for a more nuanced view. He asserts that consumption practices are potentially divisive and have become a threat to state-party legitimacy.

Growing Inequalities

Well-educated, salaried professionals are in a good position to benefit from the state's efforts to create a consumer society. Cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen have benefited greatly from the influx of foreign investment and now have large populations of white-collar workers. A competitive meritocracy is emerging, though Cheng (2006) observes that the communist party itself has yet to fully adhere to meritocracy despite having taken strong measures to punish corrupt party officials.

Privatization of the Chinese economy and growing unemployment has translated into downward mobility for much of the working class. Their working conditions are no longer formalized, job security has disappeared for most, and guaranteed benefits are shrinking.

Today, far fewer urban residents enjoy the benefits of the iron rice bowl (铁饭碗, *tiefanwan*). The egalitarian wages, welfare benefits like subsidized housing and healthcare, and lifelong employment have made way for uncertainty and mass lay-offs. A growing number of people feel that they are falling behind and missing out. On talk-radio and other popular forums, the sentiment that many of the new rich have acquired wealth that they do not deserve can be heard. One consequence of this perception of inequality is a lack of empathy for other groups and an increase in hostilities and conflict (Liou 1998). Urban residents have negative attitudes towards rural migrants and blame them for the increase in crime and the deterioration of the quality of life in urban areas. Decentralization of the economy and the disappearance of redistributive policies have intensified the regional inequalities of the Mao era (Davis 2000), and the income gap between the rich and the poor is rapidly increasing. There has been much speculation about the impact of this growing inequality. He (2003, in Whyte: 2010) writes that a level of anger is building up in the population that could eventually result in social unrest. Whyte (2010) argues that there is little evidence behind this idea of the "social volcano" and that many individuals are reasonably optimistic about the chances of ordinary people succeeding in the market economy.

Social and Occupational Mobility

Economic reform and the emergence of labour markets have eroded the rigid socialist status hierarchy. Tens of millions of peasants have moved to work and live in urban areas (Davin 1999). Others have returned to

the countryside to work, as rural economies rapidly industrialize (Ma 2001). Urban residents have also migrated to developmental zones in coastal areas to take advantage of economic opportunities (Solinger 1999). Job mobility between firms and different sectors has also become common (Davis 1992). People leave their jobs to advance their careers or because they are laid off or transferred by state-owned enterprises (Solinger 1999).

The reform period has seen the fixed hierarchy transform into an open, evolving class system (Davis 2000). Social status is now largely determined by how individuals fare in a market-style economy. Occupational mobility has become a significant factor due to the newly emerging labour markets. Public policies, economic conditions and the allocation of resources have all contributed to the rapid upward socio-economic mobility of middle-class professionals.

The Chinese Middle Class

Role of the State

The emergence of an urban, consumption-oriented middle class is not solely due to economic and social reform. It is also the result of social engineering of the contemporary reformist state and its agencies (Tomba 2004). The creation of a highly consumer-oriented, professional middle class has been an important objective of the economic reforms in recent years (Tomba 2004). It has been government policy to favour the middle class by paying them well and giving them salaries in kind. In the 1990s the pay of all the academics at China's most prestigious public universities was doubled in one go, and flats were sold to state-sector employees at highly subsidized prices, sometimes at as little as one-fifth of the original construction cost (Unger 2006).

The state has a vested interest in the successful development of the middle class and has done its best to co-opt the salaried middle class and the educated middle class, including intellectuals (Unger 2006). Traditionally, university students and intellectuals have led and organized social unrest in China. The state has done its best to ensure that the urban educated take its side rather than that of China's many disgruntled peasants and workers. It has implemented a successful strategy of divide and rule, creating an advantaged middle class that is grateful to the CCP for its existence.

China's middle classes differ from those in advanced capitalist societies because they do not share a stable lifestyle, mainstream values, and active political participation (Bian 2002). Instead, they survive on unstable sources of income (Qin 1999 in Bian 2002), are still in the process of developing a middle-class identity and value system, and lack the political motivation to fight for the birth of a civil society (Pearson 1997). China's middle class is distinctive because its development is made possible by the state. This contrasts with the rise of the European middle classes, which occurred at a distance from the state (Goodman 1999: 245). The symbiotic relationship between the Chinese middle class and the state means that it is unlikely that this privileged group will agitate for democracy (Unger 2006).

New or Old Phenomenon?

China's middle class is commonly described using terms such as "emerging" and "newly minted" in both the popular press and academic articles. China's middle class is sometimes referred to as the "new rich" (Buckley 1999). For many scholars, these terms are interchangeable and merely a matter of word choice. Most scholars agree that China currently has a middle class, that it was engendered by recent economic reform, and that it "constitutes a new and unique position in urban China" (Bian et al. 2005). Some scholars believe that the middle class is the first of its kind. Others feel that China had developed a managerial middle class previously: during the modernization processes of the 1950s and 1960s (Goodman 1999). Goodman (2008) describes a middle-class lineage that encompasses members of the socialist managerial class and successful post-reform entrepreneurs. Some of the new-style entrepreneurs who emerged during the 1980s were direct descendants of the pre-reform managerial class, and this gave them privileged access to state assets. As such, there is no new middle class; the only new group is that of the new rich. Goodman (2008) also argues that the state often passes off the new rich as the new middle classes. The reason for this is ideological – the term "middle class" sounds more egalitarian than "wealthy" or "super-rich".

Size

My sister-in-law thinks she is middle class because she works as a hotel receptionist and not in a factory. She didn't even go to hotel school; they just trained her on the job. To be middle class, you should be educated. My parents were unhappy about the marriage; my brother's also a lawyer. Her father drives a bus (Xiao Pan, 34 years old, lawyer).

In the popular Chinese press, the term “middle class” generally refers to a group of people with stable incomes who own property and cars, and who can afford tertiary education and overseas travel. No one disputes the existence or rapid growth of the Chinese middle class, but its size is frequently contested (Zhou 2008). Figures range from 35 million to over 200 million. This disparity exists because definitions of what constitutes the middle class vary widely. A common topic of debate is what level of salary classifies individuals as middle class.

The Chinese government estimates that approximately 49 per cent of households in urban areas have an income of at least 82,500 CNY per year and, as such, are middle class. If this percentage is placed into a national context, the much larger number of lower-income families in rural areas means that the middle class constitutes 247 million people, or 19 per cent, of the total population. However, this figure seems high. The state is keen to promote the idea that many of its citizens have attained a high standard of living, as this confers political legitimacy.

The number of people who identify themselves as middle class is steadily rising in China. This is not surprising, as there has been an increase in the number of people going on to higher education and significant growth in professional jobs. A report published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences states that 40 per cent of the population believe that they are middle class. This figure has been picked up and debated in local newspapers. An article entitled “Who Belongs to the New Middle Class?” that appeared in the *People's Daily* (2006), implies that this figure is unrealistic by stating that this large percentage of the population have no idea what being middle class entails economically. The article provides the following statistics: 30.6 per cent of people think that the middle class is hard to define, 21.2 per cent think a person should have at least 500,000 CNY in order to be considered middle class, and 19.3 per cent think that one should have at least 1 million CNY.

Consumption in Shenzhen

Shenzhen was a legend in its own time. It spawned the first wave of government officials and red capitalist comrades who could “travel by plane, have foreign sweethearts, spend Hong Kong dollars, and earn Chinese People’s currency” (Ye, Barmé, and Lang 2006: 195).

The fabled status of Shenzhen as a consumer paradise still holds. Thousands of people arrive each week dreaming of excitement, a freer climate, and wealth. The smell of money is everywhere. Gleaming new skyscrapers, fleets of foreign cars and luxury goods shops all attest to the success of Deng’s economic reforms. The city is grateful for Deng’s vision and there are huge billboards of him all around the city. Visiting parents often insist on having their photos taken in front of these images, to the mortification of their newly sophisticated offspring.

The more post-traditional a setting is, the more lifestyle becomes the core of self-identity, in particular its making and remaking (Giddens 1991). This is certainly the case in Shenzhen. People consume goods and services for utilitarian purposes but also to express who they are. One woman spoke of her dread of Valentine’s Day. Not because she was boyfriend-less, but because of the expense she would incur sending herself a large bouquet of flowers. Although her boyfriend earned a decent wage, he was tight-fisted and she didn’t want to be embarrassed again. The previous year she was the only woman at work not to have received an enormous bouquet. These had all been delivered to the office to ensure maximum appreciation.

In recent years, the state has denounced excessive consumption as immoral and has launched frugality campaigns (for example, see *Liaoning Xinwen* 2010). Despite this, conspicuous consumption is still widespread in China. In Shenzhen, the high turnover of the population and lack of a recognizable, established social hierarchy mean that conspicuous consumption is the most effective way of displaying one’s wealth. You are what you buy.

One evening while dining with friends in a Sichuanese restaurant, we witnessed excessive drunken behaviour and large amounts of wasted food. My professional friends, Yuyu and Ming, explained that the individuals involved were *baofabu* (暴发户, “new rich”) who didn’t know any better. “They always behave this way because they are *mei you jiaoyu*” (没有教育, “uneducated”).

San Dajian

The list of most desirable goods has changed over time. Commodities such as televisions, fridges and washing machines started off as status symbols but eventually became everyday household possessions in urban areas (Hooper 1998). This is because these goods became increasingly cheaper and readily available, and wages increased. Once goods are popularized in this way, they lose their exclusive status and new goods take their place to serve as markers of distinction (Bourdieu 1979). Goods are frequently re-evaluated to determine their current status. In the 1990s new status symbols for urban consumers were leisure activities and communication products such as pagers, computers, cellular phones, and Internet connections (Yan 2000). Currently, the top three consumer aspirations (三大件, *san dajian*) are to own a home, to own a car, and to travel. Yuyu and Ming shared the same aspirations as the other professionals interviewed. These were, in ranking order: to purchase their own home, to buy a car, and to be able to travel. Of the 60 interviewees, 26 were homeowners, 7 had bought cars, and 26 had travelled for leisure.

New Social Spaces

The decline of the work-unit system and socialist redistributive system means that the state no longer plays such a central role in people's lives. New social spaces and freedoms have been engendered in a number of different ways. What was, under Mao, previously public and politicized has become privatized. The erosion of the work-unit system means that work and home are now separate social spaces, and that one's personal and individual spheres have expanded. There are now increasingly diverse types of social space, including privately owned homes, childcare, leisure activities and education. This has been accompanied by the re-articulation of gender roles within the realms of recreation, work and the home (Yu and Tng 2003). Consumerism has contributed to economic growth and an across-the-board rise in personal income and has precipitated the redrawing of boundaries between social groups and the creation of social space outside state control (Yan 2000).

In addition, this growing commercialization has created the opportunity for independent social interaction beyond the control of the state. Previously, leisure had been controlled: The state prescribed the duration, forms and content of leisure (Wang 1995). State-organized events such as dances, film screenings and sporting events now take place in

commercialized leisure spaces such as nightclubs, cinemas and health clubs. In these new consumption spaces, people are active agents and are able to enact new identities without state surveillance (Yu and Tng 2003: 190). New consumer behaviour has allowed people to “increase the private sphere and expand horizontal social networks that challenged the primacy of vertical ties between subject-citizens and state agents” (Davis 2000: 3). Commercialization has increased the opportunity to exercise individual choices and circumvent government policies, but consumption, especially that of mass media, has also been used to reassert state power (Zha 1995). Davis (2000) cites examples of consumerism strengthening state authority on the one hand and weakening it on the other.

Economic reform has engendered freedom of consumer choice as well as the capacity for freedom of personal expression. People purchase their own homes, chat online with friends, and pursue private lives which they have constructed themselves. Interestingly, these new freedoms are rooted in powerful social and political constraints ranging from peer pressure to conform, to the continuing presence of an authoritarian state that furnishes social stability (Madsen 2000).

Research Findings

Individualism

The bathroom has to be here so I can lie in the bath and admire the sea. I will turn out the lights so that the neighbours can't see me naked. I don't know anybody else who has this. Now I can be myself. It's in my character to *think outside the box* (Meilian, 33 years old, sales director; words in italics spoken in English).

Earlier in the day, I had received a text message. Meilian was having house-warming drinks at her new apartment in Nanshan at 8 p.m. Newly built, it was part of a development rumoured to have broken local real estate records – the price per square foot was said to equal that of Shanghai. From the exterior, the building did not appear new. Missing tiles, brown water stains, and rusty pipes gave the impression that the structure was at least a few years old. The interior of the building was surprisingly dissimilar to its exterior – the lobby was decorated with expensive potted palms and large mirrors. It was a quiet, cool oasis that contrasted with the dusty, noisy chaos outside.

Meilian had only just bought the flat, and it was still an empty shell. She opened a bottle of red wine and proposed a toast. After this, she took a piece of chalk and drew her vision for the apartment on the bare concrete floor. What excited her most was the bathroom, which was going to be wall-less and positioned next to the largest window with a sea-view. This would mean that all activities in the bathroom, which included a toilet, would be visible to anyone else in the flat and to the neighbours. For Meilian, creativity and originality were more important than practicality. Like many of her peers who grew up in regulation work-unit housing and had experienced homogeneous living standards, she was keen to individualize her private space.

Home Sweet Home

Chinese started to buy their own homes in the late 1990s. Homes in China tend to be apartments. Consumers buy an empty concrete shell without floors, internal walls, electrical wiring, plumbing or fittings. Contractors are hired to come and install these services and features. Consumers spend an additional 20-50 per cent of the original price to make the apartment habitable and to furnish it. Many residents moved from pre-reform housing, with a shared toilet and kitchen, to a self-contained apartment. This required extensive planning and comparison shopping (Davis 2000). The interior decoration industry grew rapidly, and a plethora of home decoration magazines appeared to meet the needs of this new market.

Initially, there were a number of “teething” problems. Inexperienced customers with no idea of how to plan their homes had posed a problem for B&Q, a UK-owned chain of home renovation stores. The head of B&Q Decoration Service at one of the Shenzhen branches said that, previously, many customers had no idea what to do with a six-room apartment. They were used to two-room apartments and did not know how to plan the usage of the extra space. One customer decided to fill four rooms with four dining suites. A few weeks later, after viewing a friend’s new apartment with a study, second bathroom, and guestroom, the customer returned to B&Q and demanded that he have them too. Another customer had insisted on choosing white bathroom tiles to decorate her entire flat. She was eventually enlightened by a home decorating magazine, but by then, the tiles had already been laid.

Mr. Wu, the manager of the largest B&Q store in Shenzhen, described the commissioning process of wealthy businessmen from the

Chinese hinterland. Clients would hand him a large briefcase of cash, scribble down an address, reel off vague instructions (“modern but not too much”) and demand that the residence be decorated and fully functioning by a certain date. This was the arrival date in Shenzhen of the client’s wife and family. Mr. Wu added: “They make their money in awful, faraway places then move to Shenzhen so they can spend it. They have the worst taste.” According to Mr. Wu, within 24 hours of arriving in town, the wives invariably presented themselves at B&Q to complain. “They want to know why the windows don’t have blue glass in them, like rural toilet blocks do.” Mr. Wu explained that the company’s design service was launched to address these types of calamities and to offer advice to customers before fittings are purchased. These days, design professionals help customers through the whole design process, explaining all the stages, offering a choice of floor plans, and allowing them to see computerized images of what their choice will look like.

Of the professionals interviewed who owned homes, just a handful had used the B&Q design service. This is because it is only available to clients who fit out their whole apartment through B&Q – a relatively expensive process. Many individuals visited the store for the sole purpose of buying building materials, which were viewed as being high in quality. Having experienced lack of choice during the pre-reform era, middle-class professionals have become keen and selective shoppers.

The research revealed that professionals who were renting also invested much time and energy in personalizing their homes. Professionals enjoyed visiting IKEA in order to be exposed to international decorating trends. After their IKEA visits, they often recreated the same look by purchasing less-expensive equivalents at Wal-Mart and small local stores. The consensus was that being modern and stylish did not have to be prohibitively expensive, provided one had good taste and was innovative. This is similar to Smith’s observations in Malaysia (1999). Workers there who aspired to middle-class lifestyles simply bought cheaper versions of middle-class status items. These items, such as lounge suites, looked similar but were made of less expensive materials.

Us and Them

Consumption practices in China have become an important means of differentiation and division (Wank 1999). Chinese consumption is idiosyncratic and differs from the Western experience in a number of ways. One important difference is that the increasing disparity in wealth in

urban cities did not immediately segregate Chinese consumers by class. Another is that patterns of Chinese consumption are not always defined by class. This is because state subsidies of urban consumption, especially on housing, did not disappear completely (Davis 2000; Chiu 2001). Also, generation and gender influence the consumption of new goods and services as much as income level and class (Davis 2000). This means that middle-class professionals often find themselves sharing restaurants, shops and gated communities with *baofabu*. Many of the Shenzhen professionals who were interviewed look down upon the new rich. It should be noted that the act of labelling someone *baofabu* is negative in itself. The term means “upstarts” and has no positive connotations (Hertz 1998). Interviewees commonly described the new rich as “uneducated”, “noisy”, “crude”, “unaware of social etiquette”, “provincial”, and tellingly, “unable to speak English”.

The Simple Life

Goods assembled together in ownership make physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes. [...] In their assemblage they present a set of meanings more or less coherent, more or less intentional. They are read by those who know the code and scan for information (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 5).

So how do Chinese professionals distinguish themselves from *baofabu* and other classes? One way is by purchasing consumer goods that embrace a different aesthetic. Now that mainstream China is enthralled with foreign products, young professionals have started to buy goods that embody Chinese design. This is similar to Singapore, where there has been a resurgence in the popularity of the *cheongsam* and other types of ethnic clothing (Chua 2003: 79). The design aesthetic favoured by interviewees can be described as modern Chinese. The Sichuanese restaurant described earlier embodied this style: Minimalist, light-coloured furniture provided the backdrop for colourful rural handicrafts such as the giant woven baskets that hung from the ceiling. The hip reputation of the restaurant was partially due to the soundtrack playing in the toilets. It consisted of 1960s vibraphone music interspersed with a French female voice giving instructions on how to repair a lift in halting, sensuous English. The restaurant, like many of the city’s popular dining establishments, specialized in distinctive regional cuisine. The popularity of this

type of cuisine in urban Chinese areas is sometimes referred to as “culinary nostalgia” (Swislocki 2009).

The homes of professionals that I visited were often decorated with pared-down furniture combined with brightly coloured objects such as glassware or ceramics. This contrasts with the new rich who are described as favouring heavy ornate furniture in faux Baroque or traditional Chinese style. The new rich have furniture made of wood that features carvings of animals, fish and flowers. Their aesthetic is characterized by sumptuous furnishings that reflect old culture, whether it be Western or Chinese. The Shenzhen professionals who were interviewed typically described *baofabu* furniture as “anything ornate and gaudy” and clothing as “very expensive and foreign”.

They buy Western designer goods with giant logos to show off, like Polo shirts and Gucci sunglasses. The logo must be very big or they won't buy it. They can't appreciate simple things (Lily, 30 years old, finance manager).

Shenzhen has a small number of boutique stores that specialize in modern Chinese design. For those who find the variety of modern Chinese design there lacking, there is Shanghai – the design capital of China. A popular weekend excursion involves flying to Shanghai to buy locally designed clothing, housewares and jewellery. Favourite stores as named by respondents (for example, Layefe Home and ZEN) specialize in Chinese handicrafts such as pottery, glassware and other items made out of natural materials like straw handbags and baskets. The taste for goods that celebrate nature and romanticize rural life is also evident in the clothing stores favoured by respondents. These stores specialize in clothing that is inspired by life in the traditional Chinese countryside. The more expensive of these stores, such as *Nuomi* (“Brown Rice”), use bamboo, cotton and soya fabrics to make their clothes. The romance of the rural theme and environmentally friendly aspects of these products are heavily marketed. It is interesting to note that this professional pursuit of modern Chinese design *en masse* was described by informants in terms of possessing “unique” and “specialized” taste, a type of connoisseurship that stemmed from being highly individual.

One interviewee stated that her brother was one of the first people in Shenzhen to wear a traditional Chinese silk jacket (唐装, *tangzhuang*) in a modern way – with jeans. Curiously, his original inspiration had been a photo of George Bush and other world leaders all wearing *tangzhuang* at the 2001 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. A fashion

editor confirmed that after this international event, which was widely covered in the national press, many educated, urban Chinese started to wear this style of jacket. This can be viewed within the context of Veblen's theory of pecuniary emulation, where prestige is acquired by emulating the lifestyle of social superiors.

Another means of social distinction is knowledge of how to consume goods correctly (Elfick 2008). Theme bars that educate their patrons in a specialized area of expertise – like wine or tea appreciation – are very popular. These bars sometimes arrange for experts to come and host special events. The ability to consume correctly and stylishly has become so important that knowledge of how to consume has in itself become a commodity. A growing number of newspapers, magazines, websites and television programmes are devoted solely to consumption-related issues.

Travel

Travel is another means by which professionals define themselves in opposition to the new rich. Once the privilege of the rich and well-connected, overseas travel is now within the reach of many Chinese. Now, an ID card and a residence permit are all that is required to apply for a passport. Overseas travel furnishes social status and is often the topic of discussion at social gatherings. One informant confided that “people don't respect you in Shenzhen if you don't travel regularly for work or fun”. Travel within China is often either to cultural sites or to Hong Kong, the latter a popular shopping destination. The quality and variety of goods and standard of service there are seen as superior. Among the interviewees, France, Japan and the UK were the most popular overseas travel destinations.

You should see them walking round the gym showing off their package-tour travel bags. So tragic yet so proud! None of my friends do group travel. I'm going backpacking next month to Koh Samui (Xiaomei, 26 years old, banker).

Interviews also revealed that prestige is derived from travelling overseas especially if done on an individual basis rather than as part of a tour group. A growing number of young professionals have discovered the joy of backpacking and have returned from holidays sporting ethnic jewelry and batik clothing. Backpacking is felt to be adventurous and provides the opportunity to interact with travellers from other countries

in ways that group tours do not. During the interviews, young professionals showed pictures of themselves at train stations, drinking in bars, and sharing hostel dormitories with Western backpackers. The experience of mingling with foreign travellers was prized more than interacting with the local population of that particular country. When asked whether this kind of travel would appeal to the new rich, some respondents answered that backpacking requires good spoken English and an independent mindset, therefore excluding *baofabu*.

Recently, middle-class professionals in Shenzhen have developed a taste for other forms of recreation that are deemed to be “individualistic”, such as hiking. Many aspire to tour through remote areas in rural China in four-wheel-drive vehicles. The popularity of these kinds of activities can be seen on websites such as <www.doyouhike.net>, a Chinese-language website geared toward outdoor enthusiasts.

Conclusion

In China, consumption has emerged as the single most important means of expressing social identity. Consumerism has enabled people to redefine themselves and their social status in terms of consumption and lifestyle. During my stay in Shenzhen, I visited many newly decorated apartments and observed that the desire to control one’s domestic space and express one’s individuality in innovative ways was strong. Interview subjects spared no expense and went to great lengths to stamp their mark on their living spaces. This emphasis on possessing individualistic taste constantly arose when discussing consumption – whether it be fashion, food, interior design or travel. Among middle-class professionals, individualism has emerged as an important ideal to strive for.

This preoccupation with being individualistic could be explained in a number of ways. First, it could be seen as a characteristic of transitional society: Wanting to personalize one’s life could be a reaction to the homogeneous “massified consumption” (Lu 2000) that characterized life in the pre-reform era. Second, it could be viewed through the lens of consumption as social palliative. Consumerism is now one of the few ideologies in China, along with nationalism, that is both promoted by the state and actively subscribed to by individuals. Creating one’s own individual lifestyle through shopping is approved of from the top down. Third, individualism as a cultural ideal could be evidence of accelerated modernity. Shenzhen’s close proximity to Hong Kong and the prolifera-

tion of mass media has dramatically sped up the transnational flow of images of modernity. In addition to creating the desire to buy new types of goods, mass media has exposed Shenzhen professionals to new ways of consuming and of conceptualizing the world.

My conclusion is that although these explanations partially account for the consumption behaviours observed, another more important factor is at work: social distinction. The past decade has seen middle-class professionals become keen and selective shoppers. Many describe their consumption practices as informed by their own highly individualistic taste. Although this is sometimes the case, the pursuit of modern Chinese design and individualistic activities by professionals constitutes a group behaviour and serves as an articulation of a collective social identity. Middle-class professionals in Shenzhen are keen to distinguish themselves from other similar income groups, such as the *baofabu*. In order to do this, they consume goods with an alternative design aesthetic and pursue leisure activities geared toward individuals rather than large groups.

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