

The possibilities of consumption for symbolic and political resistance

The relevance of consumption in the organization of social differences in contemporary China is apparent in recent ethnographies. Research employing Bourdieu's work on social distinction has shown how the field of consumption is a social arena in which subjects represent, identify and produce the new social memberships which have arisen following the demise of the Maoist social system. Specific to the Chinese context is not the relationship between consumption practices and expression of social differences, but rather the *construction* of such differences in both official discourse and the spaces of agency that consumption offers to subjects in their attempt to carve out their own interpretations. In today's China new conceptions of femininity, ethnicity, "quality" of person, etc. have emerged to give meaning to new social configurations that appeared after reforms. My MA dissertation interrogated the opportunities that the arena of consumption offers to Chinese subjects to struggle against those symbols and values that often come with discriminatory and prejudiced connotations. Consumption activities were means by which subjects attempted to symbolically resituate themselves in opposition to a discursive discrimination that they suffered for being rural migrants, members of ethnic minorities, unstylish women, etc.

The first objective of my research is to widen that approach with new theoretical perspectives. I aim to question not only the possibilities of consumption to symbolically contest dominant categories of social difference, but also its potential for political change. This has been addressed in China, but there is no agreement about the subversive or manipulative power of consumption: an analysis that considers different groups of consumers and compares their political values and goals is still lacking.

Deborah Davis has highlighted the benefits of China's consumer revolution, defining it as a social activity that improves everyday sociability and "incubate[s] loyalties that ultimately generate the actions capable of weakening the authoritarian State" (2000:21). Conversely, Pun Ngai (2003) denies such consumer agency and prefers to mobilize the idea of consumption as a subterfuge employed by capital to improve controlling power over the workforce.

Both visions are problematic. Davis considers the privileged urban residents and concludes that consumption in China is a form of empowerment; Pun considers discriminated rural migrants and concludes that it is a new form of hidden exploitation.

The exploitation of the working class is not inconsistent with the empowerment of the emerging middle class: both are results of a political economy that discriminates against second-class citizens such as rural workers and privileges urban residents (Solinger, 1999).

I argued in my last work that consumption in China is neither *a priori* capable of subverting state power, nor is it *a priori* merely a new strategy to normalize subjects and reproduce social order. Its possibilities should be analyzed considering the use that specific groups and subjects make of it, depending on the resources they control according to their position in social structure. The development of consumption as a central social activity is part of a broader project implemented by the Party State to both sustain economic growth and create a privileged middle class that can guarantee a certain degree of social stability (Tomba, 2004; Anagnost, 2008). However, although consumption may not be immediately conducive to undermining the established order, its significance for subaltern subjects in creating spaces of self-expression should be taken more seriously. It makes sense to hypothesize a scenario in which groups of subjects created around symbols of consumption develop stronger identities, increasing their potential for dissidence and possibly evolving into political movements or calls for democratization. These possibilities should be explored to enrich the current debate.

Social differences, consumption and political change

What is needed is a comparative analysis that considers the tastes, preferences and aspirations of various social groups and prove the political relevance of their consumption discourses and practices, in particular by verifying the presence of self-defined identities that might convey dissident thoughts or, contrarily, mainstream ideologies that reproduce the social order.

First I will classify into categories the variegated universe of Chinese subject-consumers (cf. Croll 2006), and second I will verify if the consumption practices of those groups or individuals reveal significant political ideas or even claims for change. Practices and contexts of consumption of some previously selected groups – such as migrant workers, private entrepreneurs, housewives, etc. – will be investigated to put forward my poststructuralist approach that both relates taste and preferences to the main socio-cultural groups, and recognizes the freedom of subjects to express their self-

defined narratives. The aim is to ascertain relationships between their social background, consumption-based affiliation and political attitude.

The main idea is to explore the hypothesis that certain lifestyles convey subversive political values and goals. My research aims to study political attitudes of China's emerging social groups, but instead of focusing on entrepreneurs (cf. Dickson 2003), I will target consumers, who in the act of purchasing, discussing and showing off goods, express specific political outlooks that might disclose claims for political change.

Is there any evidence in China's new social landscape of emerging groups or identities shaped around lifestyle or symbols of consumption? Are these consumption-based groups developing collective political attitudes that might finally lead to political change? How is consumption's dissident potential related to subjects' socio-economic background and the inclusion/exclusion in/from the nation's growing prosperity?

I aim to clarify the role that social interaction in the field of consumption plays in this hypothetical surfacing of political consciousness. This is relevant to government policies, which have recently targeted the spending power of ordinary people. The successes and shortcomings of the CCP's commitment to "harmonizing" society by raising incomes might be investigated to reflect on the consensus or opposition that these policies are generating among subject-consumers.

Existing literature and theoretical perspective

The approaches of Miller and de Certeau consider the possibility of consumption for empowerment and "tactics of resistance", and the approaches of Bourdieu and Baudrillard shed light on the social patterning of consumption and its manipulative power. To avoid the under-socialized idea of the consumer as a self-determining subject operating in a separate sphere of social action, I will suggest a poststructuralist analysis that has three aspects: it links consumption practices to the main social stratifications by investigating the structural forces that shape the variegated world of consumption; it recognizes the active role of subjects in the cultural process; and it envisages the possibility of raising consumption-related political awareness.

I will interrogate the adequacy of Western theories in China, an aspect that has been approached elsewhere, but that might be reconsidered here after collecting my

ethnographic data, for example by assessing the actual potential of consumption for self-expression in the context of Chinese state-led consumerism.

The fieldwork

The fieldwork will take place in Yiwu, Zhejiang Province, where I have already spent long periods. Yiwu is a city of 1.2 million people and is famous for its small commodity trade and vibrant free markets. Qualitative research employing interviews, participant-observation and maybe questionnaires will be carried out to ascertain regularities and correlations between certain consumption habits, socio-economic background, and political outlook. I will monitor the social life of groups and individuals, and observe contexts of consumption - such as superstores, clothes boutiques, sport centers - where those different groups interact. I will explore the correspondence between socio-cultural formations and consumption-based identities, in particular by focusing attention on the presence of discourses that might reveal dissident views or hegemonic ideologies. The subjects' access/exclusion to the world of consumer goods must be the standpoint to assess their affinity or divergence in respect of the party-state dominant discourse.

Research Schedule and language training

The first year will be a preparatory year during which I will undertake research training, language training and designing the research. The second year I will conduct fieldwork in Yiwu. The third year will be dedicated to writing my thesis up back in Manchester.

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