TRANSNATIONAL CONSUMER CULTURE AND MIDDLE CLASS PROFESSIONALS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY IN POST-REFORM CHINA

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Certificate of Originality

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it reproduces no material previously published or written, nor material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

(Signed)

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(Name of student)

Abstract

This is an ethnographic account examining the role of consumption practices and narratives of transnational capitalism in the construction of urban middle class identity. Improved access to mass media and communication technologies has exposed individuals to transnational consumer culture. Many young professionals aspire to link themselves with this culture as it invokes status and implies sophistication.

Transnational consumer identity as negotiated in Shenzhen emphasizes the consumption of experiences as well as goods. This constitutes an epistemological shift in the study of consumption as traditionally the focus has been on the consumption of goods. In Shenzhen, having the means that permit the frequent consumption of transnational consumer experiences, as well as an understanding of how to engage in these experiences appropriately, has come to constitute middle class identity.

Research question

The thesis asks, what is the relationship between consumption and the formation of urban middle class identity in China? This question is in two stages. Stage one examines consumption practices and class in post-reform China. Stage two uses the research findings to engage with sociological literature. Consumption practices and the extraordinary manner of recounting them, as encountered during the Shenzhen fieldwork, are placed in the context of existing theories. I argue that these theories are insufficient to fully account for what was encountered during the Shenzhen fieldwork. I contend that other elements are at work: class formation, media, and idiosyncrasies of the specific fieldwork location.

Thesis objectives

The research has three objectives. First, to study the interconnections between consumption and the construction of urban middle class identity. Second, to examine the movements of consumer goods and how the narratives of transnational capitalism are being experienced at the local level. Third, to describe some of the key consumption practices associated with urban middle class life.

Thesis structure

Chapter One introduces the research topic and methodology. Chapter Two establishes the theoretical framework of the research and reviews some of the sociological literature on consumption. Chapter Three examines the

recent history of class and the process of class formation in urban China. Chapter Four describes China's consumer ongoing revolution. Chapter Five delineates the consumption practices of university students and young professionals. Chapter Six looks at mass media, globalization, and the consumption of experiences in Shenzhen. Chapter Seven outlines the role of transnational consumerism in the formation of a young professional Chinese identity.

Research papers

2009. “'Tai Guofen': Youth, Materialism, and Individualism in Shenzhen”, accepted for Melbourne Conference on China, University of Melbourne.

2009. “Class Formation and Consumption Practices among Middle Class Professionals in Shenzhen”, International Conference for Asian Scholars (ICAS 2009), Daejeon, Korea.

2008. "Television, Sex and Middle Class Identity in China". In *Patterns of Middle-Class Consumption in India and China*, edited by C. Jaffrelot and P. van der Veer, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

2005. "Xing, Dianshi he Zhongguo Zhongchan Jieceng". In *China Studies*, edited by Zhou Xiaohong and Xie Shuguang, Beijing: Social Sciences and Document Press, Autumn, No.2.

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Contents

PART I

Chapter One: Consumption and Social Identity in Post-Reform China

The research

One Saturday afternoon I was invited to accompany a friend to a barbecue in a well-heeled suburb in Shenzhen - a wealthy city in southern China. The lady hosting the barbecue was celebrating the full occupancy of offices in a commercial development that she had recently built. Most of the guests were successful professionals. At one point a polished young woman came and sat next to me.

> You're foreign aren't you? Do you like *Sex and the City*? My friends and I have watched every single episode ….Last year was great, my world changed. I bought my first car, went on my first trip to Japan, and had sex with a foreigner for the first time (Mei, 28 years).

Intrigued, a number of questions ran through my mind. What kind of work did this woman do? How did this surprising level of sexual frankness come from? Was the American television series *Sex and the City* responsible? And most of all, why did she categorize a particular type of sexual experience together with purchasing a car and traveling overseas?

Subsequent fieldwork revealed that Mei's comments were not unusual among a particular type of middle class professional woman and in time I came to hear them frequently. One thing was clear; these comments were

an important form of people expressing who they were.

Research question

The thesis takes the above questions as a starting point and asks what is the relationship between consumption and the formation of urban middle class identity in China?

Over the past two 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 one of socialist frugality to one that is consumption-oriented. Rapid economic growth has been accompanied by the emergence of mass consumption, including fashion, advertising, and luxury goods.

This research explicitly aims to bridge the gap between local experience and translocal cultural forces. It is especially concerned with how new ways of seeing the world - through goods, images, experiences, fashions and ideologies - promote new ways of being in the world.

Mass media is the main conduit for seeing the world in new ways. Rather than make mass media the main object of ethnographic enquiry, this thesis views media as part of consumer culture in general. The consumption of commercial and state media in China is inextricably linked with the broader processes of middle class consumption – including exposure to transnational consumer culture.

This study views consumer culture as “a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets” (Slater, 1997: 8). Transnational consumer culture is defined as a culture of consumption that is not confined to the national borders of one country. For a more detailed discussion of consumer culture, see chapter two.

By middle class I refer to the new class of people that has emerged in China, with medium incomes, other than the two traditional classes of workers and farmers (Zhou, 2008:110). Middle classes have existed at different times in Chinese history. The middle class that is the focus of this study can be traced back to 1978 and the initiation of Deng Xiaoping’s open policy. Members of this middle class include: owners of private and township enterprises; self-employed people like petty proprietors and small trades people; some officials and intellectuals who serve the government; white collar workers and senior managers in joint ventures; managers of enterprises and social organizations; and individuals working in high tech professions such as architects and television producers (*ibid*). For a more detailed discussion of the Chinese middle class, see chapter three.

Shenzhen has a disproportionately large middle class. According to a survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 10% of the city’s population is middle class[1]. This is a higher percentage than in any other

[1] As quoted in “In Chinese Boomtown, Middle Class Pushes Back” by Howard W. French, New York Times ,18/12/06

city in China. The existence of the large middle class in Shenzhen is tied to the numerous business ventures and enterprises located in the city.

This research examines the role of consumption practices in forming social identity among a specific middle class group – that of young Chinese professionals. The research focuses on young professionals, those individuals carving out a new cultural space which they explicitly delineate, in language and material practice, as distinct from other middle class groups. This group is similar to Gramsci's 'cadre of professionals' (1972).

This study defines professionals as individuals who are employed in a position that entails some level of responsibility - whether it is managerial, technical, or administrative - in either the private or public sector and can be characterized as potential homeowners, highly educated, and able to allocate substantial resources for education. The definition contrasts with those definitions of the middle class that are based on their relations to the means of production (see for example Marx). Instead it 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).

Young professionals in Shenzhen include "high-income people working in new hi-tech professions or fields, such as returned overseas students, architects, lawyers, accountants, real estate appraisers, salespeople, film and TV program producers, and stock investors" (Zhou, 2008).

In this thesis, the term 'young professionals' refers to individuals under the

age of 40 who are employed and have a university degree.

Two life stages in the trajectory of young professionals are studied: that of being a student at university and that of participating in the workforce in the early stages of one's career. It is during these two life stages that individuals evolve into independent consumers and become socially mobile.

The research question is answered in two stages. Stage one examines consumption practices and class in post-reform China. Stage two uses the research findings to engage with sociological literature. Consumption practices and the extraordinary manner of recounting them, as encountered during the Shenzhen fieldwork, are placed in the context of existing theories. I argue that these theories are insufficient to fully account for what was encountered during the Shenzhen fieldwork. I contend that other elements are at work: class formation, media, and idiosyncrasies of the specific fieldwork location.

Research aims

The research has three specific aims. First, to study the interconnections between consumption and the construction of urban middle class identity. Second, to examine the movements of consumer goods and how the narratives of transnational capitalism are being experienced at the local level. Third, to describe some of the key consumption practices associated with urban middle class life.

This study explores the role of consumption in negotiating a new social

identity, namely middleclassness. The research examines the different ways that goods and their meanings are produced, mediated, and circulated. This will be achieved by exploring specific consumption practices, mass media, and leisure. The concept of relaxation and being able to enjoy life is central to the lifestyle of this emerging middle class. Leisure has become available to a large section of urban society and has created new industries, such as tourism. As consumption is fuelled by desire, I will also study new conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Scope of the research

This is an ethnographic account examining the role of consumption practices and narratives of transnational capitalism in the construction of urban middle class identity. On a meta-level this study is about the relationship between consumption and broader cultural strategies. This approach is rooted in two fundamental ideas. First, that consumers are agents rather than victims. Second, that consumption is not an autonomous abstract social phenomenon and as such should be studied within its wider context. This work examines the way that consumption can be understood in the context of life strategies and as means of creating a meaningful existence (Friedman, 1994).

The broad theoretical context of the research is postmodernism which maintains that consumption is a determinant of everyday life (Featherstone, 1991). Mass media phenomena such as advertising have led to an endless search for new experiences and sensations. A number of scholars have already examined the consumption of goods as communicators that signify

taste and lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984). Rather than being simple utensils, material goods are consumed as communicators and are valued as signifiers of taste and lifestyle (Featherstone, 1991).

The core of the research is a cultural analysis of consumption. How is middle class identity negotiated on a daily basis within the framework of Chinese class formation and globalization? New social identities are emerging in China due to the transition from a centralized to a free market economy.

The thesis argues that consumption has become the single most important form of expressing social identity. As such, consumption provides the best explanation for new social patterns that have come to dominate urban Chinese life. Political class background and kinship continue to influence sociocultural life, but quotidian practices of the middle class in Shenzhen demonstrate that 'epistemological styles' (Appadurai, 1990b) have changed, leaving consumption as the framing principle for everyday experience.

The research views modernity as an experience of multiple often-contradictory epistemological styles. This approach builds upon the work of other scholars such as Liechty (2002) and aims to bridge the ethnographic gap between local experience and translocal cultural forces. The research explores the links between the global political economy and features of both national and transnational identity.

This study is especially concerned with how new ways of seeing the world - through goods, images, experiences, fashions and ideologies - promote

new ways of being in the world. In order to understand the influence of these new epistemological styles, the research specifically examines the consumption of goods and services, the consumption of images and narratives created as disseminated by mass media, and the local construction of middle class subjectivity.

Studying culture

Culture is at the centre of all ethnographic research. What exactly does the term ‘culture’ mean? Culture is commonly viewed as the knowledge, beliefs, and values that members of a society share and pass on from generation to generation[2]. This cognitive definition of culture has only recently become widely accepted. It is influenced by the work of Geertz, who in the ‘70s defined culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973:89). Culture enables individuals to engage with and understand the world around them. Geertz believes that an analysis of culture should "not (be) an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz ,1973:5). Friedman views culture, not as an autonomous entity, but as “a phenomenon to be accounted for rather than one that accounts for” (1994b: 27).

Fetterman (1989:17) points out that definitions of culture are either materialist or ideational in perspective. The materialist viewpoint looks at behaviour while the ideational viewpoint focuses on cognitive definition.

[2] Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences (http://bitbucket.icaap.org),accessed on 02.06.06

From a materialist perspective, culture is the sum of a social group's observable patterns of behaviour, customs, and way of life (Harris 1968:16). From a cognitive perspective, culture comprises the ideas, beliefs, and knowledge that characterize a particular group of people, and explicitly excludes behaviour. Each of these two definitions is lacking as an understanding of both behaviour and knowledge is necessary in order to describe a culture. Most ethnographers, therefore, use a combination of these definitions or take one of them as a starting point. This research follows this trend, looking at both behaviour and knowledge, but as it focuses on phenomena such as perceptions and imaginings of self and others, has a pronounced cognitive flavour.

Consumption

Western countries have seen the development of consumer societies accompanied by enormous growth in marketing and advertising. Consumerism is not necessarily the consumption of goods and services for survival or enjoyment. It is often described as an ideology that promotes consumption and persuades people to define themselves by continually consuming a larger amount and wider variety of products.

Consumption is held accountable for a wide range of social processes. The most common being either the homogenization (McLuhan, 1964; Sklair, 1995; Ritzer, 2007) or the heterogenization (Friedman, 1994; Appadurai, 1996; Geertz, 1998) of global culture. Consumption is often seen in a negative light. It is blamed for many things including the destruction of national and local cultures, functioning as the tool of American capitalism,

and as the dissolver of meaningful social and political relationships (Blaszczyk on Miller).

Despite its detractors, some people view the consumer society as a great success. It is credited with expanding the middle class at a phenomenal rate and exponentially increasing the accessibility and choice of mass-produced goods in global markets.

The influence of the consumer can be seen in phenomena such as consumer boycotts and the widespread availability of organic food. Ethical consumption has become big business and a growing number of companies are keen to distinguish themselves by becoming involved with consumer-driven issues such as food miles and shade-grown coffee.

Why study Chinese consumption?

China's place in the world

Chinese consumption has become a weighty topic for China and the rest of the world. The extensive social and economic change that China has experienced over the past two decades has produced the world's fastest growing economy. Rapid economic growth has been accompanied by the materialization of a world of mass consumption, including fashion, advertising, and luxury goods. Immense economic growth has enabled a significant portion of the Chinese urban population to transform their lifestyles from one of socialist frugality to one that is consumption-oriented.

Consumption has become central to modern Chinese culture and this in turn has far-reaching consequences for the rest of the world. On a global level, China’s burgeoning consumer culture elicits both exhilaration and concern. The enthusiasm stems from the enormous purchasing power that China represents, as bulk buyers of natural resources and consumer goods.

China’s manufacturing industries and plans to expand and upgrade its national infrastructure require vast amounts of natural resources which cannot be sourced locally. This dependence on imported natural resources has led to mining booms in many countries.

China’s appetite for natural resources is expected to continue to grow for at least another decade. According to Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute, China's consumption of grain, meat, coal, oil and steel had already overtaken that of the United States in 2007. China is widely viewed as regenerating the flailing economies of developed countries such as Australia and Canada, and injecting much needed wealth into developing nations such as Brazil.

Western media teems with reports of insatiable consumption on the part of the Chinese, ranging from the ravenous appetite for raw materials to a feverish demand for western luxury goods.

The flip side of this enthusiasm is widespread concern about the environmental ramifications of China's unbridled economic growth. The scale of China's environmental problem, like its rise as an economic power, is unprecedented. The fear is that the Chinese demand for basic

commodities and resources will exceed what the earth can provide and in the process cause irreversible environmental degradation and pollution.

Air pollution, potential shortages of fresh water, and the loss of arable land to soil degradation, erosion, and contamination are some of China's most serious environmental problems. China is the world’s largest producer and consumer of bituminous coal. China’s high level of chronic lung diseases is partly attributable to the serious air pollution in urban areas and in homes caused by coal burning. Water pollution is also a serious problem throughout China. Industrial waste is often dumped untreated into rivers, lakes, and the ocean. High levels of toxic pollutants in many areas mean that water is unsafe for drinking and other domestic uses.

The Chinese middle class also elicits excitement among western countries for political reasons. The growing middle class is seen as a potential agent of social change and western-style democracy (Glassman, 1991). The theory is that consumer rights will lead to people demanding political rights and challenging the legitimacy of the Communist Party. We already see research examining the link between consumer awareness and political participation (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Gans, 1988). Ironically, the Chinese government expects the purchasing power of the new middle class to improve rather than undermine social and political stability. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Design companies recognize that goods function as expressions of status and social identity. This is the heart of luxury brands. What is difficult to ascertain, is the manner in which goods are experienced or interpreted.

These are culturally specific activities (Plowman, 2003). In order to design for the Chinese market it is necessary to understand local consumption and identity, as well as the way in which people's lives and society are changing. What appears as a long-term social pattern may in fact be a short-term lifestyle trend. The study of consumption and identity dates back to Veblen's *The Leisure Class* (1970) and has increasingly become a popular research topic. Much research has been done on consumption and identity (Bourdieu: 1984, Friedman: 1994, Veblen: 1970) but little on this topic in China.

Gap in the knowledge

Reliable and systematic information is unavailable about consumption in China (Bian, 2002). One reason is the general disparity in Chinese statistics. For example, when looking for information on Shenzhen's per capita GDP one source stated that it was RMB 58,000 (US$7000)[3] in 2004. Another source stated that by 2006 Shenzhen's per capita GDP had reached RMB 8,619, 'making it the highest among Chinese mainland cities'[4]. Putting these two pieces of information together, one would logically conclude that in a period of two years Shenzhen's per capita GDP had fallen dramatically by a staggering RMB 50,000. A surprising development because it is widely agreed that Shenzhen's per capita GDP has continued to grow at a dramatic rate since 1979.

Deepak Bhattasali, Lead Economist at the World Bank, worked with the Chinese National Bureau (NBS) of Statistics over a period of time and

[3] http://www.china.org.cn/archive/2005-11/01/content_1147069.htm
[4] http://www.sz2011.org/eng/service/content/2007-06/29/content_1290975.htm

describes how little money was allocated to the organization and how overworked the staff were[5]. Bhattasali also reports problems of differential access to data by different users; lack of coordination among the government departments; and the private activities of people within the statistical agencies, who operate according to a very different incentive system. Additional problems that he encountered were the lack of adequate public data files, and the lack of understanding of national statistics as public goods. Bhattasali felt that unavailability of appropriate data made it difficult to answer very basic questions that help measure the impact of economic policies - such as, did poverty increase or decrease during the last years of the 9th Plan? Or what is happening to real consumption?

Other issues raised include high levels of statistical secrecy, gaps in coverage, and the relevance of many statistical collection efforts. He also adds that the general statistical effort is a reflection of the broader information management climate in China. The transitional nature of the country and existing restrictions on the flow of information generally mean that there is no transparency when it comes to national statistics, special collection efforts and micro surveys. Bhattasali sums up by stating that the national total statistical effort is too large to manage with the existing technology and skill levels, and at the sub-national level, is subject to excessive local pressure.

There is no lack of information when it comes to the Chinese consumer. A

[5] Observations on Chinese Statistics: An User Perspective, Deepak Bhattasali, Chief, Economics Unit and Lead Economist, World Bank, www.stats.gov.cn/english/specialtopics/intSymposium/t20041227_402219071.htm, accessed 06.02.09.

quick search for “chinese consumer” at the online book merchant Amazon.com shows that there are 2,164 books for sale on this topic[6]. In recent years numerous studies of Chinese consumers have been undertaken. These have been conducted predominantly by market research companies, such as Dun and Bradstreet, who have their own commercial agenda. This type of corporate data is sold to a wide variety of foreign companies eager to tap into China’s 1.2 billion consumers. In many cases it is not based on ethnographic research and is more often than not, a reflection of the latest western marketing trend. A recent example is the recent use of the term ‘bobo’ in urban China. The term quickly became popular, was exploited by many commercial enterprises, and became code for ‘premium value’ (Wang, 2005). In his study Wang unravels how the imaginary class ‘bourgeois bohemians’ emerged in China, a country where the bourgeois base is minute and bohemians are non-existent.

To sum up, regardless of whether the source of statistics is public or private, it is often impossible to discover the assumptions on which data is based. Therefore, it is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions. In this thesis, I have used statistics from a variety of sources to set the context of the research. However, such statistics are not critical to my core research argument, and their validity does not affect the research findings and conclusions.

My core research argument is grounded in data that I have systematically collected, with no other hidden agendas. The specific details of research methods are discussed later in this chapter.

[6] Amazon.com accessed 10.11.2008.

Personal interest

My own interest in consumption stems from my masters' fieldwork in 1996. The research took place in Luoshui village, a matrilineal society in the Lugu Lake region of south western China. The region, populated by several ethnic minorities and previously closed off to outsiders, had recently opened up for domestic tourism. During my ten-month stay in Luoshui, I witnessed the impact of an unprecedented flood of goods into the community. One of the consequences of tourism-generated income was the resurrection of pre-1949 class hierarchy and the expression of these revived social identities through the use of consumer goods.

Having visited China often from my home in Hong Kong, I was aware of the enormous changes in the material lives of the urban middle class. In the late 1990s many friends and former colleagues had purchased flats. Interior decoration had come to dominate conversation at parties. Earlier that decade, people had spoken with enthusiasm about purchasing white goods and of first holidays spent in hotels. Those comments reminded me of my father's family who had experienced the excitement of the post-war consumption boom in Australia. It took my grandmother a year to become indifferent to the wondrous properties of the fridge - ‘no matter when you open it, everything is still cold.’

Fieldwork location

The fieldwork was conducted in Shenzhen – a city of aspirations and overachievers. Shenzhen is located in the Pearl River Delta adjacent to

Hong Kong. The total area of Shenzhen is about 2,000 square km consists of seven districts: Bao'an, Futian, Longgang, Luohu, Nanshan, Shekou, and Yantian.

Originally a fishing village, Shenzhen become an economic boomtown and now has a disproportionately large middle class. People pour in from all over the country, mainly for work, and many leave just after a few years with new skills and added valuable experiences for their resumes. 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.

Within China, Shenzhen is an anomaly. Most Shenzhen residents originate from elsewhere in China. The original Cantonese speaking population is small and it is rare to meet anyone who is a true native. From a sampling perspective Shenzhen fares well as it is demographically diverse and no single ethnic group dominates the city. On the practical side, the transient nature of Shenzhen and the fact that many people are away from their networks of family and friends is conducive to conducting research. Most individuals originate from outside the city and are keen to interact. Shenzhen proved to be a rich location for participant observation and conducting interviews.

Shenzhen, Special Economic Zone

Shenzhen was designated as one of four Special Economic Zones in 1980 by Deng Xiaoping. This occurred with Deng's new agenda to develop a "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics" (*zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi shichang jingji)*. The larger context to this being economic stagnation which had engendered the slow collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The Special Economic Zones were based on Export Processing Zones that already existed in Asia (Wong and Chu, 1985). A number of Asian countries set up Export Processing Zones to attract overseas capital and technology with the aim of stimulating economic growth and building up an export market. Export Processing Zones function by enticing foreign and domestic businesses to set up manufacturing plants within specifically defined geographic areas. This is achieved by offering investment incentives.

The four Chinese Special Economic Zones were set up in Guangdong and Fujian provinces as a "window of technology, management, knowledge and foreign policy"[7]. These two provinces were granted special authorities and tax privileges which allowed them to attract outside investment and develop the zones.

The economic transformation of the Pearl River Delta was not the result of direct involvement by the central state but rather reduced state intervention (Lin 1997:6). It was the absence of the state through the removal

[7] Cited in The Role of Planning in the Development of Shenzhen,China: Rhetoric and Realities by Mee Kam Ng and Wing-Shing Tang accessed at http://shenzhen.mit.edu/~11.306/wiki/images/NgTang_2004.pdf

constraints that enabled local initiative and global forces to interact. This in turn facilitated an economic revolution that was spontaneous and self-sustained. Centralized decision making made way for local individual incentive and enthusiasm.

Park (1997) writes that although attracting advanced technology and foreign capital to China were part of the state's aims, the real objective of establishing the Special Economic Zones was the facilitation of the re-unification of Hong Kong and Taiwan through the establishment of strong economic ties. The four Special Economic Zones: Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen have close proximity to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Experimental model

Yang (1990: 241-5),Li (1988:63-70) and Cao (1990) write that establishing Special Economic Zones and dispensing special authorities to Guangdong and Fujian provinces was an attempt by the state to change southern China into an 'engine of growth'. The idea being that entrepreneurial successes would then spread to other parts of the country. Lin (1997: 6) refutes this idea. He argues that the objective of granting Guangdong and Fujian provinces 'special policy' (*teshu zhengce*) was not to give them a head start in development but to turn them into testing laboratories for risky economic experimentation. In other words, freedom was given to peripheral economic and geographical areas that were unimportant to the national economy. In other words, free market policies could be tried out there without damaging the stability of the state. Many political, economic and social policies were tried out in Shenzhen before being introduced to the rest of the country.

Economic success story

Shenzhen is now China's richest city ranked by per capita GDP[8] and in 2007 was rated the best city to live in[9]. The city also can boast many other impressive accomplishments. Between 1980 and 2001, Shenzhen's population increased by 14 times, its GDP grew by 724 times, and imports and exports 3,918 times. Shenzhen is also where the first overseas bank was established in China in 1982. 58 of the top 500 foreign-invested enterprises in China are located in Shenzhen, and 11 of the nation's top 50 enterprises have established businesses in the city[10].

Shenzhen has outperformed the other three SEZ's due to its competitive advantages. To start with, Shenzhen is physically larger than all the other zones. This means that there is more land available for developing. Shenzhen's biggest advantage however is its close proximity to Hong Kong. This enables easy access to world class technology, managerial expertise, market capital, and kinship networks (Campanella, 2008).

Demographics

After the establishment of Shenzhen as a SEZ the city became a magnet for workers from all over China. Young people flocked to Shenzhen to join a Chinese-style 'gold rush' [11]. The high wages and superior working conditions attracted an enormous number of unskilled workers as well as

[8] http://english.people.com.cn/90002/95607/6532479.html, accessed 20.12.08
[9] http://english.sz.gov.cn/ln/200709/t20070913_240645.htm. accessed 02.03.08
[10] http://shenzhen.mit.edu/~11.306/wiki/images/NgTang_2004.pdf, accessed 03.08.06
[11] Wang, Meng and Li in 2001 *International Urban Planning Settings*

the cream of China's talent; young skilled workers with university degrees as well as senior professionals such as engineers. Although some of these migrants came from other parts of Guangdong province the vast majority came from less developed areas such as the north-east of China and the interior.

Shenzhen's population in 2005 was estimated to be around 10 million[12]. It should be noted however that this is just one of several estimates. The figures range from nine million to twelve million. It is difficult to estimate the size of the population as official statistics don't necessarily include temporary migrants (Chan, 2003). In addition to this, the city has a high degree of population mobility. In 2000, migrants made up two thirds of the population[13].

Shenzhen is a young city. The low average age in Shenzhen contrasts with the rest of China where the population is rapidly aging. The average age is estimated to be 28 years[14] and is the result of young people coming to Shenzhen to work rather than the birth rate of permanent residents. The average age also stays low because of the rapid turnover in the Shenzhen population. Young people come to the city to take up jobs then leave after a few years with other youngsters taking their place. The difficulty in obtaining permanent residence in the city, homesickness, and improved economic conditions in other parts of China mean that very few migrants establish themselves long-term in Shenzhen.

In 2007 permanent residents under the age of 16 made up 21% of the

[12]Xinhua News Agency 22.08.05
[13] Wang, Meng and Li, 2001.
[14] http://english.cri.cn/4026/2008/11/07/2101s421848.htm accessed on 19.12.08

population, 17- to 24 year olds comprised 13% of the population, 25- to 44 years-old made up 49%, while people aged 60 and above accounted for less than 6% of the population, compared with the national average of 11%[15].

Shenzhen's population can be classified into three groups: local/divided owners (natives); assembly workers; and the elite (Meng et al, 1998). The first group consists of Shenzhen's original native population of approximately 300,000 Cantonese speakers. This group has limited education and skills but is the wealthiest. Members of this group became prosperous by selling or renting out land that they previously farmed.

The second group is made up of migrant workers (*mingong*), who form more than 70% of the total Shenzhen population. There were 2.5 million migrant workers in Shenzhen in 2001. These workers form the majority of the labour force and tend to work in labour-intensive sectors. For example, assembly lines for clothing, electronics and toys (Meng, Wang and Li 1998). Wu (1995) [16] makes the interesting point that these workers have nine years of education on average which is much higher than their hometown average. Most of these workers are young and single and come from places of high unemployment like 'Dongbei' – the area that of northwestern China that comprises of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces.

The third group, the focus of this study, is the elite white collar class. This group consists of migrants with skills and higher education. It was

[15] Asian Development Bank, PRM-Policy-Notes

estimated that 20% of all the PhD-holders in China reside in SZ[17]. The emergence of young professionals as a distinctive group in Shenzhen accompanied the development of the market economy. The city's numerous joint ventures and foreign owned businesses are especially attractive to young university graduates.

The city's many tertiary institutions – polytechnics, universities and other higher education bodies – also attract a large number of young people from all over China. When these individuals graduate most try to find work in Shenzhen, this being the preferred city to start their lives as young professionals.

Consumer paradise

Shenzhen's large middle class, high salaries, sizeable population of overseas Chinese, and close proximity to Hong Kong all combine to produce a distinctive consumer culture. Hong Kong has become a consumer society where luxury and competitive display are important (Bosco, 2001). These values have seeped across to Shenzhen via the movement of people and mass media.

For middle class professionals earning high salaries, Shenzhen is a consumer's paradise. Consumption in the city is more sophisticated than in other parts of China, and there is a wider range of goods and services.

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[17] Hong Kong Economic Journal as cited in 2000 Wong, K.Y and Jianfa Shen *Resource Management, Urbanization and Governance in Hong Kong and the Zhujiang Delta*

Young professionals in Shenzhen are highly educated and a significant number travel for work or leisure which translates into cosmopolitan tastes. Being single and away from kinship networks means that they go out a lot after work and spend more money on entertainment.

The next part of this chapter consists of an account of the research process, a discussion of some of the epistemological issues that informed the research design, followed by a description of the research methods and finally reflection on some of the ethical issues encountered during fieldwork.

Research timeline

July 2004 – September 2004: Research design and logistical preparation

October 2004: Arrival in Shenzhen, participant observation, design of in-depth interviews

November 2004 – January 2005: In-depth interviews with research participants

February 2005 – March 2005: Questionnaires completed by research participants

April 2005: Return to Hong Kong

May 2005 – August 2005: Collation and analysis of fieldwork data

September 2005: Started to write up research

Research design

The key to this stage of the research was formulating the research question. Once this was formulated, it was possible to design the study and develop the research methods. This involved considering the following: research participants – who were they and how they would be involved; access;

epistemology – what would constitute knowledge; emphasis of the quantitative or qualitative approach; sampling, statistical issues and survey design.

The research question became: what is the role of consumption practices in forming social identity among young Chinese professionals? The choice to study young professionals was determined by the significant cultural and economic role this group has in China, along with personal interest and access. Having already worked on a number of documentary films and research projects in Beijing and Kunming, I was familiar with the sub-culture of young Chinese professionals. Most of my social network in China belong to this group. Like many other young urban professionals, they had either lived or worked in Shenzhen at some point in their careers or knew someone who did. This meant that before I arrived in Shenzhen to start fieldwork, I already had a list of names and phone numbers of young professionals employed at CCTV, tertiary institutions and a number of private companies, that I could contact.

Research participants

The life stages of young professionals most useful for understanding consumption behaviour and related values are - first, the time spent as a university student, and second, the time spent as a working professional. It is during these two life stages that individuals evolve into independent consumers.

In China it is very difficult to get into university so high school students are

very conscientious. Once individuals enter university the pressure is off and there is more time for leisure. Many university students take on part-time jobs. Often away from home, in materially sophisticated cities, and with extra income – students are now able to independently decide what to spend their money on. Upon graduation they step into professional life and start earning substantial wages. What is the impact of becoming a fully-fledged consumer? Does this affect an individual's social values and the way that they view themselves? And if so, how? In Chapter 5, I discuss amongst other things, how fiscally conservative students become exuberant *bon vivants* upon entering the workforce, the sobering social ramifications, and how marriage suddenly becomes a lot less desirable.

Although the time constraint of the study meant that I was unable to follow large numbers of individual students through university and into the workforce, I feel that this approach is germane. I described the data collected from university students to young professionals and found that it generally correlated with their own experiences as students. This was more so with professionals who had graduated from university up to five years ago, and less so with professionals who had graduated more than five years ago.

The research was planned around the university academic year. This is because students, unlike professionals, could not be interviewed at any time during the year. The decision was made to interview graduate as opposed to undergraduate students. They had more free time and were therefore more likely to become research participants. This group of students had all finished their final exams and were waiting to graduate.

Many of them were not native to Shenzhen but chose to stay on in the city right up to graduation rather than return home. Their goal was to use this time to find a job in Shenzhen. Students attended recruitment days held on campus in period from November to March by large companies such as Lenovo and Unilever, as well as numerous annual job fairs *(rencai shichang*) held downtown by various government departments.

The relevance of this study

I am aware that my research subjects constitute a minority in several different ways. Economic reform has seen the gap between urban and rural populations, that was deliberately created by Mao Zedong, increase at an alarming rate. Individuals who attend university in China make up less than 5% of the population and of this percentage an even smaller number will work in cities. Despite this, I feel that my research findings are relevant. The consumer practices that I have 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 professional middle class values and behaviours. In addition to this, Shenzhen is an important disseminator of consumer trends. The high turnover rate of residents translates into a constant flow of people returning to less developed areas. These returnees take newly learned consumer behaviour and beliefs about consumption with them.

Epistemological concerns

In this study I have tried to find a middle path between positivist

simplification that avoids interpretation and analysis and post-modern textual analysis that suppresses the scientific (Buroway et al, 1991). For almost two decades much textual analysis simply projected assumptions about the effect of the texts (Miller, 1995). There was little concern for the actual people upon whom these effects were supposed to have occurred. Miller cites the example of media studies which views soap operas as text but initially neglected to ask how audiences responded to them.

This lack of interest in understanding the behaviour of others is also present on an ideational level. Writing on the international circulation of ideas Bourdieu (1999: 220) observed that ‘intellectual life, like all other social spaces, is a home to nationalism and imperialism’. Appadurai (2001: 15) similarly notes that research ‘itself has a rather unusual set of cultural diacritics’ and calls for its 'deparochialization'. He calls for a true exchange between the knowledges and epistemologies of developed and developing countries. This means letting go of the unspoken but prevalent assumption that developed countries are the only site for theory production and developing countries only serve as empirical case studies for the application of such theory.

This study regards the local and the global as mutually constitutive. As such, what is observed at the local level is always viewed within larger contexts such as that of the Chinese state and the spread of global capitalism. In order to develop an understanding of how changing conditions produce new forms of knowledge and understandings of self, and new ways of knowing and being - the interplays of 'global forces' (such as capitalism), 'global connections' (global links between people across locales and

nations) and the 'global imagination' (agency and meaning making from below) are also considered (Buroway et al, 2000).

Further, this study views modernity as an experience of multiple often contradictory epistemological styles built around competing ideologies of value and reality (Liechty, 2002). This is based on Appadurai's approach of studying social transformation by analyzing the change in knowledge constructs such as value systems. This differs from much research which views social transformation through phenomena such as new individual or group behaviour or new technologies.

My own epistemological position is that data is contained within the perspectives of university students and young professionals and that I should personally engage with the research participants while collecting data.

> It is important that investigators spend an adequate amount of time in the field to build trust, learn the "culture", and test for misinformation either from informants or (from) their own biases....The purpose of prolonged engagement is to provide "scope" for researchers by making them aware of the multiple contextual factors and multiple perspectives of informants at work in any given social scene (Tashakkorie and Teddlie, 1998:90)

Bearing this in mind, along with my desire for an exploratory bottom-up approach, I chose to make ethnography the foundation of my research.

This research examines a range of consumption practices and encompasses symbolic interactions as well as material goods. These

practices include shopping, personal narratives, the imagination of identities and the consumption of mass media.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the main research method of cultural anthropology. It consists of fieldwork and the writing up of research findings and analysis. The aim is to seek a deep understanding of a defined phenomenon. The researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a sustained period of time by collecting observational data (Creswell, 1998). A cultural group consisting of individuals who share a common social experience, location, or other social characteristic. This process is flexible and typically evolves contextually in response to the lived realities encountered in the field setting (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

Ethnography traditionally involves spending a prolonged period of time in a single remote location. As a research method it is demanding because studying quotidian practices entails entering people's private spaces, such as their homes, and access can be problematic. Researchers often describe the goal of their ethnographic research as 'thick description'. This term refers to a specific way of trying to understand a cultural practice. The researcher examines not just the practice itself but also its social context – resulting in a research account that is both detailed and contextual. The term 'thick description' was developed by Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Recent ethnography has seen an increasing shift from single to multi-sited ethnography. This has led to concern that the depth of

'thick description' will be replaced by a more shallow analysis (Rist, quoted in Bryman, 1988).

Qualitative research

Ethnography is one of the methods in the qualitative research approach. Modern qualitative methods can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century. Anthropologists and sociologists such as Boas and Malinowski were dissatisfied with studies of native people that relied on artifact and second hand accounts. Their approach was to live in or near the communities they were studying. Emerson points out that although neither Boas nor Malinowski really participated in the ongoing life of those they studied – they illustrated the value of intimate familiarity with the community of interest and established the basis for modern anthropology (1983).

Qualitative research assumes that: multiple realities exist in any given situation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985); the researcher actively interacts with research participants; the researcher recognizes and acknowledges that research is inherently subjective and laden with his or her own values; research is bound by context and is based on inductive forms of logic. This means that categories of interest emerge from research participants rather than being identified *a priori* by the researcher.

> Quantitative methods have developed largely to confirm or verify theory, whereas qualitative methods have been developed to discover theory (Mullerson and Iverson, in Schutt 1986:150).

The objective is to uncover patterns or theories that help explain a given phenomenon. Accuracy is determined by verifying the information with

research participants and by collecting information from a variety of sources. The researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (*ibid*).

Data that emerges from a qualitative study is descriptive and is reported in words or images rather than numbers (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1990). The researcher attempts to understand how people make sense of their lives by focusing on the perceptions and experiences of research participants (*ibid*). This type of data is not quantifiable in the traditional sense of the word. Data is deemed credible through a process of verification. This process is based on trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) coherence, insight and instrumental utility rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures (Creswell, 2008).

My research approach and methodology is inspired by Liechty's ethnography of middle class life in Kathmandu (2002). Liechty examines urban Nepali life and the growth of a new middle class, delineating the way in which these modern identities and a new sociocultural space are constructed using mass media and consumer goods. Although my focus is on consumption rather that class, our research methods are similar.

Mixed methods

I chose to use a mixed methods strategy. This research strategy incorporates qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis within a single project (Creswell, *ibid*). The mixed methods strategy is viewed by some scholars as heretical. The controversial nature of this strategy is

mired in the ongoing quantitative vs. qualitative debate - long and arduous for all concerned. Briefly, some scholars feel that an individual's epistemological and ontological predisposition determines whether one chooses a quantitative or qualitative approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Others view quantitative and qualitative approaches merely as different tools that can be utilized by all scholars regardless of their worldviews.

Mixed methods is not a new phenomenon to practicing researchers. There is a long history of practitioners who have ignored the "paradigm wars" of methodologists. Their tactic has been to use whatever approach best helps them best answer their research questions. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) urge methodologists to catch up with practicing researchers. They advocate that all scholars begin to utilize and systematically write about mixed methods - which they have labelled the 'third research paradigm'.

Sequential exploratory model

The specific model that I used to collect data in Shenzhen is known as the sequential exploratory model. This model focuses on exploring a phenomenon and prioritizes qualitative data. The main objective of this model is to use quantitative data to expand on and to corroborate the qualitative findings. The interpretation of the qualitative findings is assisted by the use of quantitative data. Data is collected in two phases. During the first phase qualitative data is collected followed by quantitative data in the second phase. Both types of data are integrated during the interpretation stage (*ibid*).

Methods and techniques

The specific research techniques that I chose were participant observation, in-depth interviews and structure questionnaires. Because my research is of an exploratory nature, the research methods and techniques have to allow categories of interest to emerge from participants. Participant observation and in-depth interviews are both methods that facilitate this. However, these methods have well-documented problems relating to accuracy. For example, during in-depth interviews it is common for research participants to anticipate what a researcher would like to hear and tailor their responses accordingly. In order to determine the validity of data that emerges from through participation and in-depth interviews, I felt it was necessary to make use of another method: structured questionnaires.

The sole function of the structured questionnaires is to corroborate the findings of participant observation and the data from the in-depth interviews. As well as functioning as an additional source of data, the closed-end nature of questionnaires allows data to be collected from a much larger sample. So for example, if the in-depth interviews reveal that young professionals strongly disapprove of divorce, this information can be checked by including the question ‘do you approve of divorce?’ in the structured questionnaire. In other words, findings based on for example, a sample of 40 could be corroborated using a sample of 200.

Data collection stages

Phase One: Participant observation and in-depth interviews were used to collect data from a small number of research participants. This data was

analysed and used to design structured questionnaires.

Phases Two: Structured questionnaires were used to collect data from a large number of research participants. The aim being the verification and corroboration of the phase one findings.

Phase Three: The research findings of phases one and two were integrated and interpreted.

Logistical preparation

During the period July 2004 – September 2004 two preparatory trips were made to Shenzhen. The purpose of these trips was to meet potential fieldwork sponsors; establish ties with local organizations with a view to finding - research participants, research assistants and gatekeepers; and to look for accommodation. A gatekeeper is “someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site” (Neuman, 2000).

Arrival in Shenzhen

In November, 2004 I arrived in Shenzhen to conduct my fieldwork. Unlike Luohu railway station, passport control at Shekou ferry terminal was easy to clear and I quickly found a taxi. Half an hour later I was at the flat that was to be my home and office, and unpacked.

This was very different to my arrival in Yunnan province in 1996. Preparing my masters’ fieldwork had entailed spending a month in Beijing to negotiate the required bureaucracy prior to travelling to Yunnan. When I eventually

arrived at Kunming airport, nervously clutching my stack of introduction letters from various ministries in Beijing and the required permits. I was met by a local professor, his wife, child, and three assistants. They whisked me off to dinner in the professor's home, where we formally exchanged presents. Before dining I was elaborately introduced to a long line of colleagues who had specially come to meet the department's first foreign graduate student. My ten month stay in Luoshui village was made bearable by monthly trips back to Kunming; a twenty-hour-long bus journey. Staff at the university took me under their wing, generously opening their homes and sharing friends. This instant social network had been invaluable.

There was no such welcoming committee in Shenzhen. Fieldwork in China had changed enormously in eight years - special permits and hosting institutions were no longer required. I was free to come and go as I pleased. In fact no one even knew I was there. The downside of this really hit home when a few hours after arriving I locked myself out of the flat, wearing an old dress and slippers. With no money and no phone on me, I walked round Shekou in the dark for a few hours trying to find a locksmith. Having no luck I ended up staying the night in a hotel thanks to a sympathetic concierge. The next day I tracked down my bemused landlady who had an extra key. One thing was clear; I needed to make friends with my new neighbours quickly.

I stayed in a small flat in Shenzhen for six months. Although I don’t claim to have the monopoly on truth, it is my experience of having done fieldwork that allows me to write with any authority on this topic. I am also aware that this research presents a snapshot in time and that my analysis too may be

‘hampered by the still evolving nature of social and economic structures in which social classes are in the making’ (Bian, 2002). I am aware that my physical presence and participation in conversations mean that I was involved and implicated in the production of the knowledge that I recorded and collected. People that I spoke to and interviewed understood that the purpose of my time in Shenzhen was research. As promised, all names in this dissertation have been changed to safeguard privacy.

Participant observation

As mentioned earlier, the three main research methods were participant observation, in-depth interviews and questionnaires. Participant observation commenced upon arrival in Shenzhen. The aim was to identify specific socio-economic issues and experiences that were meaningful to subjects within the framework of consumption and social identity. My initial contacts with university students came through my research assistants Ruichen and Weiwei. I spent much time at their university chatting to their friends, who wanted a chance to practice their English and often asked for tips on how to apply for jobs with foreign companies.

Through Lily, I started attending social activities popular with young professionals such as Toastmasters and salsa dance lessons. The issues which emerged during this stage included financial priorities, social pressure to consume, career-building, health, social attitudes and personal perceptions of changing socio-cultural practices. Once these issues had been pinpointed a list of questions were drawn up that formed the basis of the in-depth interviews.

Interview Preparation

In order to find student and professional research participants for the in-depth interviews, I used snowball sampling. This method expands the sample by asking participants to recommend others for interviewing (Bernard, 2006). The initial participants, who recommended others, were not a representative sample but rather individuals who agreed to be interviewed. In the case of the expert individuals, I selected the sample based on my judgement and the purpose of the study. I sought out those who were knowledgeable about the lives of the research subjects – students and young professionals.

Gatekeepers were instrumental for finding the large number of students and professionals required to complete the questionnaires. In the case of students, we approached class monitors at the university. Class monitors have access to thousands of students in the lecture halls every day. Their task is to make administrative announcements on behalf of the university before lectures start.

Ruichen and Weiwei were graduate students who had finished their exams and were waiting for job recruitment season to start. Their task was to help me interview their classmates, other postgraduate students, and boost the total number of interviews. As the research progressed Ruichen and Weiwei, came to understand the nature of the research and acted as both key informants and gatekeepers to the world of students. They introduced me to both formal and informal student networks. We met on a daily basis in my flat to plan interviews and document them.

Fortuitously, my flat was located near a well-known nightclub precinct which Ruichen and Weiwei regularly visited. Their friends often dropped in for a meal before going on to a nightclub. My flat quickly became a hang-out for Ruichen, Weiwei and their student friends. Ruichen accompanied me to shopping malls, various local government departments, job fairs, and local universities. Keen to add yet another skill to his C.V. and to network, Ruichen also came along with me to a number of young professional social activities, such as Toastmasters - a public speaking club.

Lily, an energetic young professional in her early 30s, became a key informant. I knew Lily via a Hong Kong friend. As the events manager for one of the large hotels in downtown Shenzhen, she had arranged a charity event for my friend's company. Despite her busy work schedule, Lily kindly took it upon herself to ensure that my time in Shenzhen would be productive. With missionary-like zeal she phoned around and called in favours from friends and ex- colleagues throughout the city, getting me the access that I needed to interview a large number of young professionals. I received enthusiastic calls and text messages at all hours of the day as Lily thought of yet another person who she thought could help. She often escorted me to interviews with professionals, which often took place in obscure bars, restaurants, and nightclubs that I would not have been able to find on my own.

In Shenzhen my weekday schedule generally consisted of meeting with students during the day and with young professionals at night. This pattern was dictated by the working hours of young professionals who could only be interviewed in the evening or during the weekend. I visited the campus

of one of the big Shenzhen universities on a daily basis. This was the university where my two research assistants were enrolled as students. Here I met and interviewed graduate students, staff and prospective employers.

It was also a great opportunity for participant observation. Students often approached me, keen to practice their English, and to ask for tips on how to apply for jobs especially with foreign companies. What was my employment and salary history? How did I get those jobs? Was it true that you don't need to be well connected to secure a job in the west? Although the university campus was the main field site for studying students, I also attended five job fairs held downtown, and socialized frequently with students off campus. During the weekend I went shopping and hiking with them.

Young professionals were a lot harder to meet and pin down for interviews than students. This is because they had less free time. Also, most students live or near the university campus whereas professionals live and work dispersed all over the city. This obstacle was compounded by the fact that Shenzhen is a geographically large city and, like Beijing, the distances between suburbs are great. Eventually I became friends with a small group of young women who lived near me and attended the same gym. Once we were better acquainted they introduced me to their wider network of friends and colleagues, mainly female, whom I was able to interview.

The number of professional men who were willing to participate in in-depth interviews was much lower than that of women, 9 to 38. This meant that I

did not have the same depth of contact with professional men as I did with women. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) observe is sometimes the case in cultures that have a strong division between the sexes, it was difficult to gain access to the world of men. Most men were reluctant to be interviewed at length. Although male consumption practices and values appeared to be similar to what I had observed with women, there are limitations to this knowledge.

Interestingly, there was no shortage of professional men willing to take part in the questionnaires. In fact they outnumbered women, 160 to 100. Men were reluctant to sit down and talk, one-to-one, but happy to fill in a questionnaire. Women, on the other hand seemed to enjoy the in-depth interviews, often discussing personal dilemmas and asking lots of questions about life outside China.

Training of assistants

An important aspect of preparing for fieldwork was training my two research assistants Ruichen and Weiwei. This mainly consisted of teaching interviewing techniques and how to record data. We also discussed the issue of privacy and the importance of being honest with participants. In order to ensure ethical research, we verbally informed participants- that they were participating in research, the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the procedures used to protect their privacy, their right not to answer questions, and their right to stop interviews at any time.

In-depth interviews

In November 2004 I started to do in-depth interviews with the help of Ruichen and Weiwei. The interviews began with general questions about consumption practices and mass media, and then went on to focus on personal perceptions of changing socio-cultural practice. The in-depth interview questions were based on participant observation, existing literature and my own knowledge of the lives of students and young professionals.

The interviews typically took between 2 and 3.5 hours to complete and typically took place on campus, in people's homes, public parks, the flat where I was staying, or quiet coffee shops.

The information that came from these interviews furnished information regarding a range of issues. These included: the range of participant responses, as well as what kinds of subjects were sensitive – such as family background if the subject was from the countryside; which types of questions – multiple choice vs. preference ranking - were easiest to answer; and, what kinds of consumption issues people were really interested in.

Analysis of the data from the in-depth interviews allowed me to design a structured questionnaire that could be completed within 30 minutes by a much larger number of subjects.

Questionnaires

In February 2005 we started with the questionnaire phase of the research.

A total of 514 structured questionnaires were completed by 260 young professionals, 100 female and 160 male, and 254 university students, 140 female and 114 male. The questionnaires were handed out in offices, gyms, and lecture halls. The questionnaires provided detail about basic consumption practices such as what people actually spent their money on and what their material and non-material aspirations were. I conducted these surveys to verify the data from the in-depth interviews.

The data from the structured questionnaires combined with the data from qualitative methods provided me with a solid foundation for further and ongoing participant observation. Having this bedrock of reliable information was essential for participant observation given the lack of systematic data on Chinese consumption.

Reflection on fieldwork experience

During the fieldwork my role expanded to that of agony aunt. The high turnover rate of the population means that people tend to have many casual acquaintances but few steady friends. In addition to this the one-upmanship culture prevalent in Shenzhen meant that people were reluctant to expose themselves to their peers. As an older outsider, with a fixed departure date, I was a suitable confidant.

This position of researcher as confidant was not unknown to me. I had been warned of the ethical dilemmas associated with fieldwork as an undergraduate student, and had fulfilled the role of confidant while conducting my masters fieldwork in Yunnan. During my time at Lugu Lake,

villagers confided in me and shared gossip, however I was rarely asked for advice on sensitive complex matters. There my main role had been that of the ‘acceptable incompetent’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1984). This role emphasizes the position of the ethnographer as novice and places the research subject in the position of teacher. It entails attempting to understand social structure and culture by watching, listening, asking questions and making blunders (*ibid).* Villagers saw this differently. Unable to kill my own food and ignorant of the most basic local etiquette, I was later described to a visiting journalist as ‘kind but stupid’.

People in the field have particular expectations regarding the identity and intentions of the ethnographer (Seale, 2004). In Shenzhen I was unable to take on the role of ‘acceptable incompetent’. Cultivated naivety was out of the questions as I was cast into the role of ‘expert’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Perceived as overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) and aware that I was a resident in Hong Kong, I was seen as a walking encyclopaedia of useful knowledge about modern life. This had advantages and disadvantages.

Women were enthusiastic about being interviewed, especially if it took place in my flat. People were keen to see how the flat was decorated, examine the contents, and if possible catch a glimpse of my foreign husband. Taking a ‘best practices’ approach, interviewees often quizzed me for extended periods. I was asked about matters ranging from Australian tax laws to whether western men thought Chinese women were *hen hao pian* (easy to fool). It was sometimes a challenge keeping interviews on course.

Ethnography no longer requires the pretence of detached and objective observation but it is still difficult to draw the lines between observer, insider and outsider (Behar, 1996). Participant observation requires an involvement on the part of the researcher which goes beyond the purely intellectual commitment; indeed, emotional participation is one of the means through which understanding can be achieved (Corbetta, 2003: 251).

At times it was difficult to juggle the roles of researcher, confidante, 'walking encyclopedia' on modern life, and mediator. For a while my phone rang at all hours of the night. Individuals, who I had interviewed, feeling courageous after a few drinks, were calling to ask for advice or favours. Some predicaments that women found themselves in were harrowing. I was often unable to help other than lend a sympathetic ear, and in some cases took the step of suggesting that the individual speak to a psychologist. I was aware that is not uncommon to be affected by the experience of research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) but nevertheless found some aspects of the fieldwork distressing.

Shenzhen is a hard place and young people there face enormous economic and personal pressures. It is not uncommon for individuals to crack under the strain. The joyous party-like atmosphere of Shenzhen has a bleak side and there is little in the way of social support. The phrase 'Shenzhen *sudu'* meaning 'Shenzhen speed' is an apt one that can also be used to describe the fast rate at which people initiate and terminate relationships. Breach of trust, disloyalty, debt, alcoholism, drug dependence, and unwanted pregnancies are common.

Summary of the fieldwork data

Between October 2004 and April 2005 data was collected in Shenzhen from 626 individuals. Three types of data were collected: data from in-depth interviews, data from structured questionnaires, and data from expert interviews. This data collection was carried out with the help of two research assistants and a friend.

In the in-depth interviews, 80 individuals participated, of which 47 were young professionals (38 female and 9 male) and 33 were students (20 female and 13 male).

In the structured questionnaires, 514 individuals participated, of which 260 were young professionals (100 female and 160 male) and 254 were students (140 female and 114 male).

In the expert interviews, 32 individuals participated. These were people whose jobs meant that they interacted with university students and young professionals on a regular basis. These included student counsellors, marriage counsellors, staff in retail chains, real estate brokers, and individuals who helped run professional leisure clubs.

Data was also collected from local media - television, films, books and magazines, government publications, internet sites and student BBS sites.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Consumption is now recognized as central to modern life. This thesis takes consumption as its key cultural dynamic. In this chapter I discuss the theoretical framework that I use to study consumption.

First, I give a general overview of consumption and highlight key references in the literature. One of my research aims is to study the interconnections between consumption and the construction of urban middle class identity in Shenzhen. Two useful ways of conceptualizing consumption that facilitate an understanding of these interconnections are: first, consumption as self-identity and second, consumption as communication. Following the introduction, I examine these two concepts. For consumption as self-identity, I examine three authors: Giddens, Bauman and Featherstone. For consumption as communication, I discuss the works of five authors: Veblen, Douglas and Isherwood, Baudrillard and Bourdieu.

After this, I focus on the wider context within which consumption occurs. I first discuss the paradigms of modernity and globalization in relation to consumption. This is followed by a discusssion of the interrelationship between global culture and local culture. Lastly, I discuss mass media as a key element in this relationship.

Conceptualizing consumption

The term consumption means different things to different people, and is a complex topic that spans many different disciplines. This makes it difficult to

come up with ‘a single analytic framework to grasp its many historical forms and influences or the diverse theoretical perspectives that either praise or condemn it’ (Zukin and Smith Maguire, 2004).

From the literature it is clear that consumption is a young field. The study of consumption stems from a variety of disparate disciplines including economics, psychology, and anthropology. With the exception of the works of Douglas and Isherwood (1978) and Sahlins (1976), very little was written about consumption in the social sciences until recently (Miller, 1995a, Zukin Smith and Maguire, 2004). This absence was remarkable given the extensive research conducted on production and labour (Miller, 1995b).

Homo economicus

Consumption has traditionally been defined as the process in which goods and services are used to satisfy economic needs. This definition was anchored in the idea of *homo economicus*, or the individual as rational and self-interested. According to this model, the consumer makes choices that are solely based on functional requirements and makes rational decisions to maximise self-interest. When consumption was studied, it was generally viewed through the lens of production. According to classical economists such as Smith and Ricardo, consumption is a function of production (Friedman, 1994a: 2). Marx saw production and consumption as inextricably intertwined and part of the same process.

These approaches are based on the idea of producing commodities with consumption of the commodity constituting the final stage of the process.

These view consumption as taking place in a vacuum and are unable to explain actual social behaviour. Interestingly, Miller (1995b: 13) points out that the traditional economic view of consumption strove to maintain economics as a discipline divorced from sociology.

The sovereignty of economic definitions of consumption has been challenged. Consumption is no longer viewed as a minor aspect of production. It is also accepted that consumption is concerned with more than the sale and purchase of products. Consumption is now considered in terms of broader meanings and its definition has 'rapidly expanded to mean anything from the popular appropriation of state services to the literal translation of ingestion in traditional Hinduism' (Miller, 1995: 283).

Recent focus on consumption

In the 1980s scholars in a variety of disciplines began to focus on the consumer, and consumption was acknowledged as a key feature of industrialized western societies. These scholars predominantly came from the fields of anthropology and history. The most prominent works of this period include *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai, 1986), *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Miller, 1987) and *Culture and Consumption* (McCracken, 1988).

Shove and Warde (1998) attribute this recent focus on consumption to three critical intellectual developments. First, the rediscovery of the role of consumption practices in the process of social differentiation, especially Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of distinction. Bourdieu’s analysis was engaged

with vigorously and stimulated a plethora of empirical research that focused on class and lifestyle. Second, an examination of the concept of “collective consumption” (Castells, 1972) which highlighted the need to understand the role of the state, as well as capital, in the reproduction of society. Third, the advent of cultural studies, and other multi-disciplinary approaches to examine the meanings and quotidian use of goods.

This recent interest lead to consumption being conceived of and studied in many different ways. Gabriel and Lang (1995) untangle and categorize these different approaches. They synthesized nine distinctive portraits by analysing the different ways scholars and consumer rights activists have envisioned the consumer. These nine portraits are - the consumer: as chooser, as communicator, as identity-seeker, as explorer, as hedonist, as victim, as rebel, as activist and as citizen.

The conceptualizations of the consumer as identity-seeker and as communicator are both useful for this research. In the next section, I will focus on consumption as self-identity. In the section after that, I will examine consumption as communication.

Consumption as self-identity

The following three sections will give a brief overview of the contributions of Giddens, Bauman, and Featherstone to the conceptualization of consumption as self-identity. The common thread through their work is the idea that consumption is a means of creating and maintaining self-identity.

Giddens

Giddens views self-identity in modern society as a reflexive project. This differs from traditional society where identity is inherited and fixed. In this section, I will discuss Giddens' contribution.

In modern society people are able to create their identities through their lifestyles. Giddens (1991: 81) defines lifestyle as 'a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity'. Individuals are continuously engaged in working on and reflecting about their identities. They are free to create and maintain personal narratives and social roles but this freedom comes at a price.

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity - and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. (*ibid*: 70)

Modernity offers endless choices concerning what to do and who to be, but gives little guidance as to how to choose. Each choice that a person makes ranging from what car to buy to where to shop is a decision concerning not just what action to take, but more importantly - who one is. This opportunity to make choices about one's life means that people are more likely to become self-fulfilled but are very aware that they may make wrong choices. Much time is spent analysing the available options.

Bauman

Bauman also regards biography as a reflexive project (Bauman 1998). Within this view, lifestyles and consumption are essential to the creation and re-creation of self-identity.

According to Bauman, the individual's search for self-identity is the main motivation for consumption. Product choice is a means of constructing and expressing a self-identity and consumer culture offers endless choices of who to be. Consumer choice becomes a form of freedom for large sections of society because it is a means of autonomous self-expression. However, consumer choice may become a major source of personal anxiety, as the individual is now fully responsible for his choices and mistakes. The freedom that consumer choice engenders is offset by a commensurate degree of personal responsibility. One of the functions of advertising is to reassure the consumer that they have made the right choice (Bauman, 1990).

Examining participation in consumer culture, Bauman makes the distinction of the seduced and the repressed. The seduced have the resources that enable them to fully participate in consumer culture. This category of individuals devote much of their lives to acquiring and displaying goods. The repressed lack the resources to participate and are therefore excluded. The self-identity of individuals in this group is defined by their low participation in consumer society.

Featherstone

Like Giddens and Bauman, Featherstone also subscribes to the idea of consumption as part of an ongoing process of creating and recreating self. Consumption is “an aspect of broader cultural strategies of self-definition and self-maintenance” (1990: 312).

Featherstone sees lifestyle as being central to modern self-identity. Rather than following tradition and unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, “the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project” (1991:86). People display their style and individuality in the way that they assemble things like goods, appearance, and practices. In this manner they design a lifestyle.

Within contemporary society lifestyle implies self-expression and stylistic self-consciousness. Individuality of taste is key. This contrasts enormously with what Featherstone describes as the ‘grey conformism’ of the 1950s (83). Greater consumer choice has been facilitated by phenomena such as changes in production techniques and market segmentation.

> We are moving towards a society without fixed status groups in which the adoption of styles of life (manifest in choice of clothes, leisure activities, consumer goods, bodily disposition) which are fixed to specific groups have been surpassed (1991: 83).

Conclusion

Modernity has spawned a mass crisis of identity (Zukin and 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 and is held responsible for all decisions that are made. The problem is that consumer culture offers too many choices and this often causes anxiety.

Associated with this idea of consumption is the concept of agency. Consumption requires the exercise of choices in which the consumer has an active role (Jackson, 1993). The idea of the consumer as an active decision maker and the accompanying notion of choice suggests both freedom and subjugation (Andrews, 2007: 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, 1988).

Consumption as communication

Having examined consumption as self-identity, I will now explore consumption as communication. The view of consumption as communication is a common thread in the work of Veblen, Douglas and Isherwood, Baudrillard, and Bourdieu. The following four sections will give a brief overview of their contributions to the conceptualization of consumption as communication.

Veblen

One of the earliest conceptualizations of consumption is Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* published in 1899. It is still regarded as a powerful critique of the traditional productionist-biased view of consumption. Rather than seeing consumption as an individual's rational response to external factors aimed at maximizing self-interest, Veblen develops an evolutionary framework in which preferences are determined socially in relation to the individuals in the social hierarchy (Trigg, 2001:1).

Theory of the Leisure Class is an ethnographic study that examines the effect of monetary wealth on behaviour at the end of the nineteenth century. The study also forms a social critique of the excessive wealth, opulence, and waste that exemplified the time. The terms 'conspicuous consumption', 'conspicuous leisure' and 'pecuniary emulation' all stem from this work. Veblen's ideas are anchored in the idea of a leisure class - a class of individuals who are not required to work. The leisure class is able to leverage the fruit of the efforts of the working class.

According to Veblen, one’s social status is commensurate with one's monetary wealth. There are two main ways of displaying wealth - through conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption. By engaging in extensive leisure activities and lavish expenditure on consumption and services, individuals create and maintain their membership of the leisure class. The term 'conspicuous consumption' specifically refers to lavish or wasteful spending with the sole aim of enhancing social prestige rather than meeting a utilitarian need. Displaying wealth in this manner produces and maintains social status.

The term ‘pecuniary emulation’ describes the behaviour of individuals who try to imitate the consumption patterns of those who are higher in the social hierarchy. The motive to accumulate wealth is to be able to keep up with one's social superiors, not subsistence. The incentive to accumulate goods would cease at some point. Pecuniary emulation or 'keeping up with the Jones's becomes part of one’s subjective sense of self worth. This aspect combined with the fact that the consumption patterns of the leisure class are not fixed but change over time, means that pecuniary emulation is an ongoing process. An important point of Veblen's analysis is that established members of the leisure classes use their accumulated culture to distinguish themselves from those labelled as ‘new money’.

Corrigan (1997) points out that conspicuous consumption holds an advantage over conspicuous leisure in environments such as cities. Status based on an individual engaging in conspicuous leisure entails word getting out into the community. This requires both time and a stable community where everybody knows everybody else. Unlike conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure is not immediately apparent. In cities, where many people are passing through on a temporary basis and strangers to one another, conspicuous consumption of goods is an ideal way of displaying one’s monetary strength to those who know nothing of one apart from what they see. Within this framework taste reflects a “sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty” (1939: 128) rather than abstract ideals of aesthetic beauty. To sum up, what is deemed to be good taste confers status because it is an expression of economic wealth.

After Veblen, very little followed in the way of theorizing consumption. This is puzzling given the centrality of consumption to disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. There were numerous studies that described consumption in great detail – for example North American potlatches – but neglected to theorize it.

All this changed with the appearance of two important works: Douglas and Isherwood's *The World of Goods* (1978) and Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). These studies successfully argue that consumers and their objects communicate positions in the social world, and that this quality is more important than that of merely fulfilling survival needs.

Douglas and Isherwood

Douglas and Isherwood's *The World of Goods* is a critique of the economic view of consumption. In this section, I will discuss Douglas and Isherwood's contribution.

The economic view of consumption is limited to the individual. Douglas and Isherwood go further than the individual and extrapolate to the more abstract level of culture. They argue that goods should be viewed as an 'information system'. All material possessions carry social meanings and cultural analysis should focus on how people use them to commu**n**icate (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979:59).

In order to understand consumption of goods we need to look beyond their utilitarian value and consider the idea that people use goods to

communicate. Douglas and Isherwood advocate the assumption that goods are “needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture” (1978: 59). They attribute a double role to goods – to provide subsistence and to demarcate social relationships. According to this approach, the primary function of consumption is to make sense of the world (1979:62).

> Goods ….are ritual adjuncts; consumption is a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events… The most general objective of the consumer can only be to construct an intelligible universe with the goods he chooses.
>
> (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979:65)

Another function of goods is to make and maintain social relationships (1979:60). The view of consumption as communication that Douglas and Isherwood promote enables one to move beyond the realm of the individual and to understand the complex social networks such as kinship and friendship.

Baudrillard

In *The System of Objects* (1970) Baudrillard shows that human relations become mediated by objects through consumption and challenges the popular economic theories of Karl Marx and Adam Smith.

Baudrillard rejects the idea that consumption is driven by genuine need. His view is that although Marx and Smith championed opposing systems of economic redistribution, both their theories were grounded in a shared

concept of need as an *a priori* phenomenon. Baudrillard disagreed with this notion of need as an abstract autonomous force that acts on the passive unwitting consumer. Instead, he feels that individuals actively place themselves within a system of signs when purchasing and consuming goods.

This system of signs is based on the idea that objects always express something about the people that consume them. Society is governed by a self-perpetuating system of consumption that generates an artificial system of needs and from which there is no escape. These constructed needs are based on desire rather than want and are created and reinforced by advertising and promotion.

In *The Consumer Society* Baudrillard delineates how consumers believe in the code of signs rather than the meaning of the object itself. He analyses the process in which the sign no longer points towards an object or signified meaning that lies behind it, but instead to other signs which together constitute a code.

Bourdieu

Bourdieu sees the essential nature of goods as communicative. His concepts of *habitus* and cultural capital are pertinent to this research.

In *Distinction* (1979) Bourdieu examines the preferences and tastes of the French bourgeoisie. At the heart of Bourdieu's ethnographic study is a fascination with the myriad ways in which classes use goods to compete

with one another.

Goods and consumption are part of a social world which functions both as a system of power relations and as a symbolic system. In this world social judgement is based on minute distinctions of taste.

> Art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences (*ibid,*1979: 7).

Different classes use different goods to proclaim their places in the social structure. Aesthetic choices serve as distinctions, that is to illustrate membership of one class and not another. Often choices are made in opposition to those made by other classes. Goods that are classified as 'distinguished' often become popularized over time and lose their exclusive status. Because of this, goods are regularly re-evaluated to determine their current status. Goods play an important role in the ongoing process of defining and redefining social status.

Habitus

Core concepts in Bourdieu's work (1977) that are especially useful to this research are *habitus*, field, and capital. *Habitus* is related to Marcel Mauss' *techniques du corps (body techniques*). Mauss coined his term to describe the different ways of using one's body across cultures. For example, around the world there are many different styles of sitting. Bourdieu took the concept of *techniques du corps* and widened the definition so that it also included beliefs and temperament. *Habitus* is understood to be the values and dispositions which develop through formative contexts such as family

and education.

The schemes of the habitus, the primary form of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will (1984: 466).

Individuals are generally unaware of the powerful influence of the *habitus* and believe that their choices in life are commonsense and made voluntarily. An individual acquires a *habitus* through socialization and this influences all subsequent actions and beliefs. It is a subconscious mental structure that is both individual and collective.

> Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism.
>
> (Bourdieu, 1980).

Bourdieu took issue with the objectivist-subjectivist dichotomy in explaining human behaviour. *Habitus* addresses this issue mediating between 'objective' structures of social relations and the 'subjective' behaviour of individuals. Related to *habitus* is the term 'field'. Bourdieu conceptualizes social life in terms of fields. A field constitutes a site of struggle over a central stake. The resources which are both used and fought over in these struggles are defined as types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Each field involves a set of individuals engaged in practices and strategies on the basis of a *habitus*.

Cultural capital

The concept of cultural capital has become widely used, especially in the social sciences. The term was first used by Bourdieu in *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction* (1973), an analysis of differences in educational outcomes in 1960s France. The term cultural capital refers to advantages which confers an individual with high social status such as attitudes, knowledge, skills, and education. For example, middle class parents provide cultural capital that makes their children feel comfortable at school. This means that they are more likely to be successful in the education system. Cultural capital operates within a system of exchange that includes accumulated cultural knowledge which confers power and status. Cultural capital is an important determinant of taste and social distinction along with academic and academic capital.

> Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.
>
> (Bourdieu, 1984: 6).

In *The Forms of Capital* (1986) and *The State Nobility* (1996) Bourdieu elaborates on cultural capital and develops it in terms of other types of capital. He defines capital as all the goods material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation[18]. Social capital is defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized

[18] as cited in Harker, 1990:13

relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". Symbolic capital is later defined as resources available to an individual on the basis of fame, prestige, and reputation.

Cultural capital comprises three subtypes: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1986:47). Embodied cultural capital is situated in the individual. It includes both inherited and acquired qualities, is strongly linked to one's *habitus,* and is attained over time through socialization. The way that an individual speaks and masters language can be seen as a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990:114).

Objectified cultural capital refers to cultural goods such as paintings. Unlike embodied cultural capital, this form can be physically bestowed. Although it is possible to own objectified cultural capital, it can only be consumed, or understood, if one has the correct type of embodied cultural capital. Institutional cultural capital refers to academic credentials or qualifications. This is mainly understood in relation to the labour market. It allows easier conversion of cultural capital to economic capital by guaranteeing a monetary value to an institutional level of achievement.

Conclusion

Consumption is now perceived of as an autonomous social phenomenon, rather than a mere function of economic process, and is widely viewed as a means of communicating social difference. The use of goods to communicate social distinction is central to the work of Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1979). A theme that crops up repeatedly in the work of Bourdieu

is that different classes have different goods at their disposal to help them communicate social distinction.

Baudrillard (1970), on the other hand, views consumption as part of a larger communication system that is tied to the overall economic system rather than the individual consumer. Unlike Veblen and Bourdieu, Baudrillard is uninterested in the empirical level of individual consumption. In his view, the consumer practices of individuals and their relationship to specific objects is irrelevant for understanding consumption. Rather, Baudrillard focuses on the systematic aspects of consumption as a whole.

Both Bourdieu and Veblen argue that taste is shaped by competition for social status. Good taste has two interesting qualities; it makes an individual distinctive and bestows honour on those who claim to possess it.

Bourdieu however states that taste confers honour not because it is a signal of economic wealth, but rather as an expression of wealth which is cultural in nature. Taste is an unequally distributed capacity for appropriating, both symbolically and materially, classes of objects and practices. Along with attitudes, preferences, manners, know-how, and educational credentials, it is a component of cultural capital, which is transmitted by a complex process of socialization through the family and the education system.

As part of class *habitus*, taste is one element of a set of dispositions and preferences which are perceived as freely embraced by social actors but which thoroughly reflect their objective class position. Although people go to

great lengths to show that taste is an innate quality, in reality it is meticulously cultivated.

The context of consumption

One of my broader research objectives is to bridge the ethnographic gap between local experience and translocal cultural forces. This is done by exploring features of the global political economy and characteristics of both national and transnational identity.

Specifically, how do new ways of seeing the world - through goods, images, experiences, fashions and ideologies - promote new ways of being in the world? In order to delineate the conceptual tools necessary for answering this question, I will discuss modernity, globalization, and mass media.

Modernity

For many people around the world modernity is an experience, first and foremost, of life in emerging local consumer societies, an experience tied to the steady encroachment of global capitalism and its cultural logics into ever more communities and ever more domains of life (Liechty, 2001: 34).

Giddens writes (1994: 94) that 'modernity' can be seen as a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. When described in a more detailed way it is usually associated with certain beliefs about the world, for example - the idea of the world as an open transformation by human

intervention; a specified set of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; and, a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. He also notes that as a result of these traits, modernity is a lot more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society which unlike preceding cultures situates itself in the future rather than the past.

The terms 'modernity' and 'globalization' are sometimes used interchangeably. This is because some theorists, such as Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992), equate them. Giddens (ibid: 63) views modernity as inherently globalizing, and further - that globalization causes different social contexts or regions to link together in the form of a global network. Meyer et al (1997: 150) see modernity as shared across the world through globalization. Other theorists such as Albrow (1996) view the global age as a distinct time period that succeeds modernity. The debate on whether globalization is a continuation of modernity or the beginning of a whole new era is ongoing.

Modernity theory takes the view that time and space are both distanced and compressed, and that social systems and cultural paradigms are disembedded from their original cultural contexts and re-embedded elsewhere.

Globalization

Most scholars view globalization as a salient feature of this age. It can be described as a process by which the world becomes more interrelated

through the combination of economic, technological, sociocultural, and political forces. Although globalization is generally viewed as a given, the conceptions of and the purposes for which the concept is used, vary greatly. In this section I discuss how globalization delivers new goods, images, and experiences, and how this results in new ways of seeing the world.

Globalization is a fiercely contested topic. Some see globalization as producing increasing cultural homogeneity (Schiller, 1969; Hamelink, 1994). Others feel that it creates cultural diversity and heterogeneity (Tomlinson, 1991; Pieterse, 1994; Featherstone, 1995). Globalization is also seen as reflecting western interests and control; providing a vehicle for the ascendancy of capitalism (Ferguson, 1992); and, undermining the nation state through transnational corporations and organizations (Albrow, 1996).

The notion that globalization produces either cultural uniformity or cultural difference has been developed further. A growing body of empirical studies (for example Friedman, 1990; Weyland, 1993) mean that social theorists now have a more nuanced view of the relationship between the global and the local.

The premise of this more nuanced view is that homogenisation is unlikely. This is because global culture is always subjected to local reworking and contextualization. The reworking of global culture can take the form of a number of processes including hybridization, indigenization, and creolization. It is now accepted that cultural goods, such as Coca Cola, are imbued with local values and have different meanings in different places. This theoretical refinement has engendered concepts such as that of plural

‘globalizations’; the ‘globalization of diversity’ (Pieterse, 1995) and ‘glocalization’ - the adaptation of business and other practices to local cultural conditions (Robertson, 1995).

Friedman (1994b) studies the interrelationship of the global market and local cultural transformations. He shows that there is a complex web of relations between globally structured social processes and the organization of identity and concludes that cultural fragmentation and modernist homogenization both make up the contemporary global system.

At various times, different social classes and groups utilize identity spaces, depending upon their varying historical circumstances and this leads to a variety of cultural strategies (Friedman, 1994b). Currently, these localized cultural strategies develop at a much faster rate due to the rapid speed of globalization. Friedman (*ibid*: 17) relates this idea of cultural strategies to consumption in the following way - “a particular kind of social existence produces a particular kind of personal experience, a particular kind of selfhood, which in turn generates a particular strategy of consumption”.

Appadurai shares some of these ideas and calls for more studies on the ‘production of locality’ (1995a). He views global homogenization and heterogenization processes not as two mutually exclusive dichotomies but as complementary forces. These forces sustain and reinforce one another. In his work *Modernity at Large* (1996), Appadurai argues that globalization has ‘shrunk the distance between elites, shifted key relations between producers and consumers, broken many links between labour and family life, obscured between temporary locales and imaginary national

attachments'. Appadurai describes what he terms the 'new global cultural economy' as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order.

Mass media

Mass media is a key element in the interrelationship between global culture and local culture. In this section I discuss how mass media influences the way people imagine their identity.

> The image, the imagined, the imaginary - these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice…. The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. ….The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order (Appadurai *ibid*: 31).

Appadurai states that mass media offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imaginary worlds. New forms of electronically mediated communication combined with voluntary and forced migrations result in 'a new order in the instability of production of modern subjectivities' (*ibid*: 4). He argues that mass media, and specifically popular culture and narrative, are central in the formation of identity in this current time of globalization.

> As Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats, as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, we see moving images meet deterritorialized viewers (*ibid*: 4).

Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed consumption as self-identity, consumption as communication and the context of consumption.

Modernity obliges individuals to create their own identity. Rigid class categories of the past have dissolved. Consumption is one ways that individuals can create such an identity. Individuals assemble an identity and accompanying lifestyle by purchasing goods.

Goods are bought, or rejected, for symbolic reasons. This is because goods convey messages about the person actively engaged in their consumption or rejection. This understanding of consumption as a form of communication is related to the social process of individualisation.

Mass media is one of the defining characteristics of globalization. The symbiotic relationship between mass media and globalization was observed earlier by McLuhan (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). Although McLuhan made the connection by combining the ‘medium is the message’ with his ‘global village’, few scholars have approached mass media as a defining characteristic of globalization (Rantanen, 2005: 1).

Recent studies that examine this relationship have focused on the power of mass media to influence the possibilities people see for themselves including the creation of new identities. People’s lives are increasingly shaped by the possibilities that mass media suggests is available to them, rather than the givenness of things (Liechty, 1991:200). The wide range of

new commodity and media images currently available enables people to construct many different imaginative scenarios of possible identities (Wilk, 1993: 141).

Chapter Three: China’s Middle Class

> 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 (Tony, 37 years, manager).

A decade ago this kind of remark was unheard of in China. It is one of many such comments that I heard Shenzhen about social difference and reflects the new openness about matters of class. Tony is a manager of a textile company and was introduced to me at a nightclub. He had visited the UK several times for work and 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 deeply unattractive (*hen nankan)*. Tony did enjoy the cleanliness and general sense of order. Cars 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 Tony described as chaotic (*luan*). He felt that order in the UK was due to a national trait of individual discipline and because people knew their exact place in society and behaved

accordingly.

The longing for order and sense of being adrift that was evident in conversations with Tony were not uncommon in Shenzhen. The traditional egalitarian social structure of socialist China has crumbled under the development of a market economy. Before entering a discussion about China's middle class I would like to briefly review society and class in pre-reform China.

Life under Mao

After the establishment of the PRC, Mao undertook to reduce then eventually eliminate the 'three great differences' that separated the citizens of China. These were the distinctions between workers and peasants, between city and country, and between mental and manual labour (Kraus, 1976). Between 1952 and 1958 the private ownership of productive assets was gradually eliminated (Whyte 1975, Kraus 1981 in Bian, 2002). Farming was collectivized and the urban economy was consolidated into the state. In pursuit of an egalitarian objective Mao eradicated pre-revolution social identity and divided society into four classes: the workers, the peasants, the petite bourgeoisie, and the national-capitalists.

Status

The socialist status hierarchy was rigid and it was rare for an individual to change from one status group to another. Bian (2002) delineates four structural and behavioural dimensions that classified the population into

qualitatively different status groups: a rural-urban divide in residential status, a state-collective dualism in economic structure, a cadre-worker dichotomy in occupational classification, and a 'revolution-antirevolution' split in political characterization.

When applying standard models of status attainment to China one has to pay special attention to the political economy of Communism (Bian, 2002). Usually such models attribute status attained by an individual to inheritance and achievement. In capitalist societies one's job is used to measure attained status, the effects of parental education and their occupation status are used to examine status inheritance, and personal achievement is usually measured by education.

Bian lists three modifications (*ibid*: 105) that should be made when operationalizing standard status attainment models in the Chinese context. First, status inheritance was defined using political criteria. This meant that family class origin was an important factor along with parental education and occupation (Parish, 1981, 1984; Whyte and Parish; 1984). Second, personal achievement is evaluated by the Communist Party. Membership of and loyalty to the party are ascribed characteristics and as such qualitatively different credentials (Walder 1985, 1995 in Bian, 2002). Third, workplace identification becomes a more essential criterion of social status than the occupation of wage work (Lin and Bian, 1991; Bian, 1994). This is because in a centrally planned economy, a hierarchy of state and collective organizations is used to differentially allocate state resources (Walder, 1992 in Bian, 2002).

State control

The state controlled all aspects of life. This was achieved through a large and complex administrative structure, social policies, and monitoring systems, as well as continuing political and ideological struggles (Liou, 1998). The state watched over and directed the behaviour of its citizens. Periodic mass campaigns and social movements were used to politicize the domestic and social spaces, transforming the private into the public (Yu and Tng, 2003). What had once been personal realms, such as the home, marriage, and reproductive choices, became areas that the state could monitor and influence.

Major policies included systems of household registration (*hukou*), food allocation and work points. Urban growth was controlled using the household registration system (*hukou*) and enabled the state to determine how and where individuals lived, and how they earned a living.

> After birth you should get a *hukou* right away. You need *hukou* to enter kindergarten; and you need local *hukou* to find a job. When you date you should know the other person's *hukou*. All kinds of permits can only be processed with *hukou*; and all kinds of benefits depend on your *hukou*. When you move to another place, you need to change the *hukou.* When you die, remove your *hukou.*
>
> (Yu, 2002: 12 as cited in Fan, 2008)

In rural areas, villagers belonged to a production brigade and a people's commune. Villages were kept isolated from urban areas. Urban residents were favoured over rural residents in what essentially constituted a two-tier class system. *Hukou* was used to ensure that most of the population stayed in the countryside and produced low cost raw materials to feed the

industralization process that was taking place in China's cities. Rather than declining, differences between rural and urban areas actually grew from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s.

The work unit

Urban residents belonged to a work unit (*danwei*). The central role of danwei in contemporary China has long been studied by sociologists (Bian 1994; Walder 1986; Whyte and Parish 1984). These work units were classified as government units (*zhengfu danwei*), public organizations (*shiye danwei*), and industrial organizations (*qiye danwei*). The function of the work unit was social and political as well as economic (Naughton, 1997).

Work units provided urban residents with jobs, houses, healthcare, and other forms of social welfare benefits. Workers and their families depended on their work units for material resources and career chances (Walder 1986, 1992). Urban society was organized as a hierarchy. The state was positioned at the top and underneath were all the work units. However, not all work units were equal. The resources that a work unit had access to depended on which sector it was located in, who owned it and ranking in the redistributive hierarchy (Bian, 1994; Liu, 2000). The work unit was an important vehicle for status attainment and social mobility and membership an indication of social status (Lin and Bian, 1991).

Work units paid their lifetime employees compensation in the form of salaries and in-kind goods and services. Salaries were rigidly regulated after the 1956 wage reform (Walder, 1987; Yuan and Fang, 1998). It was

very difficult for a work unit to pay higher cash salaries than another work unit. Salaries were paid according to an individual's occupational status, seniority, and administrative position. Centralized wage policies applied to all workers though there were some adjustments (You, 1998; Korzec and Whyte, 1981).

Most inequalities in this period took the shape of unequal distribution of in-kind goods and services such as housing, retirement insurance, medical care, social services, and other welfare program (Walder, 1992). In a cash-strapped economy access to these goods and services was more important than a monetary wage. Such goods and services could only be made available by work units 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).

Socialist society was uniform. People wore similar clothes, had similar hairstyles, and rode the same bicycles. Earning power was fairly uniform and consumption of goods was regulated using government quotas and ration coupons (Chen, 1998; Lieberthal, 1995). Although there were some inequalities, the most striking of which being the urban-rural divide, Mao's policies reduced socioeconomic inequalities (Parish, 1981, 1984). China under Mao was one of the most egalitarian developing countries of the time (Whyte and Parish, 1984:44).

Life after Mao

Today far fewer urban residents enjoy the benefits of the iron rice bowl (*tiefanwan*). Egalitarian wages, welfare benefits like subsidized housing and healthcare, and lifelong employment have made way for uncertainty and mass lay-offs.

> The introduction of market mechanisms inside work units and the rise of product, labour, and capital markets outside work units both redefined …and created new sources of inequality in post-Mao period. The system of socioeconomic stratification remains mixed—continuation and change are the parallel stories about an emerging new order. (Bian, 2002)

Social and Occupational Mobility

Social mobility has become a reality for many people. 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, 1990). People leave their jobs to advance their careers or because they are laid off or transferred by state-owned enterprises (Solinger, 2000).

The reform period has seen the fixed hierarchy transform into an open,

evolving class system (Davis, 2000). Class 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 the professionals.

Growing inequalities

Privatization of the Chinese economy and growing unemployment has meant 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. A growing number of people feel that they are falling behind and missing out. On talk back radio and other such popular forums the sentiment can be heard that many of the new rich have acquired wealth that they do not deserve. This pervasive feeling of social inequality is easy to understand given the egalitarian nature of pre-reform China. The 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 blamed them for the increase in crime and deterioration of 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.

Unlike the working class, 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: 162) observes that the Communist Party itself has yet to fully adhere to meritocracy despite having taken strong measures to punish corrupt party officials.

To sum up, the egalitarian social structure of socialist China is no longer intact. Economic reform has seen the transformation from a rigid status hierarchy to an open, evolving class system. Many people have left the three main groups that had once dominated socialist society: workers, peasants, and cadres, and joined new social groups including the middle class.

Ongoing debates

There are a number of debates surrounding the Chinese middle class. These include whether the middle class constitutes a new social phenomenon in China, whether it will bring about democratic change, and its actual size.

A new or old phenomenon

China's middle class is commonly described using words such as 'emerging' and 'newly minted' in both the popular press and academic articles. 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, 2003). Some scholars believe that the middle class is the first of its kind. Others feel that China has developed a managerial middle class previously; during the modernization processes of the 1950s and 1960s (Goodman, 1999: 244). Goodman (2007) 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.

Middle class or 'new rich'

The Chinese middle class may be a product of industrialization and modernization but more importantly is a result of social transformation (Zhou, 2008). 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. Goodman (2007) argues that there is no middle class only a group of new rich and that the state often passes off 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. 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 was independent and occurred at a distance from the state (Goodman, 1999: 245). Unger (2006) believes that the symbiotic relationship between the Chinese middle class and the state means that it is unlikely that this privileged group will agitate for democracy.

Bian (2002) writes that 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. Instead, they survive on unstable sources of income (Qin, 1999:65), 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).

Size of the middle class

No one disputes the rapid growth of the middle class in China or that it will continue to grow, but it is difficult to pinpoint its exact size. The exact size of the middle class is frequently contested (Zhou, 2008). Definitions of the middle class vary. Figures range from 35 million to over 200 million. Generally commercial figures relating to this group are overly optimistic. Corporate researchers often have their own commercial agenda and tend to inflate their figures, the bigger the perceived market the better for business.

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

My own estimates based on conversations with Chinese demographers and commercial researchers placed this number in 2005 at around 60 million people. This is in line with a sociologist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), who spoke to *Time* magazine off the record, and stated that the middle class probably numbers around 65 million people, less than 5% of the population[19].

The state and the middle class

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).

Official social stratification and nomenclature

After the intense class struggles of pre-reform China, class is still a delicate issue. The words in Chinese for 'middle class' illustrate political sensitivity towards matters of class. The most common terms for ‘middle class’ in Chinese - z*hongchan jieceng* (middle stratum), and *zhongchan jieji* (middle-income group) – sound neutral and scientific. In state publications and the wider press, social class is defined according to income or profession.

In 2002 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published a report looking at social stratification titled ‘Social Stratification Research in Contemporary China Report’ *(Dangdai Zhongguo Shehui Jieceng Yanjiu Baogao*). This report was the first study of social stratification undertaken since the

[19] http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/china_cul_rev/middle_class.html, accessed on 28.04.06

late 1970s and the first systematic attempt by the state to conceptualize the middle class. Data was collected nationwide between 1999 and 2001.

During the 1980s Chinese academics and officials used the term *xiaokang* to refer to the group that later became the middle class. *Xiaokang* society, an official goal of the CCP, is now understood to mean a society in which most of its citizens are materially comfortable. This term was introduced by Deng Xiaoping as part of his blueprint for national economic development. Deng specifically defined the *xiaokang* lifestyle as one which would have a GNP of US$800 per person by the end of the twentieth century. This development would place China within the ranks of lower-middle-income nations.

In the late 1980s, the term *xiaofei jieceng* (consumption class) was used to refer to those high income-earners who had the economic means to indulge in expensive leisure activities. The identity of this class was marked as different from *gongxin jieceng* (working class), who were struggling to make ends meet. In the 1990s, Chinese academics and the media started to use terms such as *bailing* (white-collar), *zhongchan* (middle-level) , and *xiaozi* (petty bourgeois).

The CASS report classifies Chinese society into ten social groups (*shehui qunti)* that it terms social strata (*shehui jieceng*) according to the division of labour and access to political, economic, and cultural resources. These ten groups are: state and social managers, managers, private entrepreneurs, professionals and technicians, clerks, self-employed, salespersons and service workers, industrial workers, agricultural labourers, and unemployed

and under-employed (CASS 2002). The report also describes the ‘olive shape’ (*ganlan xing*) ideal model of Chinese society. It is wide in the middle, with an expansive middle class, and narrow at its two ends. The report also states that Chinese social structure consists of five socio-economic classes: the upper, the upper-middle, the middle-middle, the lower middle, and the bottom.

State agenda for the middle class

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 as little as one fifth of the original construction costs (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, ibid). 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. To sum up, the government has implemented a strategy of creating a middle class that is grateful to the Communist Party for its existence.

Middle Class identity

In the past decade people have become fascinated by social distinction in China. However, there is little agreement on how to define class, especially membership of the middle class. Some individuals classify themselves according to income and others classify themselves according to family background. This is often related to their parents' class status and membership of the Communist Party. When asked what characteristics define someone's social class, research participants in Shenzhen gave widely disparate answers. These included: clothing brands, whether they play golf, frequent consumption of foreign food, level of education, job occupation, salary, where they live and even how loud someone talked.

The middle class is seen as a reflection of growing economic prosperity; now officially sanctioned, it is a popular topic in the Chinese press. Here the term 'middle class' generally refers to a group of people with stable incomes who own property, cars, and can afford tertiary education and overseas travel. A common debate concerns definitions of middleclassness and exactly what level of salary constitutes membership.

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% of the population believe that they are middle class. This figure has been picked up and debated in local newspapers. An article titled "Who

Belongs to the Middle Class?" that appeared in the *People's Daily (ibid)*, 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 % of people think that the middle class is hard to define, 21.2% of the population think a person should have at least RMB 500,000 in order to be considered middle class and that 19.3% think that one should have at RMB 1 million[20].

What's interesting about the *People's Daily* article is that it cites figures relating to how people define membership of the middle class. Whether these figures are accurate or not, it is clear that large numbers of people in China have detailed opinions about what middle class membership entails.

> 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, lawyer)

My view of class

The lack of consensus about class in China also extends to the literature. Class is one of the most disputed concepts within sociology (Wright, 2005:2). Sometimes this is just a question of how the word 'class' is being used. Often there are profound theoretical differences behind the various uses of the term 'class'. These differences concern the best way to

[20] Who Belongs to the Middle Class?", People's Daily 25.09.06

approach the nature and consequences of economic inequality in contemporary societies. There is a complex assortment of competing conceptualizations of class, each rooted in its own theoretical tradition of class analysis. Rather than wade into this confusing entanglement of concepts, theories and traditions – I will describe my own understanding of class.

My view of class is grounded in the work of Bourdieu. The theme of how subjective identity is formed is an important foundation of Bourdieu's work on class analysis (1984). Symbolic classifications and their associated identities are central to his observations because they are linked to class-based differences in life chances, lifestyles and collective identities.

No actual class formation in history is more real than any other. Class defines itself as it eventuates. Class, as it emerged in nineteenth-century industrial capitalist societies, no claim to universality[21].

I see class as fluid, situational, and as a consequence of particular historically situated discourses and practices. Class does not exist *a priori* or outside of its actual performance in everyday life. Class is a cultural project that is continually being formed and re-formed. It is a product of the interplay of consumption, globalization and mass mediation. I view class formation as an ongoing rather than predetermined process. It consists of idiosyncratic practices and as such should be studied within specific contexts (Abu-Lugod, 1991).

[21] E.P. Thompson, Eighteenth-Century English Society as cited in Liechty's Suitably Modern

Chapter conclusion

New social identities are emerging in China due to the transition from a centralized to a free market economy. Viewing class as process and practice is far more useful than merely applying material definitions of class. Reality reveals a wide range of vastly different class 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, 2003).

Chapter Four: The Consumer Revolution

Tai guofen! (Such excess!)

Annie, 40 yrs, commenting on her daughter's lifestyle

I first heard this phrase at a party in one of Shenzhen's many gated communities. Previously non-existent in the pre-reform era, gated communities are the result of the new choice in housing and of residential mobility (Huang, 2005). They typify the enormous stratification and segregation that is found in urban China. This particular enclave was a revelation. It was well-hidden, not advertised anywhere and the rents staggeringly high. This secret enclave comprised low-rise apartments, many of them duplexes, set in an enormous park bursting with foliage and huge mature trees. The effect was an exclusive garden of Eden; immaculate and eerily quiet.

Getting to the hostess' front door from the main road involved traversing two security checkpoints. These consisted of boom gates staffed by security guards who were uncharacteristically vigilant in their work; in China residential security checkpoints often exist purely for visual effect.

The party was hosted by Annie, an energetic 40-year-old entrepreneur who had made her fortune in Shenzhen real estate. Annie had left her husband and hometown in the northeast eight years earlier, and had come to Shenzhen looking for a new life. Her previous job working on real estate development projects for local government gave her invaluable experience

in the property development field. Having built a number of successful commercial buildings in downtown Shenzhen, she had decided to go into semi-retirement. ‘My stressful life is over, I want to listen to music, spend money, and enjoy myself. If I want to go to shopping in Hong Kong I just go. I sold all my businesses and have no more responsibilities.’

All the women at the party there looked up to Annie. She is what they all aspired to. Tall, slim, porcelain skin and elegantly dressed, Annie exuded a quiet confidence. Her conversation was peppered with financial advice and disparaging comments about marriage in general. During the course of the party she pointedly told some of her guests to avoid it if possible. It was well known that Annie’s former husband had been violent and she had only been able to extricate herself from the marriage by fleeing to Shenzhen.

Annie had three male helpers to ensure that the party went smoothly. A staggering twenty-two dishes were served along with French wines, vodka's and first rate *mao-tai.* The food had an ethnic theme, it was northeastern, like Annie, and among the regional specialities served were silkworm larvae. Polished wooden floors, huge sparkling windows, and tasteful Chinese minimalist-style furniture combined to create an atmosphere of expensive elegance. A young Eastern European pianist from one of Shenzhen's five star hotels played Rachmaninov on the grand piano in the corner as guests leafed through Bulgari booklets and Christie's auction catalogues that lay spread out on various coffee tables.

There were over thirty guests, many of whom came from the same province as Annie and spoke the same regional dialect. This group of individuals

was part of a locality enclave as defined by Pun (1999). The migrant population is more than three times greater than the local population (Liang and Chen, 2003: 194). With the majority of the population non-natives, this type of enclaving is common in Shenzhen. Most guests were professionals in their early thirties to mid forties who owned their own businesses, worked for large Chinese companies or foreign multinational companies.

Many of the guests were similar to Annie in that they were successful wealthy women. Some were divorced and a few were mothers. That particular day, the conversation centered on the wayward behaviour of spoilt children. One glamorous mother had to keep wiring her daughter money at boarding school as she could never live within her monthly allowance. Another had discovered that her son had bought MP3 players for five of his friends using an emergency-only credit card. She cancelled the credit card to teach him a lesson *('yinggai chi ku')* but was now worried about the possible consequences. What happened if her son spent all his cash and suddenly had to fly home. How would he pay for an air ticket? 'Let him walk home! ' said Annie storming off into the kitchen.

Dramatically brandishing a large pair of scissors, Annie revealed that she had recently flown to Beijing to teach her own child a lesson. She had discovered that her daughter, an only child, had bought six pairs of the same style of trousers in different colours. A whole month's allowance had been impulsively spent in one go. 'What a waste (*langfei).* Six pairs and all the same. I can't bear it any longer. Such excess (*tai guofen)*!' Outraged by such lax attitudes to money, Annie boarded the first flight to Beijing. There, she took a taxi to her daughter's university dormitory and destroyed all her

clothes with a pair of scissors. After that she flew straight back to Shenzhen. ‘I don’t care if she walks round wearing newspapers. It’s my fault; I gave her too much money and overestimated her. These kids don’t understand anything. My daughter looks down at people who eat moon cake, which was such a treat for us. Young people have gotten too much too quickly, they haven't had to work for it. Life for her is just having fun’.

This lament concerning spoiled children is commonly heard throughout China. The social implications of the one child policy that was implemented in 1979 are widely debated in Shenzhen. Everyone from taxi drivers to teachers disapproves of the consumption practices of young people, whether they are singletons or not. Interestingly enough, few people were critical of the expenditure of doting parents on their children. Lavish parental expenditure on only children has been documented in detail by, amongst others, Chee (2000) and Davis & Sensenbrenner (2000). During my stay in Shenzhen, I heard the phrase ‘*tai goufen’* (so excessive) regularly and not just in relation to the shopping habits of wayward children. Although Shenzhen people spoke enthusiastically about the cornucopia of goods now available it was clear that many individuals felt that consumption was out of control.

From socialism to capitalism

> The sociology of consumption in a rapidly changing socialist economy is a challenging field. (Hsing, 2001)

Recent studies of consumption have tended to take place in industrialized

market economies where capitalism is fully entrenched and where both individual and collective consumption have flourished since the 1950s (for example Appadurai, 1986; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Miller, 1994a). Studying consumption in a society that is emerging from socialism presents its own challenges.

In most socialist economies, consumer-oriented production did not develop until the 1980s. New issues arise when studying these types of economies that have not been encountered previously, such as the central role of the state. In the case of China, the strong presence of the state is a defining feature of the practice of consumption. Other important elements that characterize Chinese consumption are: the ongoing key role of the state-owned sector, the complex mix of planned and unplanned segments in the new economy, market regulation, and media control.

Consumption under Mao

After gaining power the CCP introduced a project of economic modernization. This was defined in terms of increased industrial output and collective ownership. Within this project, party-state rhetoric celebrated its ability to meet the material needs of the masses (Davis, 2000). As mentioned in the last chapter, in urban areas, consumption was no longer concentrated in commercial spaces such as markets but moved to locations of production – namely the work unit (Davis 1997; Gaubatz, 1999). These work units were self-sufficient communities that provided their members with work, housing, health care, food and clothes, household goods distribution, other basic social services and even leisure activities (Gaubatz,

1999).

The main economic goal was the development of heavy industry and Chinese workers received a fixed salary for more than twenty years (Yan, 2000). A shortage of basic goods forced the state to limit consumption. A planned economy meant that there was no incentive to produce, and for the first time in Chinese history, the state had to provide for each and every citizen. Workers received low salaries and ration coupons and quotas were used to control how they spent their income. The state even determined the amount of meat that an individual could consume during festive celebrations such as Chinese New Year (Chen, 1995).

From 1949-76 consumption was reduced to a minimum level (Yan, 2000). The slogan 'plain living and hard struggle' *(jianku fendou)* was promoted as the ideal during this period. Official role models such as the selfless solder Lei Feng consumed only what they needed to survive. It was rare to consume beyond basic subsistence needs and any meagre savings were deposited in the state bank to help the country; a frugal lifestyle was required in order to build a socialist utopia. Hooper (1979) writes of a cult of austerity in an atmosphere of self-denial. Ci (1994: 150) makes the interesting point that this mindset of ‘asceticism now, hedonism later' closely resembles that of the Protestant work ethic.

Yan (2000) describes three distinctive features of consumption in this period. First, consumption patterns and lifestyles were uniform. People wore the same clothes and ate the same food. Social differentiation was not reflected by material differences but by political symbols. Class labels

and party membership served as markers of social status.

Second, consumption remained at the same level of basic subsistence for nearly thirty years. More than half of household income was spent on food and it took years to get a new outfit or pair of shoes. A popular saying was "new for three years, old for three years, and win another three years through mending and patching" *(xin sannian, jiu sannian, fengfeng bubu you sannian)*.

Third, the state launched ideological and administrative attacks on the individual pursuit of luxury goods. The goal being the larger agenda of low consumption and high accumulation of capital for industrial development. The individual pursuit of luxury goods was condemned as 'corrupt bourgeois culture'. After the 1950s shops that sold jewellery and other such luxury items were closed down along with dance halls and brothels. A large number of shops selling plain goods for the masses took their place. In this manner the state imposed a new ideology of social asceticism.

To sum up, collective consumption and socialist frugality define consumption during the 1949-76 period.

Consumption after Mao

After Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping and other pragmatists created a new blueprint for economic growth. The national economy was close to collapse and required drastic revitalization urgently. Jobs for life and the egalitarian distributive system meant that there was no incentive to work

efficiently or become more productive. Private entrepreneurship and consumer spending became key features of the new plan – used to motivate workers, fire up the stagnant economy, and, modernize China. An important slogan of the time, '*nengzheng huihua'* (to be able to earn money and know how to spend it), reflects the paramount role of consumption in the state's new agenda of economic reform. This new ideology was in sharp contrast to the asceticism imposed under Mao.

Yan (2000) identifies three waves of consumerism that have occurred since the reform policies were introduced. The first wave took place in the early 1980s and was characterized by strong peasant demand for consumer goods (Chao and Myers 1998, Qiu and Wan, 1990 in Yan, 2000), and finally, inflation. The first wave helped facilitate the urban reforms of the mid-1980s.

The second wave took place from the mid-1980s until 1989 and was a result of the urban reforms. This wave of mass consumption was characterized by the doubling of urban income, rapid growth of the private sector, foreign investment and rural industry, and, less control of the mass media. People became aware of the standard of living and lifestyles in developed countries.

The third wave took place post-1992 and has been characterized by the emergence of fully-fledged consumerism. Features of this are the materialization of a buyer's market, the change of expenditure from food to other goods, the awareness of individual rights, and the development of a consumer movement. Most importantly, it was during this period that the state adopted consumerism as the dominant cultural ideology.

To sum up, there has been a move from collective to private consumption and consumerism has now become the main cultural ideology of contemporary Chinese society.

Ongoing debates

China's consumer revolution has received an enormous amount of attention from scholars (Chao and Myers, 1998; Davis, 2000; Li, 1998; Pun, 2003; etc). Latham (2006: 2) states that "the social and cultural changes of the reform era have almost been unknowable outside the frames of reference of markets and consumption." A number of key debates inform studies of Chinese consumption. These centre on the effects of consumption on the state and on the individual.

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 CCP elite were aware that the population were disillusioned and their leadership was being questioned. 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 as simplistic and materialistic and calls for a more nuanced view. Twenty years into economic reform, consumption has revealed itself not to be an unblemished panacea. He asserts that consumption practices are potentially divisive and a threat to state-party legitimacy.

Consumer rights movement

The buyer's market that emerged through reform grew to supply a wide variety of commodities but suffered from poor service, faulty products and fake goods. In 1984 the government made a decision to support consumer protection and set up the China Consumer's Association. This association constitutes a *defacto* government agency; it currently has over 45,000 branches nationwide and the leading positions in it are occupied by high-ranking officials (Yan, 2000).

The consumer rights movement emerged during the 1990s as a reaction to growing consumer discontent. This movement was spearheaded by Wang Hai, a consumer advocate who became a national sensation. Wang Hai travelled through Chinese cities testing the principle of 'double compensation' as set out in China's Consumer Rights Protection Law. The law stated that retailers caught out selling fake goods should reimburse their customers double what they had paid. In some cases Wang Hai successfully claimed double compensation but in many others he was

denied, even after requesting help from law enforcement agencies.

Wang Hai's crusade against fake goods was given mass coverage by the media and raised the awareness of consumer rights. This crusade highlighted the fickleness of what was supposed to be the rule of law. Government agencies were often powerless to take action and it became clear that consumer power was limited (Yan, 2000). The resulting lack of confidence in the rule of law has prompted a recent push by the state to promote and facilitate consumer protection laws in the interests of its reform agenda. Rather than seeing consumerism as a challenge to the state, Hooper (2005) sees people as asserting their consumer rights with its help and endorsement.

Consumption as resistance

> Millions of daily commercial exchanges not only calibrated the flow of material goods; they also nurtured individual desires and social networks that challenged official discourse and conventions. The political regime remained intact, but relationships between agents of the state and ordinary citizens had changed.
>
> (Davis, 2000)

Related to the stronger-weaker state hypothesis is the consumerism-engendered change in power relations between the individual and the state. This theme is taken up by a number of authors (see Davis et al, 2000). They contend that although consumerism has undermined the power that the state has over individuals, a wider choices of consumer goods does not mean greater personal freedom (Hsing, 2001). In other words, consumption

does not equal civil liberty. Hsing, agrees with this conclusion, but questions the usefulness of this state-society dichotomy in delineating the social implications of the consumer revolution in post-Mao China. His view is that not enough empirical research has been done yet to warrant seeing a historical trend.

Hsing makes the important point that new identities and expressions through choices of consumer goods and services have many different meanings and that these are not necessarily about modernity and resistance. The notion of consumption as resistance is popular in both academic and non-academic circles. Barmé (2003) writes that in the period after 1989 consumerism was popularly viewed as almost revolutionary by many members of the political and intellectual elite. Shopping for new lifestyles and fashioning oneself in ways that were different to what was expected by the state was seen as political struggle.

> The rise of this discourse of consumer-as-revolutionary also dovetailed neatly with a liberal teleology that now saw the ascendancy of the middle class and the democracy of Taiwan as part of the overall trajectory of Chinese modernity, and not just a hotly contested alternative. While ballot-box democracy might be deferred until a sizeable middle class existed, the republic of shopping could be realized immediately (*ibid: 50)*.

It is clearly advisable to be wary of both the simplistic view of consumption as manipulation and the romanticized notion of consumption as resistance. In the case of China, some observers do have pre-set agendas; the shadow of the state and the quest for freedom is seen everywhere. I agree with Hsing (2001) that quotidian practices such as the choice of a western-

style wedding gown, do not necessarily constitute political statements aimed at the state. They can in fact be motivated by non-political reasons such as novelty, nostalgia, or status indication; all understandable given China's recent experience of goods shortages and cultural homogeneity. Freedom of choice in consumer goods does not necessarily entail a desire for western-style democracy.

Consumption as polarizing

Does consumption promote cohesion or polarization in Chinese society? The social cohesion that the gift engenders is well documented (see for example Mauss). Gift giving is often described as the circulation of goods in order to promote social ties and bonding between individuals. Chao and Meyers (1998: 351) find that the consumer revolution in China has revived traditional gift giving practices and in this way strengthens social, economic, and political ties between people. They go as far as concluding that this encourages people to emphasize social and political stability.

Gamble (2003) disagrees with Chao and Meyers and argues that consumerism can be fracturing and divisive, creating new stresses and strains. He describes how consumerism has caused friction between Shanghainese youth and their parents. This friction is due to differing attitudes concerning consumer goods. Gamble also asserts that consumerism makes disparities in wealth visible.

Cook and Murray (2001) study China's increasing urbanization and describe growing pressures towards social polarization that reflect

disparities of wealth and access to material prosperity. Looking at the lives of young migrant factory workers, Pun (2003) writes of the social exclusion that consumerism engenders. Despite producing the goods that make up China's consumer abundance, they themselves are unable to partake in it. Pun labels the new consumer culture exploitative and in no way empowering.

Latham (2002) finds that consumption practices function as a "marker and measure of the negative aspects of economic reform". Consumption and economic reform have caused an increase in social division. In addition to this, consumption makes these new divisions highly visible. Latham (*ibid)* writes that people have become aware of differences in spending power, between urban and rural areas, between generations, between men and women, and between the coastal and hinterland regions.

Davis (2005: 696) challenges these views that label consumerism as negative, exclusionary and exploitative. She argues that Pun and Latham work within an intellectual tradition that focuses on power relations, in the workplace or within systems of production, as the main sites of class formation. Davis acknowledges that growing income inequalities have led to losers as well as winners in new China but implies that authors such as Pun and Latham have gone into the field with a pre-set productionist agenda that only allows consumers to be seen as victims with little agency. Interestingly, five years earlier, Davis herself was described as embarking on research with a pre-set agenda of 'consumerism will bring democracy' (Hsing, 2001).

In her study of Shanghai, Davis gives priority to the speech of the residents themselves – and writes that she does not to assume the predominance of either exploitation and deception or agency and empowerment. Davis concurs with Wang (2001) and concludes that urban consumer culture simultaneously incorporates contradictory experiences of emancipation and disempowerment.

My approach to consumption

Like Douglas (1996), Appadurai (1996) and Bauman (1998), I also view consumers and consumption practices as a means of understanding identity formation. This perspective views consumers as shaped by the material restrictions and politics of the work place but also attributes them with agency (Davis, 2005: 697). The consumer has the power to act, imagine and resist even as this occurs within a framework of limits and capacities strongly shaped by state policies, market conditions and social relations.

The consumer revolution

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 yuanmeng'* (borrow money to realize your dream). Since then a buyer's market emerged, there were no more shortages of goods; shopping became a quotidian activity; and expenditure of urban households changed

significantly. Urban residents found themselves in a financial position where over half their income was available for expenditure on non-food items. By 1994 the average expenditure per capita had increased fourfold since 1984[22]. 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[23].

One way of studying consumption is to examine demand for commodities. The three consumer products that are most desired are known as *san dajian* ("three big items"). Yan (2000) writes that during the 1960s and '70s, these were wristwatches, bicycles and sewing machines. These luxury items cost around RMB 2,000 each and it took years for people to save up enough money to buy them. The three big items in the 1980s were colour televisions, fridges and washing machines and cost over RMB 1,000 each.

China increasingly followed a changing 'wish list' pattern, of consumer goods, found in most developing Asian countries[24]. Currently, housing, cars and education are key commodities for the middle class in many of the larger Chinese cities, replicating demand trends in Malaysia, South Korea and Hong Kong (Chua, 2000).

Yan (2000) notes that an important feature of the consumer revolution is the disappearance of 'tidal-wave consumption' (pailangshi xiaofei). This form of

[22] figures from 1994 statistics released by the Chinese Consumer's Association, as quoted in Yan 2000

[23] figures from China Consumer News (*Zhongguo xiaofeizhe bao*) September 12, 1994, as quoted in Yan 2000

[24] Freedman, 1972, Fukutake, 1982 as quoted in Hooper, 1998

consumption epitomizes consumption in the 1980s and refers to hordes of people mindlessly buying the same item en masse. Yan lists three reasons for its demise. First, most Chinese families gradually acquired all the essential items, such as televisions, fridges and washing machines. Second, consumers matured and the new economy meant they did not have to worry any more about inflation or shortages. Third, Chinese society increasingly became polarized. People found themselves in new income and lifestyle strata. Previously, those with lower incomes could rely on kinship networks in order to buy the three big items, mainly household appliances. By the 1990s, the luxurious lifestyles of the new rich were far beyond the reach of most Chinese.

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, making up 12% of global demand[25]. It is interesting to note that while the wealthiest 20% of the population accounts for half of total consumer spending, the poorest 20% accounts for only 4.7% (UNDP report[26]).

To sum up, prolonged economic growth, a sharp increase in discretionary consumer purchases, and unequal income distribution are defining feature of the consumer revolution (Davis, 2000).

[25] Goldman Sachs report Dec 11, 2004 as quoted by the World Watch Institute, http://www.worldwatch.org/node/3864, accessed on 08.08.06
[26] As cited in United Nations fact sheet, http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/poverty/subpages/dpi1779e.htm , accessed on 05.02.08

New social spaces

> Booming consumerism is not merely a reflection of the booming economy; rather, it also reflects the changing social system and facilitates further changes in the system, such as redrawing the boundaries between social groups, creating social space outside state control and forming a new ideology. (Yan, 2000: 179)

The decline of the work-unit system and socialist redistributive system means that the state no longer has such a central role in people's lives. This has combined with growing commercialization to create opportunities for social interaction that are independent of and 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, watching films 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 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). Although this means that commercialization has increased opportunities to exercise individual choices and circumvent government policies, consumption, especially that of mass media, has also been used to reassert state power (Zha, 1995). In *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Davis, 2000) examples can be found of consumerism both

weakening and strengthening state authority.

Some of these new social spaces are experienced as more egalitarian in nature. Women, young people and children enjoy going to McDonald's because it is an attractive social space where they can independently order their own food (Yan, 2000). This contrasts with traditional restaurants, where these groups are the dependents of men. Yan (*ibid*) writes that McDonald's is a means to greater autonomy on another level; women can talk to men as equals or even dine alone without damaging their reputations.

New social spaces have been engendered in a number of different ways. What was previously public and politicized under Mao has become privatized in the sense of commercialization and of personal choice. The work unit system has eroded which means that work and home are now separate social spaces thus expanding personal and individual spheres. There are now increasingly diverse types of personal space including home ownership, childcare, leisure activities, education, and the rearticulation of gender roles within the realms of recreation, work and the home (Yu and Tng, 2003).

Commercialization has engendered freedom of consumer choice as well as the capacity for freedom of personal expression. People are now buying their own apartments and decorating them, chatting online with friends, and generally pursuing private lives which they have constructed themselves. These new freedoms, however, are supported by powerful social and political constraints. These range from peer pressure to conform to the

continuing presence of an authoritarian state that furnishes social stability (Madsen, 2000).

Chapter conclusion

The emergence of consumerism has contributed to economic growth and an across the board rise in personal income. Consumerism is also linked to the redrawing of boundaries between social groups, the creation of social space outside state control, and the formation of a new ideology (Yan, 2000).

Consumption practices in China have become an important means of differentiation and division[27]. 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 consumers by class. Another is that patterns of consumption pattern are not always defined by class. This is because state subsidies of urban consumption, especially on housing, did not disappear completely (Chiu, 2001, Davis, 2000). Also, generation and gender influence the consumption of new goods and services as much as income level and class (Davis, 2000).

The way forward

Having outlined some of the terms and key debates that inform studies of consumption and some of the socio-economic and political contexts of

[27] Wank 2000, Wang, 2000 as quoted in Latham, 2002

consumerism in China, the rest of this thesis concerns itself with answering the following questions. What do reform and market forces look like in the everyday lives of ordinary people? How are the movements of consumer goods and narratives of transnational capitalism experienced at the local level? How does consumption mediate class formation in urban China? And, specifically, how do new ways of seeing the world - through goods, images, experiences, fashions and ideologies - promote new ways of being in the world?

Chapter Five: Consumption in Shenzhen

The Magic City

> 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, 2006: 195)

The legendary status of Shenzhen 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 foresight 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.

Shenzhen attracts a large number of university students and professionals. The allure of the city is great; wages are high and there is a tangible cosmopolitan atmosphere. People study in Shenzhen with a view to obtaining residency. By finding a white-collar job upon graduation, individuals can eventually obtain Shenzhen *hukou* (Liang and Chen, 2003: 194). This entitles individuals access to public health care and schools in the city. If one is wealthy however, Shenzhen *hukou* is unnecessary. The city has many private hospitals and schools for those who can afford them.

Giddens (1991: 81) writes that the more post-traditional a setting is, the

more lifestyle becomes the core of self-identity, in particular its making and remaking. This is certainly the case in Shenzhen. There consumption constitutes the main form of making and remaking identity. People consume goods and services for utilitarian purposes but also to express who they are. Consumption therefore is often symbolic. In addition to this, consumerism is now one of the few ideologies in China, along with nationalism, that individuals actively subscribe to. This chapter specifically examines how university students and professionals in Shenzhen create self-identity through consumption.

To recap briefly, this research focuses on young professionals. It 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. Two life stages in the trajectory of young professionals are studied: that of being a student at university and that of participating in the workforce. It is during these two life stages that individuals evolve into independent consumers and become socially mobile.

Of the 514 individuals who participated in the structured questionnaires – 15% grew up in an urban area, while 85% grew up in a rural area; and, 26% were singletons and 84% had siblings. The fact that so many of the interview subjects had siblings was surprising. The one-child policy was introduced in 1979 and the university students, average age 22 years, were born well into the 1980s. When I brought this anomaly up interview subjects were very amused. A frequent explanation was ‘people in Guangdong province don't like rules’. This may have been true for the students born in

Guangdong, but most student interviewees were from elsewhere. Taking a closer look at the data, there is an overlap between having siblings and being from a rural area. In urban areas, the one-child policy is strictly enforced. In rural areas, its introduction was gradual and implementation less rigid. A second child is permitted in some rural areas if the first child is a girl.

One of the students, Jiang, came from a family of six children. His experience of growing up illegally until his parents could buy *hukou* for him was echoed by a number of other individuals from rural areas. Five of the six children in Jiang's family were illegal and as such not entitled to resident status (*hukou*) in their hometown. This meant that they were ineligible for schooling and healthcare. Jiang and his illegal siblings were moved from relative to relative in Guangdong province to hide their existence from authorities. In this way they were able to attend school and learnt a number of trades by helping whichever aunt or uncle they were living with. As a result, Jiang and his siblings were expert in a wide range of skills including repairing shoes, mending fishing nets, running a restaurant, building doors and window frames, and making clothes.

Student life

University entrance

In 2007 around 9.5 million students sat the unversity entrance exam competing for 5.67 million university places[28]. Anxious parents go to great lengths to try and ensure that their children obtain a place. The uncertain economic climate has led to a sharp increase in the number of university

[28] http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200706/21/text20070621_386478.html, accessed on 20.10.07

applicants. The disappearance of jobs for life and state benefits mean that parents expect to rely on their children for economic support, and want them to be as well educated as possible. This means that children are often treated as a prized commodity. The pressure to get into university is even greater for singletons. They are expected to be the sole providers for their parents and two sets of grandparents, as well as their own families (Fong, 2004). Only an extremely well paid job enables one to support this many dependents. Such jobs are few, leading to increased competition and stress. Parents, of both singletons and non-singletons, in urban areas invest heavily in their children and are very involved in their lives.

The pressure to perform in the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao)* is intense. There are many cases of high school students having nervous breakdowns and even committing suicide. *Gaokao* takes place over three days. During this time cities adjust in order to accommodate the needs of the students. Traffic is redirected away from areas surrounding high schools and construction work stops. Outside schools teenagers cram right up to the last minute surrounded by anxious relatives. Sometimes there are as many as six adults - parents, and grandparents - hovering about feeding the candidate with chopsticks, mopping brows, and holding portable electric fans. Vendors are also present selling water, health tonics, energy foods and the use of masks attached to oxygen tanks.

Ms. Lee, a university staff member, revealed that she'd had to send her son to an elite boarding school. It was the only way of ensuring that he would do well in *gaokao.* Both she and her husband worked full-time so her son had spent much time with her parents who lived with them. Like many

grandparents in China, they had left their hometown to help raise their grandchild. An only child, Jinchuan was spoiled by his grandparents. He had become increasingly lazy and undisciplined. Ms. Lee felt undermined in her efforts to parent her child. The grandparents would get upset if Ms. Lee or her husband scolded Jinchuan for being messy or not doing his homework.

Boarding school had been extremely effective. Jinchuan's attitude had improved and for the first time he was doing well academically. 'It's like having a new son'. Ms. Lee's son lived at the school during the week and returned home on weekends. The school was located in Shenzhen and affiliated with the university where Ms. Lee taught. This meant Ms. Lee was exempt from the annual enrollment fee of RMB 20,000 and that school fees - covering books, tuition and board - were just RMB 800 per semester, half of what non-staff paid.

Many of Ms. Lee's university colleagues also sent their children to Shenzhen Zhongxue Waiyu Xueyan or similar elite schools. Many of these schools have exchange programmes with Canada and other western countries. The enormous popularity of such schools saw many Shenzhen parents buying an apartment in a prescribed catchment area in order to meet the school's residency requirements.

Utopia

> I love it here and never want to leave. We have so much fun together. A group of us jogged on the freeway at 4am in the rain. It was so cool. (Yun, 20 years)

> My mother used to phone five times a day but I bought a new mobile and haven't given her the number. I told her that the old one was stolen. I call her from a public phone sometimes but only when I feel like it. (Meng, 21 years)

Students love life on campus. The campus environment is beautiful; the university is a flagship for the Shenzhen government and funding is high. Locals refer to it as utopia (*shiwai taoyuan*). Initially life on campus is liberating. Having secured a hard-earned place, students can now relax and hovering parents are at a safe distance. Students enjoy the lack of parental control and having less pressure to perform. Having led very structured and controlled lives, their time is now their own. For many young professionals in China, going to university represents the first big step in realizing an independent self-identity.

Student consumption

University is an exciting time of personal exploration, exposure to new people and social situations, and for many, increased discretionary income. A significant number of students take on part-time jobs once they start university. Families of Shenzhen students are wealthier, better educated, and better integrated into the political system than those in other parts of the country (Agelasto, 1998). This is offset though by the high cost of living in Shenzhen.

In the in-depth interviews with students, 15 out of 33 worked part-time to make ends meet. Many worked tutoring high school students. University

tuition fees (RMB 5,000 -7,000) were generally paid by parents, borrowed from a bank or covered by a scholarship. Students worked part-time to cover daily living expenses like meals or leisure activities. Of the 33 students interviewed, 30 had parents who helped them financially.

Most students had to watch their finances very closely. Students often cycled long distances across town to buy slightly cheaper books and a recurring debate was whether the RMB 6 set-lunch at the canteen was really worth the extra RMB 2 or not. Favourite leisure activities, like watching films or television programmes on the internet, were free. Mass media in Shenzhen is far less restricted than in other parts of China. Students spend a lot of time on the internet consuming foreign produced media including news and entertainment. Although online reading about Chinese and foreign entertainment celebrities was popular, students were also interested in politics, culture and history. One of John Kerry's speeches was one of the most downloaded items on campus while I was there and many of the student BBS sites referred to this speech. Students were very interested in the US presidential race and how governments in other countries functioned.

The three activities that students liked to spend money on were - in order of preference - dining out, purchasing clothes and shoes, and buying books and magazines. Most of the students interviewed felt pressure to consume. The sources of this pressure were, in order of ranking, media advertising, fashion and trends, and friends and peers. Of the 33 students interviewed, 31 owned a mobile phone.

Discussions with students showed that debt, including credit card debt, was a growing problem. Initially it was difficult to discuss personal debt with students. The question ' Do you have any debt, and if so, how much' was invariably answered with 'No'. However, when asked about their friends debt situations, students were remarkably precise in the debt figures that they gave - for example, RMB 375. Such precise figures and very detailed discussions about how the debt was incurred, led to the conclusion that either the students were talking about their own personal debt, or that students discussed this matter in great detail with close friends. Either way, these figures are reasonable indication of debt levels.

Of the 33 students who participated in the in-depth interviews, 27 said that they had friends' with debts. Out of these 27 students: 18 had debts under RMB 1,000; 9 had debts over RMB 1,000; and 15 had a credit card.

The figure of 9 students out of 33 with debts over RMB 1,000 (not including debts for tertiary fees) is significant. For most students lending a sum of RMB 20 to a friend was considered a big favour. Friendships had ended because amounts as small as RMB 10 had not been repaid. Debts were incurred mainly to pay for daily living expenses, such as meals and snacks, rather than big-ticket expensive consumer items.

Resourcefulness

One of the research assistants, Ruichen, had held down part-time jobs from a young age and his experience was typical of students from rural areas. The first time I met my research assistant Ruichen, I was impressed by his

irrepressible enthusiasm, ambition and dishevelled appearance. His shirt needed a good wash and his glasses were patched together with a Band-Aid. A Masters student in Law, Ruichen had passed his exams and was waiting to graduate. In the meantime he was looking for a job and spent a lot of time trying to pinpoint job fairs. When asked what he most wanted in life Ruichen replied “a permanent job here in Shenzhen". It turned out that this was the dream of almost all students. When asked what the worst thing was that could happen to them, students usually replied "not finding a job here and having to return to my hometown."

Ruichen’s flawless English was the result of working for foreigners from a young age. He had learnt some English at high school but really become fluent when he started working during his high school holidays. Ruichen met foreigners by hanging round the railway station in Shenzhen or Guangzhou during trade fairs. There he approached foreigners and offered his services as a guide/assistant. As an assistant Ruichen interpreted, and often helped with the purchase and transportation of goods. Many clients were Indian or Pakistani businessmen who recommended him to others. On a few occasions I heard Ruichen ending phone conversations with a phrase in Urdu or Hindi. Like many people of his age in Shenzhen, Ruichen was curious about life outside China and keen to interact with foreigners. On campus Ruichen had many friends who were foreign exchange students. He often asked questions about their behaviour and English phrases that they used.

Other enterprising students earned money on campus by different kinds of services such as laundry and printing services, and even rooms which

could be rented by the night. These ‘hotels’ were a popular place to take one’s girlfriend for the night. Student entrepreneurship flourished often undercut existing merchants, who were licensed to operate on campus, causing a great deal of tension. The student BBS was littered with advertisements for rooms to rent on campus. These rooms cost Y50-70 per night furnished and contained all kinds of comforts that dorms don’t have, such as DVD players and televisions. These rooms were actually let to staff by the university. The staff who lived off campus often sublet their flats to students per term, who decorated and furnished them before renting them out per night.

Finding a job after graduation

As students approach graduation they start to experience pressure to find a job. Parents have often sacrificed a lot to pay tuition fees and students are keen to stay on in Shenzhen. In December and January of each year civil servants are recruited and private companies start their application rounds. As well as the enormous job fairs held down-town, many recruitment events are held by private companies on campus. The recruitment events for multinational companies such as Price Cooper Waterhouse and Unilever, which involved role-playing and problem solving tasks, were eagerly anticipated by students. Students described the goal of such activities as ‘discovering your real skills, not who your family connections are’.

During this time dormitories at the university were flooded with students’ friends and high school classmates who came to town for the job fairs. Many slept on the floor leading to tension and scuffles with dorm mates.

The huge influx of graduates could also be felt in the hospitality industry. Hotels were fully booked and there were many stories of large numbers of students sharing a single hotel room. A university degree no longer guarantees employment. In 2005 almost 27.6% of university leavers failed to find employment upon graduation[29].

Students were asked for whom they would like to work. The top three choices, in ranking order, were: foreign company, government department and government support units. The least popular choices were being self-employed and working for a local private company. Jobs with foreign firms are popular because wages are high and some students feel that they will learn a lot there. Students are keen on government jobs because of the good working conditions, fringe benefits, job security and status. Students were also asked what factors were most important when considering applying for a job. The top three, in order of ranking were: prospects for promotion, salary, and social status.

Students were frustrated by the recruitment process for government jobs. Many students said that entrance tests for these jobs only applied to individuals who did not have didn't have the right social connections (*guanxi*). There were whispers that jobs were automatically reserved for the 'stupid' children of officials. These children were rumoured to be even 'more stupid' than the students who had gained entry to the university, based on the fact that they had Shenzhen *hukou,* and who had lowered university standards. Some students preferred the idea of foreign firms because these were perceived as meritocratic and promotion there would not be based on

[29] http://www.edu.cn/degree_1414/20060310/t20060310_166466.shtml, accessed on 09.01.08

guanxi. There was also a lot of anger because the number of jobs as advertised by the municipal government did not materialize.

Life goals

Financial stability is an important goal for students. When asked which goals they wanted to reach by 40, students responded first, to have a healthy family then second to have a successful career. Owning property came in third place. Students grew up in state-owned housing but some moved to private housing when their parents bought homes in the 1990s.

Financial security also was a consideration for students on the question of future marriage. In the structured questionnaires, students were also asked 'At which age would you like to get married and why?' The average age for marriage was 28 years. This is two years older than 26 years, widely considered to be the ideal age for marriage in China. Students felt it would be better to marry later in order to be financially stable and to enjoy life first.

The following data is derived from the structured questionnaires completed by students. 93% wanted to get married in the future. 9% of females and 4% of males did not want to marry. Students were almost equally divided on the question of living together before marriage, with 54% supporting it and 46% against it. 86% expressed the wish to be a parent one day. The percentage of females who did not want children was marginally higher than that of males. On the issue of divorce, 2% of students felt that it was unacceptable regardless of the circumstances. 98% of students felt that acceptable reasons for divorce were, in ranking order, no longer being in

love, violence, incompatibility, infidelity, and spouse not earning enough money.

Male and female students had similar opinions with the exception of the last matter. The percentage of female students who felt that a low earning spouse was a good reason for divorce was almost double that of male students. This expectation of males to provide also manifests itself in student relationships. A good boyfriend was often defined as one who ‘often buys drinks and pays for snacks or meals’. The purchases were required to be frequent but not necessarily expensive.

Peer support

Students often experience their first intimate relationship at university. The following data is derived from the structured questionnaires completed by students. 70% of students had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Of these relationships over 80% had started on campus. Conversations with students revealed that this was a major event in their emotional lives. Many students from urban areas are unprepared for the freedom of university life. At home they had little unsupervised time and were closely monitored by their parents. Even if their communication with their parents is good, most parents are unable to comprehend the challenges of university life. 83% of students were the first generation to attend university.

Removed from their families and social networks, students were dependent on peers for support. Students who were interviewed said that they had almost no meaningful contact with guidance counsellors and that there was

little was offered in the way of mentoring support. Only a handful of students said they had contact with staff out of class and could discuss personal issues with them. When asked who they went to when facing a crisis, not a single student mentioned counsellors. In difficult times they turned to fellow students, friends back at home, or family. Guidance counsellors were described as ‘out of touch’ and staff as ‘too busy earning money with private jobs’.

Engaging in part-time work is a widespread practice among Chinese academics. In Shenzhen the salaries of state employees have been kept at low levels. University staff earn far less than those of similarly qualified professionals who are self-employed or work for foreign companies (Agelasto, 1998). In addition to this some staff feel ignored by the university administration, and choose to disengage, devoting their energies to “climbing the bureaucracy, making money, or emigrating to the West” (Link, 1992)[30].

> I feel like a nobody here, as though I am invisible. Many staff here own 3 or 4 investment properties, everyone goes on holidays to Europe or is planning to do that soon. Staff only talk about real estate and travel. At my old university no one spoke of such things, we didn’t have that kind of money. There a PhD meant something because not many people had one. Here in Shenzhen you need a PhD and a lot of money. (Staff member, 46 years)

Many new staff from outside Shenzhen found life exciting but difficult. The staff member above had recently moved from a more prestigious university in one of the provincial capitals. She was shocked at how little interest her

[30] Link, 1992 as quoted in Agelasto ,1998

colleagues showed in academic life. Most were so busy ‘with other things’ that they had no time to discuss the curriculum. Students reported that staff worked a lot for lucrative private companies, especially law firms.

Many of the problems that students encounter concern social interaction with other students. Wondering who students turned to when facing a personal crisis, I visited the student resource centre. The centre was established in the mid 1980s and offers both psychological help and career advice. Interestingly, the guidance counselor there had a degree in political science rather than one in psychology. Ms. Zhou was in her fifties and had worked at the university for 18 years. Before working in the student resource centre she had lectured in Marxist thought.

Ms. Zhou said that most students visited the resource centre to make use of career-related materials, like books, rather than to seek help. When asked about the types of problems students most sought psychological support for, Ms. Zhou said relationship problems. Her opinion was that campus romances lead to trouble and spending time together as a couple was bad for their individual development. Ms. Zhou added that young people should mix with the opposite sex but only as part of a large group.

Female students sometimes came for help with harassment issues. An ongoing problem was harassment by text message. These messages revealed that the student was being watched, with accurate descriptions of their clothing or activities, or contained lewd suggestions. The week that I visited a frightened student had been in, upset at having received over 80 such messages in the past 72 hours. Ms. Zhou’s advice had been to ‘stop

dressing flirtatiously and ignore it'.

Ms. Zhou had mixed feelings about the students. Students used to be content working for the collective goals of the party. Now they were individualistic, materialistic and spoiled. They wanted everything immediately; were easily bored; didn't understand sacrifice or long term planning; were given too many things too quickly; and, as a result weren't able to experience the satisfaction of achievement. In addition to this, Ms. Zhou believed that academic standards had declined sharply due to the greater number of students. These comments were not surprising. The increasing commercialization of education means that similar opinions can be heard not just in China, but also in universities around the world.

On the positive side, Ms. Zhou found today's students more capable of looking after themselves after graduation; more proactive; and, more mature and independent. She attributed these characteristics to students being able to access information via the internet and awareness that the job market is very competitive. "The scrapping of automatic assignment of jobs to graduates (*fenpei)* changed things a lot". Ms. Zhou always told students to ask for a lower salary than advertised, to ensure they got the job.

Familiar with Hong Kong where student credit card debt is a problem, I raised the topic. Ms. Zhou explained that students in China are unable to obtain credit cards. Just an hour earlier, I had passed bank representatives from two different banks energetically handing put credit card applications forms while walking to the resource centre. The promotion strategies were similar to those used in Hong Kong. One bank offered a free MP3 player

with each application and the other a chance to win an expensive mobile phone.

When Ruichen opened his wallet and pulled out his student ID and credit card, Ms. Zhou was genuinely surprised. She then quizzed Ruichen excitedly and asked whether he thought she would be able to apply for one. The rest of the conversation revealed that Ms. Zhou was fairly out of touch with the lives of the students. She did not know the price of university tuition, the cost of text books or how much a meal was in the student canteen. Ms. Zhou's unawareness may have been due to simple disinterest or her own situation of financial security. Like many of her older colleagues her job was for life.

Financial pressure is recognized as the main causes of suicide at universities in China. Figures from the Ministry of Education indicate that around 2.63 million university students suffer from poverty, making up 19% of the total national student population[31]. Poor parents often go into debt so that their children can attend university. It's the children of these parents who are most likely to attempt suicide if they don't do well academically. Student suicide is not a rare occurrence. It is an extremely sensitive issue in China and difficult to obtain accurate figures on. Three separate staff members revealed off the record that in 2004 up to six students had successfully committed suicide and that 10-15 unsuccessful attempts had been made. The total number of enrolled students in 2005 was approximately 15,000. This means that the suicide rate at that particular university was 39.9 per 100,000. Students and staff said that the

[31] http://www.edu.cn/Newswin_1547/20060323/t20060323_142176.shtml, accessed on 14.11.07

disproportionately high suicide rate had the authorities worried. However, very little was done to help students in practical terms.

Values and identity

Young people have a bad reputation in China. They are often depicted as spoilt, lazy, irresponsible, and selfish. State publications have accused university students of extreme individualism, pleasure seeking and money worship (see Reed 1998:361). My findings question some of these notions.

The following data is derived from the structured questionnaires. When asked to name what the government should spend money on - the top three answers in order of ranking were: help the poor, social welfare programs and the environment. Also, over 40% of students interviewed were engaged in some kind of volunteer work. This work included mentoring peers, organizing student activities, and teaching children of nearby migrant workers to read.

Students have also been labelled as too commercially minded when choosing courses (Liu, 1998: 132). Given the dire financial predicament that many students find themselves in, it is not surprising that they make practical choices. The desperation that permeates Shenzhen job fairs is very real.

Moral and political education campaigns were regularly conducted at the university. As the city's flagship university it was expected to provide a shining example. Amounts as large as Y1.3 million had been allocated for a

single campaign[32]. Such exercises annoyed students who described them as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘hypocritical’. The previous autumn the university imposed new rules regarding student behaviour and attire. Students were banned from public displays of affection. Kissing or holding hands were forbidden, along with halter neck and sleeveless tops for girls. Transgressors would be expelled from the university. This had caused an enormous uproar and thousands of angry messages filled the student BBS’es. Eventually one of the students leaked the story to a journalist. After its publication the new rules were rescinded.

Many students had undisguised contempt for the university administration. Some students described the relationship as ‘we are at war with them’. Cynical students enjoyed showing each other newspaper articles describing the latest university scandal, and in China there are many. Scandals include plagiarism by staff, misappropriation of funds, bogus research results, commercial bribery - academics often work on government advisory panels, and lavishing money on useless prestige projects. These students, like those studied by Reed (1998: 371) were caught between being forced to take responsibility for financing their education and find their own jobs, and having to conform to strict ideological education with inflexible prescribed behaviours The personal initiative and independent decision making was rewarded in some situations and punished in others. This incongruity was the source of much student frustration.

On another level, however, the university experience did shape the values of students. The example of staff taught the students that moneymaking

[32] Hertling 1996: A45 as quoted in Reed, 1998

activities were paramount – far more important than the education process. Students also learnt duplicitousness on both a personal and institutional level. Campus life exposes students to the machinations of a system where many people in authoritative positions are not doing what they are supposed to. Within this system the consequences for talking one way but acting another are slight. This system along with the university's profitable black economy played an important pedagogical role. Students learned essential skills for life after graduation – such as the art of cultivating social networks, the difference between public and private, and how to overlook discrepancies and indiscretions.

Largely left to their own devices, students industriously organized their own lives. Many students were active in committees and clubs, arranging film nights, sporting events and informal study sessions. The campus was known to be dangerous at night and boys often escorted girls back to their dormitories. The disparate lives of staff and students strengthened student unity and identity. A perceived slight by Kingway beer, years earlier, had led to a student boycott of the product. The boycott was still in force in 2005. Students enjoyed showing solidarity on-line. Many discussions about how to defend their reputation, as students of that particular university, took place on student BBS-es that were all hosted by the university server.

Seething online lynch mobs manifested when the students' reputation was brought into question. A Canadian exchange student provoked 723 abusive messages within the 24 hours when he advertised on a BBS looking for a Mandarin tutor. He had specified that the tutor be 'good looking, tall, and female'. Furious students called the Canadian student a 'lecherous

foreigner out for sex' and a 'pervert, comparing him to Chen Ning Yang, the 82 year old Nobel Prize winner who had become engaged to a 28-year-old post-graduate student. Students felt that they had been collectively insulted. Some messages suggested tracking him down and taking retaliatory action.

Although some events unified students, the rural-urban divide that characterizes China was also present on campus among students. Students from urban areas were wealthier and mingled together. Students also preferred to socialize with those from the same hometown, province, or language group. Although it was rumoured that wealthy students with Shenzhen *hukou* frequented expensive nightclubs and drove expensive imported cars, I did not observe this. Many students visited night clubs on the weekend but their consumption was usually limited to just one beer or soft drink for the whole evening. The main difference between wealthy and poor students was that those from well-off families did not have to take out student loans to pay for tuition or work part-time to cover their daily living expenses.

To sum up – at university, students are exposed to new ways of thinking, new people, and new forms of consumption. Having part-time jobs enables students to purchase goods that were previously unavailable to them. Unlike other Chinese universities, where the student-teacher relationship is often a close one, most students at this university had to fend for themselves. The milieu at this particular university forces students to be very reliant on their peers. Being away from their parents means that students are free to do what they want but as graduation approaches there is intense pressure to find a job.

The students encountered during fieldwork spent their time studying and socializing with one another on campus. For most students money was tight and they did not have the means to indulge in stock market speculation or purchase expensive PDA's and overseas holidays, as widely reported[33].

Professional life

At work

Graduate students find work in a variety of sectors of the Shenzhen economy. These include real estate, advertising, retail, hospitality, law and financial services. Employers are the private and state sectors, and are Chinese and foreign. In 1998 around 17.5 million Chinese were working in the foreign business sector (Zhang, 2005). Many of these positions were in middle and senior management (Zhang, 2000). Individuals who work in middle and upper tier managers in multinational Western and Japanese companies form the core of the business elite in the foreign sector (Pearson, 1997 in Zhang, 2005).

> All my friends prefer to work for foreign companies. The salary is higher, you learn new management skills and ideas and they train you. Also, they are more stable – lots of Chinese companies fail within the first couple of years.
>
> (Alan, engineer, 28 years)

The following data is derived from the structured questionnaires completed

[33] See for example, "Students Warned Away from Stock Market, China Daily 25.05.07.

by young professionals. 63% worked in the private sector. Of this group, 71% worked for foreign companies. This high percentage is due to Shenzhen's position as a gateway to China for manufacturing and investment, and the popularity of working for a foreign company. In 2006, 113 of the top 500 global multinational companies had offices in Shenzhen. Employees of foreign financial, commercial, and service industries, are usually paid much higher wages than their counterparts in domestic industries (Wank, 1999: 270).

Like the issue of student debt, salaries were also a sensitive topic. This was not a problem when collecting data using questionnaires, as these were anonymous. When conducting in-depth interviews face-to-face the salary question was tricky. To overcome this, professionals were asked to divulge the average monthly salary of someone working in a similar position with similar qualifications. It became clear that salaries differed significantly depending on the company. The salary range of interviewees was RMB 4,000 – RMB 25,000 per month. The average salary was RMB 11,000 per month.

Women often struggle for equal treatment in the workforce. Despite the women's rights movement, established after 1949 and the CCP ideology of women as 'holding up half the sky', Chinese society is still deeply patriarchal. Female professionals were quick to point out that they were often paid lower salaries than male colleagues, and that they were not promoted at the same speed.

> The women at work are tall, fair-skinned and beautiful. The men are hideous, that's

> life. I was lucky to get a job there with my single eyelids (*dan yan pi)* and dark skin. And I'm under 160cm. (Penny, account manager, 26 years)

Women are also expected to be physically attractive. In China job advertisements often have a height requirement or state that applicants should have 'regular features' (*wu guan duan zheng*). In other words, ugly or deformed people should not apply. Women felt that these requirements were applied more strictly to women than men and enjoyed mocking bizarre civil service requirements that stipulated symmetrical breasts and no O-shaped legs.

New skills

In the new economy individuals have to compete for jobs. As commodities in the market, individuals need a competitive edge and this requires mastering a number of new skills. These skills include selling oneself, speaking standard Mandarin, and networking. The ability to present and sell oneself is essential. Formal job interviews were a new experience when first introduced by foreign companies (Zhang, 2005). Unlike the pre-reform era when jobs were allocated, individuals now have the responsibility of finding themselves employment. To make a good impression at job interviews it is essential for professionals to package themselves and behave according to the rules of the new market. A detailed understanding of these rules is vital to secure a job and to get ahead.

The ability to speak both standard Mandarin, as spoken on mainland Chinese television and radio, and English is increasingly important (Zhang, 2005). Globalization has linked China with a Chinese transnational

capitalist community (Ong & Nonini, 1997) as well as the global economy. Overseas Chinese businesses, situated in many countries including Hong Kong and Taiwan, have played a key role in the development of China. Together they comprise the largest source of direct foreign investment in mainland China. In addition to this overseas Chinese are often employed by western multinationals to run their operations in China. Participants often sprinkled their Mandarin with English words. Some individuals agreed to be interviewed on the condition that it was conducted in English. Over half of all participants had jobs that required English.

In the pre-reform era, social networks discretely facilitated access to goods and services and helped secure protection (Yu and Tng: 2003, p.190). The post reform period has seen an increasing reliance on personal networks *(guanxiwang)*. These are based on the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence. *Guanxiwang* entail creating obligation and indebtedness through the exchange of gifts, favours, and banquets (Yang: 1994). Participants are obliged to give, to receive, and to repay.

> In the post-Mao era of economic liberalization, personal networks are one of the primary means by which individuals navigate disjunctures and radical shifts in China's social order. The proliferation of such networks is both an outcome of and a catalyst for increased privatization, of not only the economy but also nearly all realms of life in China. (Yu and Tng, 2003: 192)

In Shenzhen, this type of social capital is extremely important for the rising economic elite. This is because it can potentially be converted into economic capital (Wang, 2000). Private entrepreneurs work outside the established state system. As outsiders they need social networks to

facilitate access to limited economic capital - state and foreign. The highly unregulated nature of the market stimulates entrepreneurs to seek trust in economic transactions and thereby reduce their risks.

Consumption practices

> When I got my first pay check it felt like heaven. I treated three of my friends to dinner at a Cantonese seafood restaurant followed by drinks at Starbucks. We took taxis everywhere. (Bing, lawyer, 25 years)

Earning a proper wage signifies that beginning of the transition from student to professional life. Describe the financial temptations of Shenzhen. The high wages in Shenzhen mean that the consumption patterns of professionals there are different from those in other cities (Agelasto, 1998). Another factor is the unparalled access to goods and services in Shenzhen. Billboards reveal that major luxury brands, like Chanel and Prada, are available. Flyers given out on the street advertise health clubs and gyms, and websites like ShenzhenParty.com promote an endless series of food buffets, wine tastings, and dance parties.

The most expensive items that professionals bought were property and cars. The following data is derived from the structured questionnaires completed by young professionals. 33% owned their own property, 28% owned a car, and all owned a mobile phone. Other than mortgage and car payments, the three things that they spent money on were - in order of preference - dining out, purchasing clothes and shoes, and, nightlife. 82% felt pressure to consume. The sources of this pressure were, in order of

ranking, friends and peers, fashion and trends, and media advertising.

In terms of consumer aspirations, professionals desired, in ranking order, property, a car and to be able travel frequently. Most professionals have clear memories of living in homogenous cramped state housing and are keen to purchase and personalize their own home. In terms of travel, it has become a lot easier to travel overseas in the past few years. These days individuals only require an ID card and a residence permit in order to apply for a passport. Prestige is derived from travelling overseas especially if done on an individual basis rather than as part of a tour group. As one informant observed ‘people don’t respect you in Shenzhen if you don’t travel regularly for work or fun’.

The following data is derived from the structured questionnaires completed by young professionals. 43% had travelled for leisure within China, including Hong Kong, and 23% had travelled for leisure outside of China.

In-depth interviews indicated that travel within China was often to cultural sites in China or to Hong Kong - a popular place for shopping. The quality and variety of goods and standard of service there were seen as superior. These interviews also revealed that Japan, France, and the UK were the most popular overseas travel destinations.

This preference for the foreign also extended to everyday consumption. If participants could afford it they shopped at supermarkets like Carrefour and Jusco, department stores such as Walmart and Seibu, and B&Q and Ikea for home renovation and furnishings.

The in-depth interviews with professionals revealed that debt, including credit card debt, was a problem but individuals were reluctant to offer any details. When asked about debt levels of 'friends' respondents gave vague answers such as '*bu tai qingqu'* (it's unclear). For every individual who was able to manage their finances there seemed to be another who was not. I was aware of many individuals who were financially reckless and were unable to curb their spending. It is not unusual for people to spend their monthly salary within a fortnight of receiving it. People lent one another money and this was a great source of friction among friends and colleagues.

The next section takes a closer look at homeownership - the number one goal of young professionals.

Homeownership

The majority of 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% of the original price to make the apartment habitable and to furnish it. Many residents moved from pre-reform style housing, with a shared toilet and kitchen, to a self-contained apartment. This required extensive planning and comparative 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.

Customers with no idea of how to plan their homes had posed a substantial problem for B&Q, a UK home renovation store. The Chinese B&Q stores are unique in that they offer installation and design services. The head of the 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 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. An interior decoration magazine eventually set her straight but by then, the tiles had already been laid.

Mr. Wu, a manager in the same store spoke of wealthy clients from the Chinese hinterland arriving with briefcases of cash, scribbling down an address and instructing him to have a house decorated and fully functioning by a certain date. This was the arrival date in Shenzhen of the wife and family of the client. '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 showed up at B&Q, complaining and wanting to know 'why the windows don't have blue glass'. Mr. Wu explained that the company's design service was launched to address these types of calamities.

These days the design service offers advice to customers before fittings are

purchased. 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. According to the B&Q web site the decoration service makes up 40% of sales. In 2006 it designed and fitted out 30,000 apartments. Of the professionals interviewed 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 to purchase materials, which were viewed as high quality, and for inspiration.

Professionals who did not own an apartment yet also spent significant sums beautifying their homes. Shenzhen has many home furnishing stores including Ikea and Romanjoy. Much time and effort was also put into personalizing one's home. As Davis (2000) notes purchasing items to increase comfort, value or distinction has taken on an importance difficult to imagine in the previous decades of work unit-controlled housing.

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*[34].
>
> (Meilian, 33 years, sales director)

Earlier in the day I had received a text message. Meilian was having

[34] Words in italics spoken in English

housewarming drinks at her new apartment in Nanshan at 8pm. During the previous week over 20 text messages had flown back and forth between Melian and her friends debating the time. 8pm suited friends who have to drive across town and those working until 7pm. No one wanted to miss out on seeing Meilian's new apartment. Newly built, it was part of a new development rumoured to have broken local real estate records, the price per square foot was said to equal that in Shanghai.

The apartment was located on a dusty road near a prominent restaurant precinct in the Nanshan district. Three residential buildings were being constructed in the same street. The entire street was a building site: rubble, whining drills, jackhammers, and dust everywhere. Threadbare clothing flapping on lines belonged to migrant labourers who lived with their families on site.

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 dilapidated pond in the courtyard seemed to confirm this. Only the bright cheerful banner on the building announcing opening hours of the show flat confirmed that it was the correct address. The interior of the building was surprisingly dissimilar to its exterior. Cool white marble tiles lined the floors and the lobby was decorated with well-tended potted palms, large mirrors, and chrome light fittings. It was a quiet cool oasis that contrasted with the dusty, noisy chaos outside.

Entering the flat, I saw that it was still an empty shell. Meilian was opening a bottle of red wine and guests were seated on the floor. After a toast,

Meilian took a piece of chalk and drew a floor plan on the concrete floor. What excited her most was the bathroom. Melian wanted the bathroom to be wall-less and to position the bath next to the largest sea-view window. I asked whether a wall-less bathroom was practical. Everyone laughed. ‘You are such a Hong Konger, all practicality and no creativity!’ During my stay in Shenzhen I visited many new apartments and observed that the desire to be an individual, innovative, and most of all – have control of one’s domestic space - was strong.

Life goals

Health and happiness are important goals for professionals. The following data is derived from the structured questionnaires completed by young professionals. When asked which goals they wanted to reach by 40, professionals responded first, to have a healthy family, second, to be wealthy and third, to be happy.

Professionals were asked ‘At which age would you like to get married?’ and ‘Why that specific age?’ The average age for marriage was 29 years. Like students, professionals believed that marrying later would facilitate financial stability and being able to enjoy life first.

82% wanted to get married in the future. This figure is 9% lower than that of students (93%). 14% of females and 19% of males did not want to get married. On the question of living together before marriage, 84% supported it and 16% were against it. 74% expressed the wish to be a parent one day.

On the issue of divorce, 3% of professionals felt that it was unacceptable regardless of the circumstances. 97% of professionals felt that acceptable reasons for divorce were, in ranking order, no longer being in love, infidelity, violence, incompatibility, and spouse not earning enough money. The expectation of men to shower women with gifts is widespread in Shenzhen.

> Recently I met a beautiful woman, an air stewardess, 1.72 metre tall and slim. She rings me 20 times a day and is very sweet. Every time we're in bed she asks me to buy her something like a new watch or a mobile phone. That's just normal here.
>
> (Ming, entrepreneur, 38 years)

Changing life values and goals

In the transition from student to professionals, some life goals and values change significantly. This was revealed during the in-depth interviews and corroborated by the data from the structure questionnaires. For a comparison of the data derived from the student structured questionnaires and the professional structured questionnaires, see the appendix.

On the issue of whether more money results in greater happiness, there was a significant drop from 57% for students to 22% for professionals. In Shenzhen the dramatic increase in income that accompanies entry to the workforce brings many new challenges. In-depth interviews revealed that young professionals feel pressured to show off their new wealth and that the many temptations that Shenzhen offers in the way of nightlife and entertainment are difficult to resist.

On the issue of whether living together before marriage is acceptable, there was an increase from 54% for students to 84% for professionals. Graduation signals the end of on-campus accommodation. In China living together before marriage with a long-term boyfriend is common in the big cities and is accepted by most of the urban population. There is an expectation though that the couple will eventually marry at some point.

Professionals also share accommodation with peers. Flatsharing is a relatively new phenomenon in China and is viewed as an acceptable way of saving money and having company. The choice of flat mate is usually someone with a similar educational background, and occasionally with someone of the opposite sex like the brother of a colleague. Women like the safety aspect of living with a man and men enjoy having the emotional support that women are seen to provide.

Both sexes enjoy the cachet of being viewed by their peers as modern and broad-minded. This form of flat sharing is frowned upon by the older generation and women with a male flat mate generally keep this secret from their parents.

On the issue of becoming a parent there is no change. Male participants who did not want children said that this was due to financial pressures, instability of life in China, and the polluted environment. Female participants who did not want children often said things like ‘your in-laws will nag you all the time’, ‘everybody has an opinion on how to raise your child’, ‘the child will face unbearable pressure’, ‘there are no good men’ and ‘women are expected to work and to take care of everything at home, including the

baby'.

Not wanting children is partially explained by life in Shenzhen. People don't see their parents regularly, as they do in their home towns, so they are less subject to pressure to have a child. In addition to this, Shenzhen is expensive and people become attached to a particular lifestyle and standard of living. The cost of raising a child in Shenzhen is much higher than in other cities and couples do not want to lose income for up to a year after the child is born. Sometimes retired grandparents move to Shenzhen to help raise their grandchildren but as one informant said 'the great thing about life here is that you are far away from your family'.

Job-hopping

People abscond from work, arrive late while still intoxicated or under the influence of drugs from the night before, poach clients from friends' companies, and change jobs frequently. The reasons for job-hopping are higher wages, opportunities for career development, better prospects for promotion, a bad relationship with a superior at work, and simple short-term thinking. Young professionals are not concerned with job security as they expect the economy to keep growing.

Job-hopping, for just a slight wage increase or because the work is unsatisfactory, is common. Jinchuan was hired by a multinational accounting company. His starting salary was high and received a package that included health insurance, gym membership and other perks. After just

18 months, Jinchuan left the company disillusioned. Initially he enjoyed the job, especially the contact with overseas Chinese colleagues. However, he disliked the fact that every aspect of his work had to be checked and re-checked by his seniors. ‘I cannot make a single decision on my own; everything I do has to be approved by someone else. It's like being a robot’. Entrepreneurial by nature, Jinchuan set up a successful company that produces and exports women’s underwear to the Middle East.

Consumption and identity

One night I saw an interesting incident in a Sichuanese restaurant. My husband and I were there with Xioahong and Yunfen, a couple whom I had interviewed the previous weekend. The restaurant was very popular and we were lucky to get a table without a reservation. The cuisine was modern Sichuanese. The large white dining space was decorated with minimalist furniture and three enormous woven baskets added a rural accent. The restaurant’s hip reputation was sealed by the quirky recording playing in the toilets. A sexy female French voice could be heard giving instructions on how to repair a lift in halting English – interspersed with 1960s vibraphone music.

During dinner restaurant staff appeared preoccupied and agitated. At one point muffled thuds and hoarse shouts could be heard emanating from one of the private dining rooms. The noise from the room became progressively louder and staff ran towards it. Loud banging noises could be heard followed by shrieks. Intrigued, I walked through the restaurant following the noise. Staff stood outside the dining room attempting to barricade unruly

diners in the private room. Eventually the doors flew open and eight brawling diners spilled out. These drunken escapees were roughly grabbed by staff who stuffed them back in the room, using their bodies to barricade the doors shut. Suddenly the manager appeared screaming ‘use the chairs’. Waiters ran to get these and jammed them under the door handles, preventing further escape.

Later in the evening dishevelled guests emerged from the same dining room. These guests were *jiurou pengyou,* people who were networking through eating and drinking together. On my way to the restroom I peeked in the door. The floor was littered with overturned tables and chairs, dozens of empty wine and beer bottles. Lying on the floor were also three drunken diners - two dishevelled men and one comatose woman whose uphoisted dress revealed her underwear. Most shocking were the piles of uneaten food that lay on the floor.

Conspicuous consumption had reached new heights in Shenzhen. The city’s frenzied entrepreneurial climate meant that luxury restaurants often functioned as arenas where businessmen entertained and built of their personal networks. Xiaohong and Yunfen were blasé about the episode and described it as ‘Christmas excitement’. Other customers were also unaffected – no one batted an eyelid at drunken guests staggering around covered in food or the bloodcurdling shrieks. The potlatch-like display of wealth was not a one-off and I saw similar scenes on several other occasions.

In recent years the state has denounced excessive consumption as

immoral and launched frugality campaigns[35]. 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 in Shenzhen mean that conspicuous consumption is the most effective way of displaying one's wealth. You are what you buy.

Exuberant consumption

> When you first get here you are innocent but there are so many temptations. Shenzhen is like a beautiful sexy girl beckoning to you from across the road, you can't refuse her. You know that if you ignore her she'll hunt you down, there's no escaping her. (Ben, hotel manager, 40 years)

Professionals often spoke of the temptations of Shenzhen. The language used often portrayed the city as an inescapable force that everyone eventually succumbs too. Resistance was futile. 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.

Many of the professionals I met went out 4-6 evenings per week. Favourite activities were dining out, salsa classes, exercising at the gym, polishing their public speaking skills at Toastmasters, networking, singing karaoke, or

[35] For example, see http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/English/e2005/e200511/p10.htm

dancing in nightclubs. Socializing on a weeknight until 2 a.m. was common. During the weekend, high-end nightclubs were packed to maximum capacity until closing time at 5 a.m. Popular high-end haunts were the V Bar at the Crowne Plaza hotel and Dafudi Habibi, a Moroccan-style restaurant, bar and karaoke complex.

A busy social schedule is imperative for professionals and no expense is spared. Salsa classes are around RMB 500 for 20 lessons and the membership of a fashionable downtown gym is usually RMB 400 per month for unlimited use. The most money is spent in nightclubs where drinks cost between RMB 20-40, which is expensive considering that an average professional salary is RMB 6,000 (€600) per month. Individuals often treat their friends by purchasing a whole bottle of spirits in a club for RMB 250. Unlike their Hong Kong compatriots who enjoy cup and dice games in night clubs, Shenzhen professionals danced wildly on any available space, including sofas, and drank large quantities of alcohol. The V Bar had to engage extra bouncers to stop women charging the stage when the nightly tequila drinking competition was announced.

Young professional life in Shenzhen is characterized by exuberant consumption [36] , recklessness, and one-upmanship. People enjoyed describing their own lives or that of friends as 'excessive' (*guofen*). Binge drinking, consumption of drugs such as ecstasy and amphetamine, and casual sex were common. Although these behaviours can be observed in other large Chinese cities, there they occur in less extreme forms and are limited to much smaller sections of the population.

[36] This apt term is borrowed from Tomba (2004)

> Shenzhen is like a non-stop American style freshman year. The party never ends.
>
> (foreign academic, 46 years)

Another foreigner likened life in the city to spring break in Cancun. Either way, professionals in Shenzhen are determined to enjoy themselves. Away from the prying eyes of relatives and finally cashed up, life really is one big party.

Us and them

> 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 what is it that defines membership of the Shenzhen's professional class? Is it high social status? Shenzhen's inhabitants all enjoy a certain amount of prestige simply by residing there. Living and working in the city signals success. Residents, whether they work in a restaurant or a bank, are the envy of friends and family back home.

Returning to the concept of 'three big items' (*san dajian),* we see that this 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,

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). The three big items are now: homeownership, a car and travel.

Lifestyle is one way of defining social status. Economic reform has created the freedom to personalize one's home and more importantly - the freedom to choose one's neighbours. It is now possible to live among people who lead a similar lifestyle and to avoid association with those who don't. Looking at Shanghai housing advertisements, Fraser (in Davis, 2000) observes the popularity of the concepts of privacy and havens.

Collective leisure has made way for social interaction in a wide variety of private spaces. Professionals attended many activities for the purpose of meeting an interacting with other professionals. The two most popular gyms in Shenzhen had their own hiking and wine tasting clubs, and often organized picnics and dances for its members. Like the Shanghainese studied by Gamble (2002), Shenzhen professionals relate more to the affluent lifestyles of their Chinese counterparts in Taiwan or the U.S., than with their fellow citizens.

One of the biggest changes engendered by consumerism is in the area of social stratification. The socialist hierarchy created under Mao has been

turned upside down. Consumerism has spawned social mobility and enabled people to redefine their social status in terms of consumption and lifestyle.

According to Veblen‘s theory of pecuniary emulation, consumption is built on a tiered logic. The fastest way of acquiring social prestige is to emulate the lifestyle of those higher up in the pecking order. In Malaysia (Smith, 1999) observed that workers aspired to middle class lifestyles and bought cheaper versions of the middle class status items. These items such as lounge suites looked similar but were made of less expensive materials. Workers educated their children in middle class lifestyles by taking them to middle class supermarkets and shopping malls.

So how do Chinese professionals distinguish themselves from wannabe’s or *baofahu* (the new rich)? One way is to embrace a different aesthetic. As mentioned earlier, consumer choices are often made in opposition to those made by other classes. Now that mainstream China is mad about foreign products, young professionals have started to buy goods that embody a modern Chinese design aesthetic. This is similar to Singapore where there has been resurgence in the popularity of the *cheongsam* and other types of ethnic clothing (Chua, 2003:79).

Shenzhen has a number of boutique stores that specialize in modern domestic design. These include furniture and interior decor shops. Paintings and ceramics in this style can be found in the homes of young professionals. For those who find the variety of modern Chinese design lacking in Shenzhen there is Shanghai. A popular weekend excursion

involved flying to Shanghai for the weekend to buy clothes made by local designers. Interestingly, a friend claimed that her brother was one of the first people in Shenzhen to wear a traditional Chinese silk jacket with jeans. Interestingly, his inspiration had been a photo of George Bush at the 2001 APEC summit.

Chapter conclusion

Despite an increase in income through part-time jobs, and exposure to new forms of consumption, most university students were prudent with their finances. Debts were incurred mainly to pay for daily living expenses, such as meals and snacks, rather than big-ticket expensive consumer items.

This changed dramatically once individuals entered the workforce. Young professional life in Shenzhen is characterized by exuberant consumption, recklessness, and one-upmanship. Debt was common and people were proud to describe their lives or that of friends as ‘excessive’ (*guofen*).

Professionals, having experienced the homogeneous mass consumption of the pre-reform era, were keen to personalize their homes and use goods to reflect their individual taste. Consumer goods were also used by middle class professionals to articulate their social identity. By purchasing goods that expressed a different aesthetic, Shenzhen professionals distinguish themselves from other classes such as *baofahu* (the new rich).

PART II

Chapter Six: Consuming Experiences

> You're foreign aren't you? Do you like *Sex and the City*? My friends and I have watched every single episode ……Last year was great, my world changed. I bought my first car, went on my first trip to Japan, and had sex with a foreigner for the first time. (Mei, 28 years)

Returning to Mei's comments in chapter one, see above. These took place at the start of the fieldwork and sparked a number of questions regarding the sexual freedom of Chinese women, the influence of foreign television programmes, and Mei's surprising classification of a particular type of sexual experience with buying a car and overseas travel. As the fieldwork progressed it became clear that Mei's comments were common among a particular type of middle class professional woman and an important means of expressing social identity.

This chapter delineates the relationship between consumption and identity among young Chinese professionals. This is achieved by specifically examining the consumption of sexual experience as a marker of professional middle class identity in Shenzhen. Sexual behaviour and the extraordinary manner of recounting it, as encountered during the Shenzhen fieldwork, are placed in the context of existing explanations for China's ongoing sexual revolution.

Several explanations are examined, the most popular being the relaxation of sexual repression by the state. I argue that existing explanations for

China’s sexual revolution are insufficient to fully account for what was encountered during the Shenzhen fieldwork. I contend that other elements are at work: class formation, media, and idiosyncrasies of the specific fieldwork location.

Initially Mei’s micro-skirt, expensive designer bag, and immaculate grooming gave the impression that she was a kept woman or high-end sex worker. In Shenzhen it’s not unusual to meet *ernai* (mistresses) and sex workers at private parties in people’s homes. Prostitution and concubinage was abolished when the PRC was founded in 1949. However, the economic reforms introduced since the 1980s have seen the resurgence of these phenomena.

The main reasons for this revival of prostitution and concubinage are economic. First, there are now a lot more wealthy men around and second, young women from rural areas are attracted to urban areas by higher living standards. A significant number of these women become sex workers with the aim of earning fast money then returning home to start their own business. However, many women stay on permanently having tasted the sophisticated urban life that their new wealth gives them access to. Some eventually become the mistresses of wealthy men but most remain full-time sex workers. As one of China's wealthiest cities, Shenzhen has a disproportionately high number of sex workers and second wives.

Eventually it transpired that Mei was not a high-end sex worker but an accountant with a multinational firm. The fieldwork subsequently revealed that Mei's comments were not unusual among a particular type of middle

class professional woman and in time I came to hear them frequently. Much has been made of the link between economic reform and sexual behaviour. The Chinese media teems with images of immoral women who willingly become sex workers for materialistic reasons. My research, like that of Farrer and Sun (2003), is grounded in the idea that not all sexual relations in urban China can be reduced to economic exchange. This study focuses on sexual behaviour that is non-commercial by nature.

The concept of sex as an experience that can be consumed by women is relatively new in China. This notion is still evolving and is subscribed to by young professional women in China's large cities. Although the number of individuals who hold this belief is small, it is likely that it will 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 they perceive to be professional middle class values and behaviours.

Consumption has often been studied as an important way of reproducing class. Objects of consumption have long been used to culturally reproduce social identities (Slater, 1997). The idea is that consumption patterns are deeply embedded in class habits and politics of distinction. In China, an ongoing process sees the old class system based on a party elite and workers crumbling. A new class system is now emerging that is largely based on individual wealth. China is still undergoing social transformation and will continue to do so for some time. As China's new social order is still evolving, consumption cannot be studied as simply a tool for reproducing existing classes. Instead, consumption should be viewed as a means of negotiating new social identities.

In China a new openness about sex has accompanied the economic reforms that have taken place since the 1980s. Discussions regarding changing sexual attitudes and practices have become prominent features of popular culture. Sex in post-reform China has also been a popular topic for researchers. It been studied through many lenses ranging from sexual attitudes and private morality (Farrer, 2003) to sex and the elderly (Shea, 2005).

This section of the thesis is based on 38 in-depth interviews with middle class professionals. All 38 subjects were female and unmarried. 4 had steady partners[37], 9 had new relationships[38], and 25 were single. The average age was 29, with nearly three quarters of the subjects in the 26-34 age group. All subjects had graduated from university, and 6 had a master's degree. None of the subjects were 'only children', and just 14 grew up in urban areas. One third of the subjects had reached middle level management positions. None of the subjects were self-employed.

The consumption of experiences

The initial aim of the Shenzhen fieldwork was to study the role of consumption practices in forming social identity among young Chinese professionals, and to provide a detailed account of the practices that make up contemporary professional middle class life. Existing literature pointed to material goods as the key to understanding consumption (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Bearing this in mind, fieldwork interviews were designed

[37] more than 6 months
[38] relationships of less than 6 months

to focus on the possession of, or aspiration to acquire material goods, such as houses and cars.

This focus changed during the course of the research when it became clear that female participants had another topic on their minds – the consumption of experiences. Interviews designed to elicit information about financial and career goals from young professional women quickly turned into sessions where subjects proudly displayed their worldliness by recounting experiences that they described as modern, crazy, excessive, or 'rock and roll lifestyle.' The following account is typical.

> I'm exhausted; I spent last night out with friends in a five star hotel. We were really crazy. We jumped up and danced on the bar and broke RMB 1,200 worth of bottles. It was all expensive imported alcohol. The barman said this had never happened before, he couldn't believe that women could do something like this. Look, here are the photos (shows photos in mobile phone). There were lots of guys watching my friends and me. One of them was cute so I went home with him, I can't remember his name though.
>
> (Lilly, advertising executive, 32 years)

These accounts often contained the following ingredients: behaviour that was considered novel or daring by mainstream standards, an exclusive location, the consumption of luxury items like alcohol or food, and sometimes, sex. These experiences were often documented using mobile phones. By doing this individuals had visible evidence of what had occurred, important in a low-trust environment like Shenzhen, and were able to extend their audience beyond people in the immediate vicinity. Chua (1992: 133) writes that the individual is oriented to a series of audiences, each with

a different evaluative status. When talking about such experiences, individuals often described the reactions of their different audiences. Individuals desired different reactions from different audiences – shock and dismay from some, and approval and admiration from others.

The average age of the women I interviewed was twenty-nine years. Although twenty nine is considered old by conventional Chinese standards, these women were regarded as highly desirable [39] by middle class professional men. Among Shenzhen professionals single women over the age of 26 are not seen as pitiful 'leftovers'. This contrasts sharply with attitudes in other Chinese cities.

Socializing with subjects revealed that many women engaged in one-upmanship in group situations. These exchanges centred on conspicuous consumption – the lavish dinner the night before, exotic holiday destinations, the exclusive location and so on. An unspoken competition was taking place - the aim was to consume as many experiences as possible. Points were scored based on the type of experience, was it novel/ modern/excessive, where it took place (overseas was best) and how much it cost.

I was constantly probed for information about my own recreational experiences in the west. What was it like to drink vodka in Iceland, had I driven a Ferrari, were French men good lovers and so on. Many questions related to sexual experiences. It was not unusual for subjects to ask long and detailed questions about subjects such as infidelity, homosexuality,

[39] As partners for a long-term relationship as opposed to a brief affair.

specific types of unusual sexual activity, and sexual experimentation. The assumption was made that as a foreigner, I would have experienced all these things.

My lack of expertise was disappointing to some individuals who, undeterred, directed their questions at other foreigners at social gatherings. It was not uncommon for subjects to ask intimate questions relating to unusual sexual practices within five minutes of being introduced. When stunned acquaintances were unable to answer these questions, subjects were very surprised. It was obvious that many women held strong stereotypes of foreigners and were confused when their expectations were not fulfilled.

Women were not just interested in talking about hypersexual activity; many of them also practiced it. Sexual experiences constituted honour badges; the more you collected the more status you had. Individuals sometimes boasted that they were more open-minded than western women [40], including the female characters in *Sex and the City*.

Interestingly many references were made to *Sex and the City* when discussing sexual behaviour, marriage, and career goals. Women often likened themselves to one of the four female characters or referred to a specific scene from a particular episode during casual conversation. All of the 38 subjects had watched at least half of the *Sex and the City* series and 29 had watched every episode. The series' sophisticated representations of the social and professional status of single women, as well as dilemmas of independence, were clearly very appealing. The character that subjects

[40] Westerners are often perceived as promiscuous in China.

liked most in *Sex and the City* was Samantha, an attractive slightly older woman who scorns marriage and motherhood. Samantha prides herself on 'being like a man' – afraid of commitment and preferring casual sex to romance.

The Shenzhen fieldwork revealed two interesting developments. First, that a small group of young professional women strove to consume a wide variety of new experiences, including ones of a sexual nature. The act of consuming these new experiences was labelled 'modern.' Second, that new sexual behaviour and attitudes, as discussed in the Chinese media, were not limited to discourse. Participants practiced much of what they discussed and it was clear that sexual behaviour has radically changed. The next section looks at China's unfolding sexual revolution.

The Chinese media reflects the nation's new sexual awakening. Viewpoints range from lamenting the perceived decline in morals to pride in the new liberal attitude towards sex. Everyone has an opinion about sex - whether they are psychologists dispensing advice on phone-in radio shows or private citizens venting in chat rooms.

Pre-reform views of marriage and sex

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the state identified sexuality as a site of political control (Evans, 1995). It applied a code of normative sexual and gender expectations to sexuality that was legitimized by pseudo-scientific authority. The 'technology of sex' (Foucault, 1978) was a means of ordering marital, familial, and social relationships. It

was achieved through a variety of medical, social, and political discourses. Arranged marriages were outlawed and the only type of marriage recognized was that based on the free choice of partner. Concubinage and prostitution were also prohibited and divorce was made easier. In this period sexual behaviour and romantic love were deemed to be ‘shamefully illicit or a manifestation of bourgeois idealism and thus detrimental to collective welfare’ (Evans, 1995).

During the Cultural Revolution men and women wore the same types of clothes and any attention paid to one's physical appearance, for example elaborate hair and makeup, was viewed as bourgeois. Sex education was limited to official government pamphlets, contraceptive information restricted to married women, and regular party announcements relating to morality. Outside these official discourses, all things sexual were perceived to be taboo. To summarize, all forms of overt sexuality were discouraged in pre-reform China. Men and women were usually segregated during group activities, and displays of public affection between couples were prohibited.

Recent transformation of sexual practices

During the last two decades sex has made its mark on popular culture in China. Public discourse about sex can be found in magazines, newspapers, on the Internet, in television and radio programmes and in government publications. Subject matter ranges from tips on how to be more seductive to advice for individuals who suspect their lovers are cheating them. This new openness has its roots in the economic reforms that started in the 1980s. It represents far-reaching change and contrasts sharply with the

secrecy surrounding sex during previous decades.

The pervasiveness of sex in the media has been accompanied by a transformation of sexual practices in urban areas. Although the countryside still remains conservative, premarital sex, extramarital affairs, cohabitation before marriage and casual sex have become increasingly common in large towns and cities. A growing number of young men and women subscribe to a new youth sex culture based on romance, leisure, and free choice (Farrer, 2002).

New sexual freedom and the state agenda

Another interesting development has been the new sexual freedom for women. The puritanical attitudes of pre-reform China have disappeared and the previous requirement of sexual propriety has become less strict. In urban areas, divorced women and women who live together with a partner before marriage are no longer ostracized.

The Chinese media takes an ambivalent stance towards female sexuality. On the one hand, sexually active women are often portrayed as money-hungry marriage wreckers or as psychologically unstable individuals who pose a danger to everyone including themselves. On the other hand, the same media revels in the new sexual freedom of women. During the past twelve months, the results of a number of sex surveys of Chinese women were published with great fanfare in national newspapers. These surveys claimed that 90% of women students approved of premarital sex (China Daily, 19.12.04) and that Chinese women were lining up to test female

Viagra (*People's Daily*, 07.09.04). Other articles reported that the '2003 Durex Global Sex Survey' found that global males regard Chinese women as the most sexy in the world (*China Daily*, 11.11.04); and, that a new trend is emerging in some cities - divorces instigated by men whose wives have been unfaithful. This type of divorce was previously unheard of and is seen as a reflection of the growing economic independence of women.

The state agenda concerning sexual behaviour has changed significantly. It is now largely confined to enforcing the one-child policy. The previous control of sexuality within the private sphere has almost completely disappeared. Pre-marital cohabitation has been enabled by changes in the household registration laws which previously favoured couples, and by revision of the marriage law. The old marriage law prohibited cohabitation with the opposite sex. Cohabitation is now only illegal if an individual resides with someone of the opposite sex while married to a third party. Technically, extramarital sex was not illegal during the pre-reform period but was deemed unbecoming and regularly punished by work units (Farrer, 2003).

Existing explanations for new sexual behaviour

The Chinese media, scholars, and the public largely attribute the sexual revolution to a number of developments engendered by China's transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. These developments can be categorized into three basic types of explanations.

The first is political. The reform period was accompanied by the relaxation of regulations pertaining to many aspects of private life, including sexual behaviour. In addition to this, the large-scale migration from rural to urban areas means that the traditional Chinese extended family has declined and small nuclear families have emerged in urban areas. This has resulted in weakened social control (Pan, 1993). It is interesting that subjects sometimes compared the sexual revolution to economic reforms – 'everything about China is being privatized.'

The second is economic. New market forces have brought about economic empowerment and greater individual freedom, especially for women. Economic empowerment also means that a growing number of people now have access to foreign media content and to western values regarding love and sex. The Chinese themselves describe these changes as an 'opening up' in response to foreign influences and increased Westernization (Farrer, 2002).

The third is social. New individualism and personal liberation mean that Chinese society now has a greater tolerance toward sexual openness. Popular soap operas such as 'Divorce Chinese Style (*Zhongguoshi Lihun*) ', 'Big Sister' (*Dajie*), 'Mother-in-Law' (*Popo*) and 'Romantic Things' (*Langman De Shi*) deal with topics such as infidelity and divorce. Farrer points out that communism provided much of the momentum for China's sexual revolution (2002). The party promoted gender equality and helped pave the way to greater sexual freedom for women.

Towards new explanations

The elements of market economics and foreign influence in the loosening of China's previously strict sexual morals are insufficient to explain the unusual manner of describing behaviour as encountered during the Shenzhen fieldwork. I argue that other forces are at work - the most important force being class formation.

Given that the middle class are so important to the state's agenda of economic development, it is not surprising their foibles are overlooked. The loosening of sexual morals among middle class women is tolerated partly because it is a mode of experimentation that is contained to a personal level. Middle class women, unlike sex workers, are not seen as money-grabbing home wreckers as they are high earners with independent incomes.

With shifting social boundaries, people have become extremely class conscious. Consumption has become the single most important form of expressing social identity. Recreational activities are particularly significant. The type of recreation that a person engages in is viewed as an expression of their status and wealth. As such, young professionals are anxious to participate in as many recreational activities as they can afford.

New experiences that are seen as prestigious are attending classical music concerts; learning music, painting or other art forms; visiting exhibitions, art galleries, and museums. A new type of popular experience-based activity is visiting theme bars. These tend to be small establishments that educate their patrons in a specialised area – like wine or tea appreciation - by

hosting events and providing supporting materials. The décor is specifically designed to reinforce the experience and experts are often invited to come and give talks. Theme bars are not limited to culinary experiences. Some focus on activities such as literature and handicrafts, and even psychological wellbeing.

Bed hopping and identity

> People who drive good cars and travel abroad are open-minded. Most of them understand that women can enjoy sex too. It's not just something to please your husband. My parents don't know anything about romance and passion; they're from the countryside and didn't go to university. Everyone I know has had sex before marriage; some even have one night stands. None of them are ashamed of this, it's because they're well-educated. A taxi driver wouldn't share these same ideas.
>
> (Jinlin, 32 years, PR associate)

Conversations with subjects indicated a great desire to consume experiences that furnish social status. Experiences, especially novel and unusual ones, are highly valued tokens that are proof of modern character traits such as open-mindedness and daring. These specific personal characteristics are also being rewarded in China's new professional milieu, especially by foreign companies which have the most financially rewarding and prestigious jobs.

Participants relished recounting their sexual experiences. Women boasted about their number of sexual partners, variety of lovemaking locations, unusual sexual practices, emotional indifference to sex partners and, in some cases, infidelity. Although none of these women were married, some

had steady partners. A favourite saying was ‘what's outside the home is more attractive’ (*jiawai caiqi piaopiao*). This saying was often used to justify why one shouldn’t get married. Significantly, subjects always pointed out how modern they were, and that their behaviour and experiences were extraordinary by Chinese standards. It is interesting to note that the consumption of novel sexual experiences greatly enhances social status but, unlike many other prestigious recreational activities, is inexpensive. A distinct advantage in a city where the cost of living is high and debt is a problem.

Nightclubs are perceived as a cosmopolitan space allowing for appropriation and consumption of ‘foreign’ sexual styles (Farrer, 1999). Clubs provide a space, especially for young women, for sexual expression which would be unacceptable in other social spaces. In addition to this they offer the opportunity to participate in a global consumer culture and to display the commodified sexual self.

Local media

> Television here is boring, even the ads are boring; it's just some man with a big booming voice telling you to buy something. They use the same man for every ad. Who wants to hear that? Hong Kong ads are cool, they have exciting special effects and many different styles. No one tells you what to do.
>
> (Zhou, university student, 19 years)

The Chinese media has functioned as the ideological apparatus of the state since 1949 and is still referred to as the ‘throat of the Party’ in official publications. The reform period has seen growing diversity in media content. This can be attributed to three main factors. First, state media is now

largely expected to fund itself through advertising. In addition to promoting state policy, content now has to appeal to large audiences in order to secure advertising revenue. To this end, the state vigorously encourages competition between media outlets. Second, although the state has clearly defined restrictions relating to content in both state-owned and private media, new technologies such as text messaging mean that media control is increasingly less effective. Third, the Chinese media market has been opened allowing the establishment of privately funded newspapers, magazines and websites – some of which are owned by foreign publishers.

> Each of us not only 'has', but lives a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life.
>
> (Giddens, 1991: 14)

The proliferation of mass media in China has sped up the transnational flow of images of modernity. In addition to creating local desires to consume exotic foreign goods, mass media has exposed individuals to new ways of seeing and experiencing the world. This in turn has shaped the participation of individuals in society and inspired people to imagine new possibilities. Television and the internet offer new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imaginary worlds (Appadurai, 1996).

A growing number of individuals now have direct access to foreign media. People who live in the southern coastal cities are able to access Taiwanese and Hong Kong television and radio. This is done using short wave radio, a simple television antenna, cable television which is available for a fee, and inexpensive satellite dishes. Residents in coastal cities often have relatives in Taiwan and Hong Kong who travel back and forth bringing foreign

magazines and newspapers with them. In addition to this, much foreign media content can be accessed via the Internet and the thriving trade in pirated DVD copies films and television programmes. All of this means that the state is no longer the only source of public discourse.

The allure of international media

Access to foreign media content means that people now see Chinese media in a new light. Higher production budgets mean that foreign media content is often glossier and visually appealing. In contrast to this, the content of locally produced media is largely viewed by the Chinese population as bland. For example, most countries have a film rating system that classifies films according to levels of sex, violence and bad language. Such an apparatus determines the suitability of a film for minors. The lack of such a rating system in China means that films have to be appropriate for all age groups including young children. The result is that local productions are extremely limited content-wise.

Participants felt international media content was more sophisticated, less condescending and more truthful than Chinese media, whether state or privately owned. Chinese media is still considered as an instrument of the state or as being controlled by it. Interviews with informants revealed that foreign media is often viewed as inherently truthful simply by nature of being foreign. This is especially the case with young professionals.

The faith in foreign media that young professionals have is a manifestation of growing cynicism towards the state. Once in the workforce, graduates

quickly become painfully aware of how inadequately the Chinese education system has prepared them for work in the new China. In 2005 the McKinsey Global Institute suggested that a mere 10% of Chinese graduates would meet the standards expected by major U.S. companies and as such they should not be seen as very highly skilled workers. (Winters and Yusuf, 2007:12). Recent reforms in higher education have sought to produce high calibre professionals and to ensure the national curriculum meets the needs of modernization (Agelasto and Adamson, 1998:6).

Education, however, is still largely based on rote learning and model answers. One woman described her astonishment when she undertook a postgraduate law degree in the U.K.

> The difference in education styles was like night and day. Everything that I had previously done, mainly rote-learning Confucius, was suddenly worthless. I was marked on my ability to question things; we even had to approach problems using multiple points of view. In many cases there was more than one correct answer, I was stunned.

The national curriculum does not teach skills like independent thinking, creative problem solving, the ability to critically interpret information, or the capacity to work independently. Young professionals have come to prize these skills as they are required to climb the career ladder. In addition to this many believe that values such as open-mindedness, self-development, and meritocracy are the way forward. Life outside China as depicted in foreign media content is perceived to embody and encourage the skills and values that many middle class professionals now identify with.

Transnational consumer culture

Since the reform period began, the Chinese professional middle class have embraced transnational consumer culture. Visiting foreign fast food restaurants such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken are popular experiences. Many people prefer Hollywood to domestically produced films. Foreign goods are generally viewed as reliable, well-designed and innovative, and foreign media content is seen as exciting and untainted by state censorship. Those who can afford to invariably consume foreign goods and experiences. Although many people have yet to travel overseas, individuals go to great lengths to display their knowledge of global culture and values whether it is through products they buy or values that they advocate. Linking oneself with transnational culture whether it is through the consumption of foreign goods or experiences implies sophistication and yields status.

This fondness of foreign things also extends to cultural events. Although Spring Festival is universally observed in China, the urban middle class are now celebrating Christmas and Valentine's Day in growing numbers at the expense of some of the traditional celebrations such as Dragon Boat Festival. Foreign goods and experiences are strongly linked with being modern. However, this does not mean that individuals are keen to emulate all western lifestyles and values. Despite sometimes being frustrated by the disparity in wealth between China and wealthier countries, middle class professionals had a strong sense of nationalism. Many, who regarded themselves as not especially patriotic, were incensed by a Nike

advertisement depicting the defeat of a cartoon kung-fu master and dragons by an American basketball player. As one commented ‘insulting Chinese is not the right way to sell products’.

While in Shenzhen I witnessed much nationalism, especially anti-Japanese sentiment. In April 2005 tens of thousands of people protested Japan’s depiction of its past in school textbooks. During the ensuing riot Seibu, a Japanese department store, was attacked. Many protestors were not disgruntled laid-off workers but successful and middle class. The internet was one of the main tools for organizing the protest - a technology that few workers have access to. Entrepreneurs in Shenzhen have seen a commercial opportunity in anti-Japanese sentiment. One evening I found myself in a barbecue restaurant eating steak under a huge black and white photo with a group of friends. Waiters enthusiastically ran back and forth carrying enormous skewers of meat, great lumps of which were periodically tossed on our plates. Closer inspection of the photo above us revealed a mountain of naked charred corpses, victims of the Nanjing massacre. Everyone kept eating undeterred.

The Chieftain is one of several restaurants in the suburb of Futian that have an anti-Japanese theme. Signs on the doors, that we initially missed, proudly proclaim ‘dogs and Japanese unwelcome’ (*gou riben ren bu zhun runei)* or ‘no entry for Japanese’ (*riben ren bu zhun runei*). Anti-Japanese feelings are encouraged by the state and broadcasted in some form by Chinese mass media on a daily basis. Zheng (2004) argues that the revival of nationalism springs from the new needs of the Chinese Communist Party. In the post-Mao era, the search for political legitimacy has replaced the foreign threat.

New wealth, less stringent moral control by the state, open markets, and improved access to mass media and communication technologies may have enabled individuals to connect with a transnational consumer identity. Although urban, highly educated groups in many countries increasingly share common aspirations and beliefs, the transnational identity as described here is not homogeneous. It is not a single pre-existing identity complete with fixed values that is imported wholesale and unquestioningly from the west. Rather, it refers to a collection of local perceptions and interpretations of what transnational consumer culture is and what participation in it entails. In China, it is mainly middle class professionals who engage with aspects of transnational consumer culture, interpreting and transforming them in the process. The resulting beliefs and behaviours are then emulated by individuals who aspire to belong to its ranks.

The role of television

> More than any other form of mass media … television brings a variety of vivid experiences of the non-local into the most local of situations, the home.
>
> (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 191)

For the past six years, the middle class in China has had access to foreign content television programmes in the form of satellite television and pirated DVDs. Foreign programmes with explicit sexual themes such as *Sex and the City* have become common viewing in large cities and inspired tamer imitations such as 'Pink Ladies' (*Fenhong Nulang*). As mentioned earlier, participants frequently referred to *Sex and the City* when talking about sex or recounting their own recent exploits. However, when asked to comment

on Liu Mang Yan, a controversial Chinese blogger, famous for chronicling her sex life – participants were visibly annoyed. They described her as ‘distasteful’ and ‘talentless’. Talking about sex openly with friends was one thing but broadcasting one’s personal details to the world via the internet was a different matter.

The ability to visualize a culture or society almost becomes synonymous with understanding it (Fabian, 1983:106). In contrast to print media which leaves a lot to the imagination of the reader, television is distinctive because it presents fully envisaged situations. However, rather than just acting as a DIY sex manual, *Sex and the City* had several important functions for the women that were interviewed. First, the series portrayed the personal dilemmas of being a young educated single woman living on her own in a big city. Interview subjects could relate to this and treated the series as a self-help manual that could provide solutions to complicated problems, sexual and emotional, which were otherwise not being addressed. As one informant put it “Americans have the bible and we have *Sex and the City*.

Second, this programme functioned as a template of how participants could lead their lives professionally. Women often discussed aspects of the series such as how much personal information you should reveal to colleagues, what to do if you were being bullied at work, and how to handle sexual harassment in the workplace.

Third, *Sex and the City* spelled out in detail what being a glamorous transnational consumer entails. The four female characters in the series not

only have an international perspective on shopping, clothes, food, men of many nationalities, and holiday destinations. Far from being provincial, the characters handle themselves confidently whether in New York or Paris.

Every episode in the series features some form of consumption. The four characters shop a lot, purchasing designer shoes, clothes, and furniture on a regular basis. Most importantly, the characters are open to new experiences – whether it is going to see a movie on one's own or unusual sexual behaviour. One of the underlying messages is that being a modern single woman means not being overly concerned by what others think, and having the confidence to try out as many new things as possible. By the end of the series, the four characters have racked up an astonishing breadth of culinary, recreational, emotional, and sexual experiences. This exposure to transnational consumer culture is also facilitated by other American television series such as 'Friends', and by numerous Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Japanese and Korean soap operas. These are widely available on cable, pirate DVD's and the internet. Sites such as youku.com illegally host whole television hit series, such as the American television programme *Lost*.

Subjects found *Sex and the City* appealing as an expert system but also because they could identify closely with the characters. In many cases, the most important relationships that subjects had in Shenzhen were with other single professional women. They too had moved to a new city to pursue careers for work and in doing so left their friends and families behind. Not having a social network has its advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage being relative anonymity and the freedom to do as you please.

The downside being many lonely evenings after work unless you make a conscious point of filling your diary.

Participants described *Sex and the City* as 'truthful because it is based on reality' unlike most of the locally produced copycat shows. The sexual revolution which is taking place in China's cities has its negative aspects. Common issues that significantly affect the lives of single young women, such as infidelity and unwanted pregnancies are not addressed in domestic television productions.

By referring to *Sex and the City* in conversations, subjects attempted to establish a common frame of reference that would make communication easier. By doing this, they also placed themselves in a sophisticated light by associating themselves with the glamorous transnational consumer identity as depicted in the series. These were Mei's intentions during our initial exchange at the barbecue. Her grouping of a particular type of sexual experience together with purchasing a car and overseas travel made sense. These were all features of a specific social identity that Mei wished to link herself with.

In Shenzhen, television has helped to establish the consumption of sexual experience as a marker of professional middle class identity. This has been achieved by introducing transnational consumer culture and its emphasis on the consumption of goods and experiences, including sexual ones.

Freefall in Shenzhen

> You know what they say: "if you never work in Beijing, you'll never know how lowly your position is; if you never go shopping in Shanghai, you'll never know how poor

> you are; and if you don't go chasing Hainan girls, you'll never know how little stamina you have". From a Shenzhen perspective that is nonsense, something only someone with no experience would say. If you come to Shenzhen, you'll realize you have got not status and no money – and you'll fall down on the last front as well.
>
> (Ye, 2006: 195)

Money, sex and status sum up Shenzhen well. One evening I was at a popular nightclub with a visiting Taiwanese friend. At midnight, as was custom every Friday and Saturday night, the DJ called for ten female volunteers to come on stage and participate in a vodka drinking competition. The crowd went berserk and there was no shortage of volunteers. After the competition the contestants were asked stay on stage and dance for the crowd – 'sexy dancing only'. Mesmerized by the sight of a middle aged woman in a suit studiously grinding her crotch against an African DJ, my horrified friend exclaimed 'so this is how Chinese people behave when no one is watching!' Someone else described the atmosphere in Shenzhen as 'the last big party on earth'. And for many this is true.

Shenzhen is a cut-throat city and has a rapid turnover in population. People lose their jobs, get transferred, are poached to companies in other cities, or simply leave because they miss their friends and family back home. Unsure of how long they will be in Shenzhen, people are determined to take advantage of their time there. There seemed to be two main priorities: earning as much money as possible and sampling everything that the city had to offer - from high fashion to the recreational drug ecstasy (*yao tou wan*).

Shenzhen has functioned as a social experiment at many levels. Being open to new ideas and practices, including foreign ones, was always part of Deng's grand plan for the city (Vogel, 1989: 151). The combination of a lack of kinship networks and the transient nature of the population means that there is very little social control. This allows people to experiment with behaviour and new identities. Individuals often behaved in ways that they would not at home. Many underwent a metamorphosis when their relatives came to town. Suddenly they were 'single'. Bathrooms and closets were rigorously purged of items that betrayed premarital cohabitation.

My initial suspicion that Mei was a high-end sex worker stemmed from previous occasions when acquaintances arrived at social functions with sex workers as their dates. These companions ranged from sophisticated young women, who drove expensive foreign cars and lived in luxury apartments, with no visible source of income to handsome young men who worked full-time as live-in chauffeurs for wealthy older women. Such companions, along with already married or same-sex partners, were conspicuously absent during family visits.

Over 45,000 working couples in Shenzhen have chosen not to have children according to a recent survey by the Shenzhen Academy of Social Sciences[41]. Chinese researchers attribute this to couples wanting to enjoy a high standard of living and freedom. The number of such couples is increasing and the local government is concerned. Being childless and having no offspring to support them when they get older, these couples will be more prone to divorce and loneliness. Social isolation however is

[41] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-02/12/content_5728469.htm, accessed on 14.02.08

already a problem in the Shenzhen. The high level of anonymity found in Shenzhen is unique in China. The flipside of anonymity and the exhilarating freedom that accompanies it is social isolation and superficial relationships. I often heard sentiments like ‘I feel invisible’ and ‘I know a lot of people but still feel alone’.

> This city makes me feel like I’m in a *jianghu* (underworld), fighting for food for my family, a lone wolf in a BMW. (Ben, hotel manager, 40 years)

The high-octane life in Shenzhen comes at a price. It can be difficult to build up a stable social network. Much of the population is transient which means that relationships were often short-lived and lacking in trust.

> You get so sick of calling someone that you've shared good times with and finding that their phone has been disconnected. They have left town. It happens all the time. People don’t even say goodbye. Not that it matters, most people aren’t who they say they are. I had a boyfriend for over a year then I found out he had a wife and child in Shanghai. (Lihong, architect, 32 years)

The exuberant recklessness that characterizes much behaviour of young professionals also comes with a price – alcoholism, depression, drug dependency, unwanted pregnancies, debt, and failed relationships.

Class formation

Middle class professionals look down upon the *baofahu* (the new rich) who share the same restaurants, shops and gated communities. *Baofahu* are uneducated, self-made and in the view of young professionals – lack taste and finesse.

> 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, banker, 26 years)

Travel is just one means by which professionals define themselves in opposition to *baofahu* and other groups. Some professionals had discovered the joy of backpacking and returned from holidays sporting ethnic jewellery and batik clothing. Backpacking was felt to be adventurous and provided the opportunity to meet and mingle with fellow travellers from other countries.

Individuals tried to consume as many different experiences as possible. Points were scored based on the type of experience (was it novel/ modern/excessive) where it took place, (overseas was best), and how much it cost. In this sense consumers are similar to tourists - they are both 'sensation-seekers and collectors of experiences; their relationship to the world is primarily aesthetic; they perceive the world as a food for sensibility - a matrix of possible experiences (Bauman, 1998: 94).

The manner in which people engaged in experiences was dilettantish. Individuals collected experiences as though they were toys. Experiences were numerous, varied, and short in duration. There was little concern for the authenticity of an experience and people did not expect them to be all-engrossing. In fact, the ability to zip from one experience to the next was an important skill. This flitting from one experience to the next required a certain amount of emotional management, a skill which not everyone

possessed. Many individuals were emotionally ill-equipped to deal with the long-term consequences of bed hopping and this often resulted in jealousy, tears, and angry phone calls.

It was important though to consume experiences correctly. Theme bars that educated their patrons in a specialised area of expertise – like wine or tea appreciation – were wildly popular. These bars arranged 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, website, and television programmes are devoted solely to consumption-related issues.

Expert systems

The search for consumption knowledge characterizes young professionals in Shenzhen. The popularity of *Sex and the City* is just one example of professionals actively scouring depictions of life outside China for useful information. Exposure to images of wealthier societies in films and advertising did not leave them feeling cheated and impoverished, unlike the Dalian teenagers studied by Fong (2004). China's transition to a market-based economy means that new forms of knowledge are now required. Giddens (1990) delineates 'expert systems' that engender trust and provide a framework of knowledge and allow individuals to navigate their way through the world. These are 'systems of technical accomplishment that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today' (*ibid*: 27-28). Examples of 'expert systems' are banking and

finance, and building codes.

In China old knowledge frameworks have disappeared and new ‘expert systems’ are still in the process of evolving. ‘Expert systems’ allay feelings of uncertainty; the lack of them makes it difficult for individuals to manage risk and act confidently. Many scholars have observed people trying not only to make sense of the disorientations of rapidly changing life but also learning new types of skills to help them engage with modernity successfully. Kraus (1995) observes that urban characters in the novels of Zhang Jie learn ‘modern’ behaviour and language from the arts. People now talk like foreigners in films and television programmes. Zha (1995) writes of young Chinese who gain knowledge of sex from pornographic videos. And Yan (2000) describes parents who are pleased their children like western-style fast food. This is because they believe its consumption to be in good taste and modern. Eating a Big Mac and fries, like learning typing and computer skills, are viewed as important preparations for modern life (*ibid*: 212).

Bauman (1990) writes that advertising constitutes an expert knowledge system that furnishes a framework of knowledge for purchasing. This idea applies to Shenzhen professionals in two different ways. First, advertising did assuage the anxieties of making a bad choice. The wide variety of similar products now available in China can be confusing. Second, advertising especially those of foreign goods, inadvertently functioned as a template of how to consume products correctly. Individuals regularly consulted advertising in the form of printed leaflets, product brochures and websites, to help them find the best possible method.

Chapter conclusion

The absence of a traditional social hierarchy in Shenzhen and the high salaries that facilitate conspicuous consumption combine to accelerate the process of social mobility. This together with the elements of consumerism, media and transnational consumer identity, all combine to make the drama of class formation in Shenzhen especially potent. High salaries mean that a large number of Shenzhen citizens are able to buy luxury goods and engage in consumer practices considered prestigious in other parts of China. These include playing golf and travelling overseas.

A growing number of young professionals now distinguish themselves from other groups, such as the new rich, by consuming and collecting experiences including sexual ones. The most valuable of these experiences are transnational ones. The consumption of experiences is strongly linked to self-realization and great emphasis is placed on consuming them correctly.

The current lack of 'expert systems' in China mean that professionals often turn to mass media depictions of life outside China in search of useful information. This knowledge helps individuals to navigate the challenges of modern life and furnishes information on how to consume experiences correctly.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In this chapter, I will summarize the thesis question, the fieldwork, the findings from the fieldwork, and the conclusions that I have come to based on these findings. In the final section, I briefly discuss further research directions.

The research question

This thesis has three specific aims. First, to study the interconnections between consumption and the construction of urban middle class identity. Second, to examine the movements of consumer goods and how the narratives of transnational capitalism are being experienced at the local level. Third, to describe some of the key consumption practices associated with urban middle class life.

This study concerns itself with how new ways of seeing the world can promote new ways of being in the world. New ways of seeing the world are realised through the consumption of goods, images, experiences, fashions and ideologies.

Mass media plays an important role in this. Rather than make mass media the main object of ethnographic enquiry, this thesis views media consumption as part of consumer culture in general.

The fieldwork took place in Shenzhen, a southern Chinese city, with a disproportionately large middle class.

Fieldwork in Shenzhen

The research focuses on young professionals in Shenzhen. The term 'young professionals' specifically refers to individuals under the age of 40, who have a university degree, and who are employed in a position that entails some level of responsibility. They can be characterized as potential homeowners, highly educated, and able to allocate substantial resources for education.

Two life stages in the trajectory of young professionals were studied: that of being a student at university and that of participating in the workforce in the early stages of one's career. The reason for studying both students (aspiring professionals) and professionals, is that individuals evolve into independent consumers and become socially mobile during these two life stages.

The research model used to collect data in Shenzhen is known as the sequential exploratory model, which uses quantitative data to corroborate the qualitative findings. Data is collected in two phases – the first being qualitative data collection and the second being quantitative data collection. Both types of data are integrated during the interpretation stage.

Ethnographic techniques were used to explore the role of consumption practices in forming social identity among students and young professionals in Shenzhen. The specific research techniques that I chose were participant observation, in-depth interviews and structure questionnaires.

Between October 2004 and April 2005 data was collected in Shenzhen

from 626 individuals. Three types of data were collected: data from in-depth interviews, data from structured questionnaires, and data from expert interviews.

Findings from the fieldwork

The first research objective was to study the interconnections between consumption and the construction of urban middle class identity. For young professionals, consumption has become the single most important form of expressing social identity. Having experienced the homogeneous mass consumption of the pre-reform era, they are keen to personalize their homes and used goods to reflect their individual taste.

The second research objective was to examine the movements of consumer goods and how the narratives of transnational capitalism are being experienced at the local level. It became clear during the course of the research that the consumption of experiences was as important as the consumption of goods. Participant observation and in-depth interviews with young professionals revealed the consumption of sexual experiences as a category of interest.

A growing number of young professionals now distinguish themselves from other groups, such as the new rich, by consuming and collecting experiences. The most valuable of these experiences are transnational ones. The consumption of experiences is strongly linked to self-realization and great emphasis is placed on their proper consumption.

The third research objective was to describe some of the key consumption practices associated with urban middle class life. Using ethnographic techniques, the research revealed that consumption practices changed dramatically once individuals entered the workforce. While most students are thrifty, young professional life in Shenzhen is characterized by exuberant consumption, recklessness, and one-upmanship.

The concept of relaxation and being able to enjoy life is central to the lifestyle of young professionals. New recreational experiences that are seen as prestigious are attending classical music concerts; learning music, painting or other art forms; visiting exhibitions, art galleries, and museums; visiting theme bars; travel; the consumption of foreign food and alcohol. Young professional women strove to consume a wide variety of new experiences, including ones of a sexual nature. The act of consuming these new experiences was labelled modern.

Conclusions based on the fieldwork

The Shenzhen fieldwork revealed that the consumption of experiences is an important marker of middle class identity. New wealth, increased access to communication technologies, and less stringent moral control by the Chinese state have made it possible for individuals to connect with global consumer culture.

Within the transnational consumer identity that young Chinese professionals are so keen to identify with, sex is seen as just one of numerous experiences available for consumption. What is commonly

viewed as burgeoning promiscuity brought on by years of sexual repression by the state is in many cases a manifestation of an emerging social identity that places great value on the consumption of new experiences. The consumption of experiences is strongly linked to self-realization and great emphasis is placed on their proper consumption.

The significance of the conclusions

This research challenges two established assumptions. The first is the centrality of goods in the study of consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone 1991). The second is the belief that globalization is destructive of distinctive local culture (Schiller, 1969; Hamelink, 1994).

This research demonstrates that the consumption of experiences can be as important as the consumption of goods. This constitutes a significant epistemological shift in the study of consumption. Traditionally the focus has been on the consumption of goods. The fieldwork revealed the importance of the consumption of experiences for young Shenzhen professionals. Having the financial means that permit the frequent consumption of transnational consumer experiences, as well as an understanding of how to engage in these experiences appropriately has come to constitute middle class identity.

The Shenzhen fieldwork also showed how young professionals actively appropriate transnational experiences to construct local social identities and hierarchies. Young professionals identified transnational experiences as the most significant type of experiences to consume. In Shenzhen much social prestige is derived from linking oneself with a type of transnational

consumer identity.

This research shows that Chinese ‘expert systems’ are still developing and the consequences of this. Expert systems provide a framework of knowledge and allow individuals to navigate their way through life. China’s transition to a market-based economy means that new forms of knowledge are required. The fieldwork shows that in the absence of expert systems that equip individuals for life in the new China, Shenzhen professionals often turn to foreign media. Through television programmes, such as Sex in the City, young professionals learn skills that help them to succeed in the modern workplace, and to consume experiences in the correct manner.

Further research

This thesis has identified the correct consumption of transnational experiences as playing an important role in defining the middle class for young professionals in Shenzhen. This leads to some key new areas of research focusing on different age groups, class and locations.

- What role does the consumption of transnational experiences play in defining class among other age groups – for example older professionals?
- What role does the consumption of transnational experiences play in defining other classes in Shenzhen – for example the working classes?
- What role does the consumption of transnational experiences play in defining class in other large cities in China – for example in Shanghai?

- What role does the consumption of transnational experiences play in defining class in rural areas of China with limited access to mass media – for example in Panzihua, Sichuan?
- What role does the consumption of transnational experiences play in defining class in other countries – for example in India?
- Are there people in China who have the desire to consume experiences that are specifically Chinese as opposed to transnational? And does this consumption of Chinese experiences contribute to the formation of class identity?
- How will Chinese 'expert systems' develop? And, do other post-socialist societies face similar problems relating to modern life and the lack of expert systems?

Appendix

Samples of data from in-depth interviews

This information was collected from research participants during the in-depth interviews.

Case 1: Li Hong

Work and salary

Li Hong hopes to buy a flat but lives beyond her means. She is 22 years old and graduated with a degree in Physics from a Shenzhen university in August 2005. Her high grades and track record of leadership in many extracurricular activities mean that she was recruited for sales by Unilever in February 2005. Recruiting students up to a year before graduation by the larger multinational companies has become common practice in China. The trip to Shanghai for the job interview was Li Hong's first plane trip.

Li Hong's starting salary is RMB 6,300 a month and her classmates consider her lucky to have found a job with a prestigious foreign firm, a high salary and located in Shenzhen. Benefits include health insurance and superannuation. Jobs with multinational companies are also coveted because they are seen as having a defined career structure, are meritocratic and add value to employees by training them. good for one's resume if you wish to move on in a few years time.

Accommodation

Li Hong started work at the end of April 2005 but choose to remain in the university dormitory until her student registration time was up. Dormitory fees are cheaper but the real reason was that she was reluctant to leave

campus life and her friends behind. In July Li Hong moved into a small two bedroom flat near her work. She currently shares this flat with a female friend who she knows from university. Li Hong's flat has the bare essentials. Both she and her flatmate spend little time there and home decor is not a priority. Li Hong has an automatic savings plan that sets aside RMB 2,000 per month of her salary. She hopes to buy a small flat in 5 years time.

Monthly expenditure

Li Hong's monthly expenditure is as follows:

Rent (half monthly total)	RMB 1000
Building management fees (half of monthly total)	RMB 30
Phone fees (landline and mobile, monthy subscription and actual usage)	RMB 400
Water and electricity (half of monthly total)	RMB 250
Gym fees	RMB 100
Buses and taxis	RMB 1400
Groceries	RMB 600
Dining out and drinks in night clubs	RMB 1000
Clothes and shoes	RMB 2000
Beauty and hair products and expenses	RMB 800
Total	RMB 7580

Within a month of her first job Li Hong had purchased a new mobile phone for RMB 3,000, an MP3 player for RMB 400 and a good quality Louis Vuitton imitation bag for RMB 800. Including the RMB 2000 that she is saving each month, Li Hong's total monthly expenses are RMB 9580. This is RMB 3280 more than her salary. This means that uses her credit card a lot and borrows from friends to get buy. When things get really tight, her parents chip in.

Case 2: Jiang Wen

Work and salary

Jiang Wen owns a flat. He is 32 years old and graduated with a degree in Engineering from a Shanghai University in 1996. He moved to Shenzhen 4 years ago and works for a medium sized Chinese software company. Jiang's monthly salary 9 years after graduation is RMB 7,000. During the first three years after graduation, Jiang spent most of his salary on consumer goods. Back in the 90's salaries were much lower and his starting salary with his first job was RMB 1,400.

Accommodation

Jiang bought his 2 bedroom flat in Shenzhen 3 years ago for RMB 340,000. He saved around half of the deposit himself and borrowed the other half from his family. The flat is 80m2 and is situated in a quiet middle class residential area. Jiang has rented out one of the rooms to a colleague and is saving to buy another flat as an investment.

Jiang's flat is less sparse than Li Hong's. This is because he has been working for longer and has a steady girlfriend who often buys him presents like cushions and paintings. Jiang has two televisions, a large 40-inch screen in the living room and a smaller one in his bedroom, a fashionable but simple dining suite, and a couch.

Monthly expenditure

Jiang's monthly expenditure is as follows:

Mortgage repayment (flatmate also contributes RMB 1,000 per month)	RMB 1500
Phone fees (landline and mobile, monthly subscription and actual usage)	RMB 180
Water and electricity (half of monthly total)	RMB 150
Buses and taxis	RMB 300
Groceries	RMB 800
Dining out	RMB 300
Clothes and shoes	RMB 50
Total	RMB 3280

Jiang's total expenditure of RMB 3280, allows him to save RMB 3,720 per month. Consumer electrical goods and home decor do not interest Jiang. Being in his 30's, he wants to save for a second property then get married.

Case 3: Wang Xiao Yun

Work and salary

Wang Xiao Yun has settled with his girlfriend in a luxury flat that he bought. He is 38 years old and graduated from the Beijing Film School in 1992. He moved to Shenzhen 6 years ago and now works for a large Chinese advertising firm. Wang earns RMB 22,000 a month and lives with his girlfriend, a lawyer, who earns RMB 9,000 per month.

Accommodation

Wang bought his 3 bedroom flat in Shenzhen 6 years ago for RMB 450,000. The flat is 100 m2 and is situated in a luxury development complete with pool and surrounding gardens. Wang and his girlfriend of 8 years are considering marriage but have decided they do not want children. Much of their income is spent on buying things for the house like expensive

bathroom accessories and travel. Most of their furniture is medium to high end, and their house is decorated in a simple modern Asian Californian style. Wang has two flat screen televisions, and an expensive Scandinavian sound system. Wang's favourite places for travel are Tokyo and New York, and feels that these cities have more interesting design cultures than London and Paris.

Monthly expenditure

Wang's monthly expenditure is as follows:

Mortgage repayment	RMB 2300
Building management fees	RMB 400
Phone fees (landline and mobile, monthly subscription and actual usage)	RMB 600
Water and electricity (half of monthly total)	RMB 400
Car payment	RMB 1200
Groceries	RMB 1600
Dining out	RMB 4000
Clothes and shoes	RMB 2000
Total	RMB 12,500

Wang's total monthly expenditure of RMB 12,500 leaves him with RMB 9,400 per month to spend on travel and other leisure activities. He has no intention to buy another property.

In-depth interview questions

Below is a sample of some of the questions that young professionals were asked during the in-depth interviews.

Personal details

1. How old are you?
2. Where is your home town?
3. When did you come to Shenzhen?
4. Are you single or married?
5. If single, are you in a steady relationship?
6. Where did you meet your partner?
7. If married, do you have children?
8. Where did you go to university?
9. What do your parents do?
10. Did either of them go to university?

Career

1. What is your profession?
2. How long have you worked in this job?
3. Have you changed jobs during the past five years?
4. Why did you change jobs?
5. What is your ideal job?

Consumption

1. Do you own a car?

2. Do you own a flat?

3. What is your monthly salary?

4. What is the breakdown in terms of accommodation, transportation, utilities, groceries, clothes, dining out and leisure?

5. What do you most enjoy spending money on?

6. Do you feel pressure to consume?

7. What is the source of this pressure?

8. Where have you travelled to in China? Overseas?

Views on tradition and modernity

1. What is the most valuable thing from overseas?

2. What is the most valuable thing that China has to offer?

3. More foreigners are coming to live in China. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

4. What is the most important difference between society as it is now and ten years ago?

5. Do you think the more money people have the happier they are?

6. Do you feel that people are happier now that they have a higher standard of living?

7. Do you believe that the winner should be able to take all?

8. These days, there are more people from the countryside coming to live in the big cities; is this good thing or a bad thing?

9. Do you feel that there is discrimination in Chinese society?

10. If a person is poor is it their fault or the fault of society?

Views on family life

1. Do you think the only child growing up without sisters and brothers is good or bad for the child?

2. In this type of family, do you think the only-child will have to support his/her extended family and bear a heavy financial burden when he/she grows up?

3. What kind of influence do you think the one-child phenomenon has on society?

4. Is the way that you spend and save money different to that of your parents?

Structured questionnaire results

	Students	Young professionals

Number of participants

female	140	100
male	114	160

1. Do you feel pressure to consume?

Yes	88%	82%
No	12%	18%

(a). If yes, what is the source of this pressure?

friends and peers	3	1
media advertising	1	3
fashion	2	2

2. Do you own a car?

Yes	2%	28%
No	98%	72%

3. Do you own property?

Yes	0%	32%
No	100%	68%

4. Have you travelled for leisure within China (including Hong Kong)?

Yes	28%	45%
No	72%	55%

5. Have you travelled for leisure outside China?

Yes	3%	23%
No	97%	77%

6. Have you travelled for work outside China?

Yes	NA	9%
No	NA	91%

7. You are applying for a job, rank what is important to you?

salary	2	1
job location	5	5
social status	3	4
prospects for promotion	1	2
job stability	4	3
opportunity to travel	6	6

8. You are looking for a job, rank which sector you prefer?

state-owned company	4	6
foreign company	1	1
local private company	6	5
government department	2	3
government support-units	3	2
your own company	5	4

	Students	Young professionals

9. What should the government spend money on, other than education?

national infrastructure	5	1
help the poor	1	3
environment	3	4
public facilities	6 (tied)	2
social welfare	2	7
national security, army	10	13
culture heritage tourism	9	11
stimulate the economy	5	6
science and technology, telecom	4	5
public transport	6 (tied)	8
health care	8	12
develop countryside agriculture	7	9
develop sports	11	10

10. The more money people have, the happier they are?

true	57%	22%
true (females)	50%	12%
true (males)	65%	9%
false	43%	78%
false (females)	50%	88%
false (males)	35%	71%

11. Is it OK for couples to live together before marriage?

Yes	54%	84%
yes (females)	24%	84%
yes (males)	90%	80%
No	46%	16%
no (females)	76%	63%
no (males)	9%	31%

12. Would you like to get married one day?

Yes	93%	83%
yes (females)	91%	84%
yes (males)	96%	82%
No	7%	17%
no (females)	9%	14%
no (males)	4%	19%

	Students	Young professionals

(a). If yes, at what age would you like to get married?

average age	28.1	27.4

13. What qualities are important in a spouse?

physical appearance	2	2
family background	4	5
hukou	6	6
age	3	3
education	1	1
wealth	5	4

14. What are good reasons for divorce?

divorce is unacceptable	6	6
violence	2	3
infidelity	4	2
no longer in love	1	1
spouse doesn't earn enough money	5	5
spouse no longer compatible	3	4

15. Would you like to be a parent one day?

Yes	86%	86%
yes (females)	85%	84%
yes (males)	88%	67%
No	14%	14%
no (females)	15%	16%
no (males)	12%	13%

16. What goal would you like to reach by the time you are forty?

Car	5	6
successful career	2	4
happy family, healthy family	1	1
own property	3	5
to be wealthy	4	2
own a business	6	9
travel	8	7
to be in love	9	8
be happy	7	3

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