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Middle Class, Middle Class Women and the Meaning of Consumption in Urban China

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HS4008-Social Institution Of Contemporary China: Literature Review

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China’s market reform in the late 1970s has opened its flood gates to a plethora of social transformations, so salient that it has become the key characteristic to define contemporary China. As China’s economy continues to accelerate, the world is concurrently witnessing the phenomena rise of a new Chinese urban middle class and the empowerment of urban middle class women. To understand the above two phenomena, the realm of consumption is incontrovertibly an important characteristic for analysis. In my literature review, I would first draw out similar themes among the arguments reviewed on the Chinese urban middle class and their relationship to consumption. I would then draw out the differentiated gender experience focusing on urban middle class women. Lastly, I would point out the research gap in the literature review.

For the following section, I would examine the meaning of consumption to the Chinese urban middle class. Not surprisingly, the middle class’ identity is built around the notion of consumption. To put in Goodman’s summation of the middle class, a middle class individual is “someone with high cultural capital and economic capacity to consume” (Goodman, 2013, p. 64). The Chinese urban middle class’ consumption is more appropriately coined as the consumption of lifestyle (Goodman, 2013) which extends to material goods as well as leisure and investments in cultural capitals.

The first significant theme that has emerged from the various researches is the **distinction of the middle class status** through consumption. Material wise, real estate is perhaps the most sought after material good among the urban middle class. According to Tomba (2010), owning real estate in urban china is a signifier of the middle class status among the urban dwellers. Furthermore, homeownership also functions as a key mechanism to forge the collective middle class “taste”. This mechanism is particularly observed in the private gated residential community regarded as the “epitome of middle class living” (Goodman, 2013, p. 63) accessible only to the socially and economically capable urban
middle class. The mechanism of social and economic exclusion of the lower class from the gated communities creates the “new solidarity” (Tomba, 2010, p. 204) among the urban middle class and defines a particular taste for “consumption patterns, behaviours, and desire for political participation” (Tomba, 2010, p. 204). Tomba (2010) however did not specify what the middle class’ “consumption pattern” (Tomba, 2010, p. 204) is.

A clue to the middle class’s consumption “taste” is found in Tsang’s research on middle class’ “quest for higher education” (Tsang, 2013, p. 653). The distinction of class status is not only limited to the consumption of material goods but also cultural goods. Middle class’s “Taste” in the consumption of education refers to the high value placed by parents on higher education. It was reviewed by Mintel, a global market survey company that a staring three quarter of Chinese middle class parents aspire their children to earn a postgraduate qualification (Lin, 2012). Furthermore, Tsang’s research shows that among the middle class parents she interviewed, they will only settle for their children entering China’s first-tier universities. Should their children fail, parents will alternatively send them to private universities affiliated to top foreign universities as a stepping stone to finally enter top foreign universities (Tsang, 2013).

More significantly, it is the ability of urban middle class parents to invest in their children’s higher education that cemented the distinction of the urban middle class. Already privileged by their urban Hukou 户口 (Household Registration), Danwei 单位(Working Units) as well as their own education attainment, Chinese middle class parents are able to accumulate financial support and Guanxi 关系 to “put their children through private universities and send their children abroad for pursuing higher degrees.” (Tsang, 2013, p. 654). Middle class parents would also go the extra miles to cultivate their children’s talents such as in music, foreign languages and sports (Tsang, 2013) so as to equip them with the
“additional edges over those from less well-off families” (Tsang, 2013, p. 663). Despite having similar education aspiration as the middle class (Tsang, 2013), the lack of finance and knowledge by the lower class marks the difference between the two classes’ consumption of cultural goods.

The distinction of the Chinese middle class through differentiated taste in consumption can be summarized by Bordieu’s (1986) concept of Habitus. The habitus can be simply explained as the disposition that guides individual’s thoughts and behaviour, shaping individual’s value, choice and taste. Habitus is mould by capitals to which embodied cultural capitals, institutionalized capital, economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is relevant here. Embodied cultural capital refers to the intellectual capacity for individuals to further acquire other skill (Bourdieu, 1986) and is associated with “time, effort and parental involvement and nurture” (Tsang, 2013, p. 657). Institutionalized cultural capital refers to formal credentials such as education or professional certification that affirms the legal competence and value of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986).

Embodied cultural capitals and Institutionalized capitals are of paramount importance in China as the possession of the two cultural capitals enables the middle class to further acquire other capitals. For example, urban middle class parents who have a relatively high education qualification themselves (institutionalized cultural capital), are more likely to be employed in good Danwei 单位, allowing them to acquire social capitals manifested in Guanxi 关系 and also economic capitals to invest in their children’s education (Tsang, 2013). Embodied cultural capital allows for middle class parents to have the “know-how” to make plans and even backup plans for their children’s education trajectory (Tsang, 2013). All these capitals eventually provides the middle class with the access to superior taste (Real estate,
top-notch education) and effectively define and reproduce the boundaries of the middle class status in contemporary China.

The second common theme that emerged from researches on Chinese middle class consumption is the concept of Agency. Agency can be simply defined as the power to choose. Several authors have make use of either macro of micro analysis to question the agency of the Chinese urban middle class consumers. Davis (2005) found that when juxtaposed against their past experience with the Maoist era which is stripped of consumption choice, the middle class residence now see themselves exercising agency through furnishing their house. Even for those who are financially limited, having the choice to buy small household items is better than the compulsory adherence to the homogenizing standards forced by the Maoist Danwei regime (Davis, 2005). As such, Davis’s research shed lights on the conventional Neo-Marxist analysis of passive consumers subordinated by their false consciousness to the interest of capitalist. My critique on Davis’s paper is her assumption that the Chinese market is completely autonomous such that the urban middle class have the potential to exercise complete consumption agency. The verisimilitude of complete consumer agency in China remained a myth as the Chinese market and economy is still tightly controlled by the state.

My critique on Davis’ (2005) research is reflected in Tomba’s (2010) argument that the consumption agency of the middle class is fundamentally pre-conditioned by the state’s discourse and policies. Using typology as methodology and the functionalist paradigm, Tomba (2010) identifies the top-down impacts of the housing reform on urban middle class residence. He argues that although privatisation of housing has allowed residence to exercise some form of self- governance such as the formation of Residential Committee 居民委员会 (juminweiyuanhui), the political autonomy bought from the state (through consuming private housing) does not erode the state’s ideology of governance (Tomba, 2010). Rather, the gated
communities continue to govern their residential area in consistent to state’s ideology of social order 和谐 (Hexie) Tomba, 2010.

Both Davis (2005) and Tomba’s (2010) argument with regards to agency converges to Michael Foucault’s (1991) concept of Governmentality. Foucault (1991) argued that when governmentality is outsourced to various institutions, power is no longer monolithic but exists in multiple levels. This allows for rooms to exercise agency (Foucault, 1991). Linking back to Davis’s argument, despite inequalities in finance and cultural capital within the middle class, consumers are able to negotiate their agency and find “individuation” (Davis, 2005, p. 708) through furnishing their house. Nevertheless, consumption as a “new mode of governmentality” (Davis, 2005, p. 708) continues to profit capitalist more than labour (Davis, 2005). It also simultaneously serves the interest of the state by distracting individuals from the past Maoist oppression (Davis, 2005) and the current political limitations in China. Similar to Tomba’s (2010) argument, the outsourced governance to gated communities reproduces the state’s ethos of “social and political responsibility” (Tomba, 2010, p. 211) instead of catalysing bottom-up initiatives to challenge the state’s legitimacy (Tomba, 2010).

The final common theme that I observed is the discourse on Suzhi 素质 which is most closely translated to “Quality” (Crabb, 2010, p. 388), or the concern with the “formation of human capital” (Goodman, 2013, p. 388). Suzhi is the new underlying rationality of the middle class to exhibit themselves as the exemplar of modernity (Tomba, 2010). The discourse on Suzhi was introduced by the state as an overarching rationale and justification to various reforms, from the One Child Policy in the 1970s to the Housing reforms as well as Education (Goodman, 2013, p. 60). For housing, gated residential committee uses Suzhi, or civility as the basis to resolve residential conflicts while gated communities use it to justify their self-governance (Tomba, 2010). In education, Suzhi becomes the measurement of
embodied cultural capital of students; classifying them into *gaosuzhi* 高素质 (high quality) students versus the *disuzhi* 低素质 (low quality) uncivilised migrant students (Crabb 2010). The discourse on *Suzhi* is also further extrapolated to the realms outside of the private sphere or education. *Suzhi* is used as a marketing tool for travel holidays, automobiles and a spectrum of consumption goods as a mean to cultivate oneself (Goodman, 2013).

It is clear that *Suzhi* function as an effective double justification in favour of the state’s interest to modernise China. On one hand, it gives hope for the disadvantaged that *Suzhi* can be achieved through meritocratic means of consuming status symbol rather than limited to ascribed status. On the other hand, the discourse of *Suzhi* legitimises inequality by outsourcing the burden of “cultivating or raising one’s quality” (Crabb, 2010, p. 392) to consumers. The dichotomy of *gaosuzhi* 高素质 and *disuzhi* 低素质 effectively creates a hierarchy of distinction that discriminate those who lacks the capital to achieve upwards aspiration through consumption of education and material goods. The discourse of *Suzhi* forms the grand ideology that drives the mechanism of distinguishing the middle class strata as well as the governing principle behind the private and public sphere of the middle class.

A short coming of the literature reviewed above is the **undifferentiated gender experience**. The post-Mao’s era characterised by market reforms and social transformation not only catalysed the rise of the Chinese Urban middle class but also saw the empowerment of urban middle class women largely through education and mass consumption (Luo, 2005). Yet, both women and men are analysed as a single entity under the assumption that they share similar experience as an urban middle class.

One author who differentiated women’s experience in the consumption of education is Vanessa Fong (2002) who argued that the One Child Policy has benefited urban middle class daughters. Without the need to compete with brothers who are conventionally favoured
by parents, urban middle class daughters received undivided investment in education, inheritance and parental attention (Fong, 2002). When proven to be equally or more capable than sons in academics and employment, there is an increasing egalitarian gender preference attitude among urban middle class parents and children themselves (Fong, 2002). Fong’s differentiation of urban female consumption experience is however based on a general commodity (Education) and therefore does not take into account of consumptions that are more gender based.

To understand how urban middle class women make sense of their consumption, a relevant and representative type of is the consumption of cosmetics and plastic surgery, coined as 美女经济 meinüjingji (Beauty Economy) (Xu & Feiner, 2007; Yang, 2011). Quite expectedly, authors who have written on the consumption of cosmetics and plastic surgery in China are largely writing from the feminist approach. Some feminist argue that the freedom for Chinese urban middle class women to express their feminine identity through consumption provides a platform for women to “articulate their new demand and desires” (Luo, 2005, p. 23). This perspective parallels to “consumer post-feminism” (Weiser and Stacer, 2006, p. 257) which exalt women as having “political agency” (Weiser and Stacer, 2006, p.260), “personal choice” and “individual equality” (Weiser and Stacer, 2006, p. 257) in their consumption. In the Chinese context, the expression of femininity made possible by consuming cosmetics, jewellery and even plastic surgery also marks the break from the singular dictation of feminine standards in the communist regime to that of free expression (Croll, 1995 in Hopkins paper) in modern China.

Opponents however argued that women’s agency remained constrained as they “do not control the symbolic value of the goods they buy” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 302). Such argument supports the view that Chinese urban middle class women merely buy into the desired identity shaped by social norms and advertising rather than create their own feminine
identity. Some feminist accused that the consumption of beauty products or plastic surgery seek by Chinese women is an intepellation of superior Western features such as bigger eyes, fuller breast and high nose bridge (Luo, 2013). Other feminist researchers found that the enhancement of appearance through consumption of cosmetics and plastic surgery provides women with better opportunity to climb the social ladder, be it at the job market (Luo, 2013) or as a trophy wife (Hopkins, 2007). Therefore, consumption does not liberate women from societal norms but is merely a “new prescription for acceptability” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 293), often subjugated to male gaze, racialized norms and economic market survival.

The research gap I find from all the literature review is the lack of comparison on the meaning of consumption between the middle class as a whole and middle class women in urban China. The analysis of middle class women’s consumption such as cosmetic and plastic surgery tended to be very feminist charged and western theories-based rather than approached in the light of Class Distinction and Suzhi. Agency is an exception as it is a major concern in feminist studies but nevertheless, the types of agency seek by middle class and middle class women still differs. While there are brief mention and inference on Class and Suzhi/Quality, these themes are lacking in empirical research and emphasis in the feminist approach which understandably emphasize heavily on agency. Since middle class women are a subset of the middle class while Suzhi is a localised rationality of the Chinese middle class, future research that analyse Chinese urban middle class women’s consumption on cosmetic and plastic surgery in the light of Class distinction and Suzhi would provided a better social stratification and localised understanding of gendered consumption in China, rather than simply based on western feminist theories.

In conclusion, despite a large array of research on Chinese urban middle class’s consumption experience and meanings, many of these researches failed to differentiate women’s experience. Studies on urban middle class women’s consumption on cosmetics and
plastic surgery on the other hand is largely based on western feminist paradigm rather than a localised social stratification approach. Although it is highly likely that the major themes (Class Distinction, Agency and *Suzhi*) from my literature review of urban middle class’ consumption will resonate with the urban middle class women’s consumption experience, the in-depth meaning is likely to be more specific or differ from the urban middle class as a whole. It is important to differentiate Chinese urban middle class women’s consumption experience not only because it is constantly being transformed by social dynamics but it also simultaneously transforms gender relationship and social hierarchy in contemporary China.
References


