Urban Consumer Culture*

Deborah Davis

ABSTRACT Over the past decade, urban residents have experienced a consumer revolution at multiple levels. In terms of material standard of living, sustained economic growth has dramatically increased spending on discretionary consumer purchases and urbanites have enthusiastically consumed globally branded foodstuffs, pop-music videos and fashion. At the same time, however, income distribution has become increasingly unequal. Some scholars therefore emphasize the negative exclusionary and exploitative parameters of the new consumer culture seeing nothing more than a ruse of capitalism or marker of all that is negative about post-socialist city life. Building on nearly a decade of fieldwork in Shanghai, this article disputes such a linear interpretation of subordination and exclusion in favour of a more polyvalent and stratified reading that emphasizes individual narratives unfolding against memories of an impoverished personal past, and a consumer culture that simultaneously incorporates contradictory experiences of emancipation and disempowerment.

Over the decade of the 1990s urban residents experienced a consumer revolution at multiple levels. Macro economic growth doubled real incomes and almost all households substantially increased discretionary consumer purchases. Former luxuries such as refrigerators, colour televisions and washing machines became household necessities and by the turn of the century advertising for mobile phones, overseas holidays and family sedans generated substantial revenues for the state owned media.[1] Committed to full membership in the WTO, the political elite enthusiastically advanced a neo-liberal development model that identified personal consumption as a primary driver of economic growth and individual consumer choice as a spur to further efficiency and innovation.[2] Global retailers such as Carrefour, Wal-mart and Ikea invested heavily in China as the critical new consumer market of the 21st century, and by 2004 city residents had become avid – and knowledgeable – consumers of transnationally branded foodstuffs, pop-music videos and fashion.

* I thank the Council on East Asian Studies of Yale University for research grants in support of fieldwork in 1997, 2002 and 2004, and colleagues at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences for repeatedly extending themselves personally on my behalf.

1. In 1986, 65% of urban households owned a washing machine, 29% colour televisions and 18% refrigerators; by 1998 the percentages were 90.5%, 105% and 76%. State Statistical Bureau, *A Survey of Income and Expenditures of Urban Households in China, 1986* (Honolulu: East West Center, 1987), pp. 242–44, *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* 1999 (*China Statistical Yearbook 1999*) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1999), p. 324.

2. "Zhengfu gongzuo baogao" ("Government work report"), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 20 March 2003, p. 1; Li Gangqing, "Jianquan he yuanshan shehuizhuyi shichang," ("Develop and improve the socialist market"), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 22 February 2003; Du Haishou, "Genben mudi shi gaishan shenghuo" ("The basic goal is to improve living standards"), *Renmin ribao*, 15 October 2003, p. 6.

© The China Quarterly, 2005

At the same time, a newly formalized regulatory regime extended legal rights to individual consumers. In October 1993, the National People's Congress passed China's first Consumer Protection Law.[3] A month earlier, the NPC had passed the Law Against Unfair Trade and a year later China's first Advertising Law.[4] Together these three pieces of legislation established the legal framework within which consumers could seek compensation for shoddy goods, claim their rights to accurate information and organize to defend their interests.[5] Legal scholar Benjamin Liebman has demonstrated how settlements awarded under the provisions of these laws created important precedents for future class action suits.[6] Emblematic was the case where 300 Beijing residents received compensation after documenting in court that the widely promoted Mao anniversary watches that they had purchased did not contain the advertised gold and diamonds.

Article 49 of the Consumer Protection Law guaranteed cash payments worth double the sale price whenever consumers could prove that merchants had sold a fraudulent product or shoddy service. During the late 1990s, consumer activist Wang Hai popularized this principle of "double compensation" and tirelessly publicized his success via television appearances and his own website.[7] Evidence of his success even reached the pages of *Chinese Civil Affairs*, where one article explained why "hero" Wang Hai need not pay income tax on the refunds he got from merchants who had sold him counterfeit products.[8]

Since 1994, the Consumer Protection Law has also gained prominence in official publications directed at professionals. In 2003, the weekly magazine of the China Law Society identified it as one of the ten most influential laws enacted since the beginning of market reform.[9] To

3. For English translations see http://www.qis.net/chinalaw/prclaw26.htm, accessed in May 2004.

4. Copies of these laws can be found on the website of the China Consumers' Association, www.cca.org.cn, and www.lawbase.com.cn, accessed in May 2004.

5. Most relevant were the articles in the Consumer Protection Law that guaranteed consumers the right to correct information (articles 8 and 13), the right to choose and exercise supervision over commodities and services (articles 9 and 15), the right to fair trade including fair measurement (article 10), the right to receive compensation for damages (articles 11, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39 and 49), and the right to form social groups to safeguard their legitimate rights and interests (articles 12, 31 and 32). In addition, the law required the state to listen to consumer opinions when formulating laws (article 26) and the courts to simplify the procedures for consumers to file a lawsuit (article 30).

6. Benjamin Liebman, "Class action litigation in China," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 111 (1998), pp. 1523–41.

7. See http://www.wanghai.com/business, accessed in May 2004.

8. Chengning Ren, "Daxia yingxiong gaibugai nashui? ("For destroying fakes must a hero pay taxes"), *Zhongguo minzheng* (*Chinese Civil Affairs*), September 1996, p. 6.

9. The other nine were: the new Economic Contract Law (1981), the Constitution of 1982, the new Code of Civil Procedure (1986), a draft Law for Village Elections (1987), Administrative Litigation Law (1989), the first Company Law (1993), the first Compensation Law (1994), the new Criminal Code (1997) and the 2000 Legislative Procedure Law. "Gaizao Zhongguo de shinian dajing dianli" ("Major laws during the ten years of Chinese reforms") *Minzu yu fazhi shibao* (*Democracy and Law Times*), 12 March 2002, pp. 12–15.

illustrate the law's importance the Law Society cited surveys that showed an increase of more than 50 per cent in the number of consumers filing for damages in the first five years after passage of the law and a rising number of claims for losses under 2,000 *yuan*.[10]

However, amidst these positive trends for consumers in general, there was more sobering news on skewed distribution of income and purchasing power. Between 1985 and 1995, income inequality in China increased more quickly than in any country tracked by the World Bank since the end of the Second World War.[11] After 1995, disparities grew still larger. For example, during six years (1998–2003) when the official consumer price index for urban China barely changed, the income disparity between the richest 10 per cent and poorest 10 per cent of urban residents effectively doubled. Moreover, it was not only the very poor who fell behind. The relative share of those in the middle of the income distribution also steadily declined, dropping from 46.7 per cent in 1998 to less than a third by 2003 (see Tables 1 and 2).

In the case of Shanghai, the city that provides the empirical foundation for this article, income inequality became particularly marked as privatization intensified after 1998. By 2003 incomes in Shanghai were more skewed than in urban China as a whole, and the departures from the distributions of the recent past were stark. In 1998 the gap between the middle 20 per cent and the top 10 per cent was 8,320 *yuan*; by 2003 it exceeded 25,000 *yuan* (compare Figures 1 and 2). Clearly, analysis and interpretation of the character and trajectory of urban consumer culture must confront these income inequalities and consider if urban consumer culture is fundamentally exclusionary.

Table 1: **Changing Income Shares among Urban Households, 1998–2003 (%)**

Income ratios	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*2003*
Bottom 10%: top 10%	22.7	21.7	20.0	18.6	17.3	11.7
Middle 20%: top 10%	46.7	45.6	44.2	42.0	41.7	33.0

Source:
Zhongguo tongji zhaiyao 2004 (*Chinese Statistical Abstract 2004*) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2004), p. 104.

10. "Major laws during the ten years of Chinese reforms," p. 14.

11. The literature on increased inequality is enormous. I therefore cite only a few sources from among those published since 1998: Eugene Chang, "Growing income inequality," *China Economic Review*, Vol. 11 (2002), pp. 335–340; Azizur Khan and Carl Riskin, *Inequality and Poverty in China in the Age of Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Xueguang Zhou, "Economic transformation and income inequality in urban China," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105 (2000), pp. 1135–74.

Table 2: **Annual Per Capita Urban Income and Expenditure, 1998–2003 (in *yuan*)**

	1998	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*2002*	*2003*
Average incomes						
Bottom 10%	2,505	2,646	2,678	2,834	3,168	2,762
Next 10%	3,329	3,518	3,658	3,888	4,486	4,209
Next 20%	4,134	4,391	4,651	4,983	5,826	5,705
Middle 20%	5,148	5,543	5,930	6,406	7,638	7,753
Next 20%	6,404	6,942	7,525	8,213	9,874	10,463
Next 10%	7,918	8,674	9,484	10,441	12,604	14,076
Top 10%	11,021	12,147	13,390	15,220	18,288	23,484
Annual change in consumer price index						
	99.4	98.7	100.8	100.7	99.0	100.9
Average expenditures						
Bottom 10%	2,397	2,523	2,540	2,691	2,987	2,562
Next 10%	2,979	3,137	3,274	3,452	3,913	3,549
Next 20%	3,503	3,694	3,947	4,197	4,696	4,557
Middle 20%	4,179	4,432	4,794	5,131	5,846	5,848
Next 20%	4,980	5,347	5,894	6,241	7,155	7,547
Next 10%	6,003	6,443	7,102	7,495	8,701	9,627
Top 10%	7,594	8,262	9,250	9,834	11,224	14,515

Source:
Chinese Statistical Abstract 2004, pp. 88 and 104.

Figure 1: **2003 Average Per Capita Incomes in All of Urban China and in Shanghai**

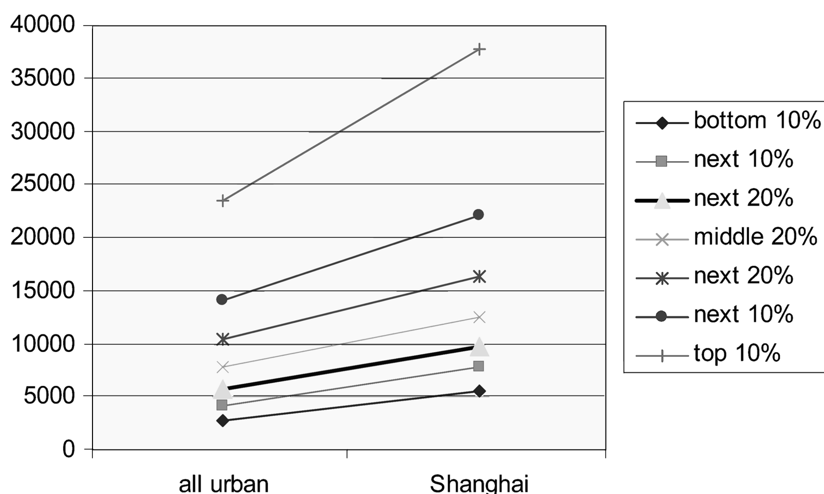
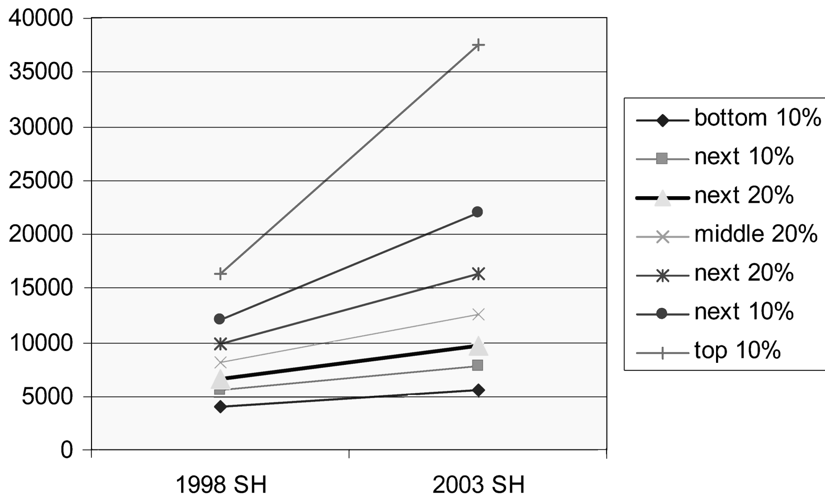


Figure 2: **Change in Shanghai Per Capita Income between 1998 and 2003**



Source:
Shanghai tongji nianjian 2004 (*Shanghai Statistical Yearbook 2004*) (Shanghai: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2004), pp. 104 and 106; *Chinese Statistical Abstract 2004*, p. 104.

On the Possible Illusions and Exclusions of Consumer Culture

In her superb essay on the "phantom" of a consumer revolution Pun Ngai places the pain and injustice of exclusion at the heart of her analysis and interrogates consumer fantasy as the newest "ruse of capital."[12] Pun not only documents how the new consumer abundance lies beyond the reach of the young migrant factory workers whose labour produces the consumer cornucopia, she also argues that consumerism itself is a particularly effective form of capitalist exploitation that erodes class consciousness and offers no enchantment, emancipation or empowerment. Kevin Latham, drawing on his 1997 fieldwork in Guangzhou, also found consumption practices to function primarily as a "marker and measure of the negative aspects of economic reform."[13] Pun and Latham work within an intellectual tradition rooted in the Frankfurt school where power relations at the workplace or within systems of production are the primary sites of class formation; consumers – particularly as they participate in mass consumption – are victims with little agency. Their work also evokes Jackson Lear's and Daniel Bell's equation of consumption with hedonism and thus stands in direct contrast to more recent

12. Pun Ngai, "Subsumption or consumption?" in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2003), pp. 469–492.
13. Kevin Latham, "Rethinking Chinese consumption," in C.M. Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 227–28.

anthropological and sociological analyses that approach consumers and the social practices of consumption as opportunities to identify and understand networks of communication or identity formation.[14] From this latter perspective, material restrictions and politics of the work place shape consumer practices, but consumers retain the possibility for fantasy, resistance and empowerment.

During more than a decade of fieldwork in Shanghai, I, like Pun and Latham, have witnessed the growing income inequalities of the 1990s and in several previous publications I have contrasted the fates of the winners and losers in the new post-socialist economy.[15] Nevertheless, when seeking to understand the character and trajectory of urban consumer culture through the experiences of city residents, I give priority to the speech of the residents themselves and do not assume the predominance of either exploitation and deception or agency and empowerment. In particular, when one approaches consumer culture as a narrative and a form of communication, the task of field research is to remain open to the multi-vocal speech of participants themselves. The structural dynamics and material inequalities of the contemporary post-socialist political economy necessarily frame these narratives, but the consumer culture that individuals create through their personal commentary and social discourse cannot *a priori* be presumed to be illusory or exploitative.

Approached through the processes of narration and dialogue, consumer cultures may be dominated by exclusion, seduction or exploitation, but they are more likely to be as polyvalent and multi-levelled as the social positions and the temporal framing of the participants.[16] Moreover, because my fieldwork focused on domestic consumption, and in particular on consuming in and for the home, my respondents emphasized the personal and private parameters of consumer culture that the publicly oriented, productionist-focused theories of the Frankfurt tradition routinely ignore or marginalize. Moreover, because furnishing urban residential space served as a primary focus of consumer desire and spending among all income groups in Shanghai during the past decade, conversations about spending for the home reveal values that are pervasive in contemporary consumer culture. In discussing their purchases for their homes my respondents recognized the injustice and pain of increasing

14. Mary Douglas, *Thought Styles* (London: Sage, 1996); Daniel Miller, *Acknowledging Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1995), Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

15. Deborah Davis, "From welfare benefit to capitalized asset," in Ray Forrest and James Lee (eds.), *Chinese Urban Housing Reform* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 183–196; "Inequality and insecurity among elderly in contemporary China," in Susanne Formanek and Sepp Linhart (eds.), *Asian Concepts and Experiences* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1997), pp. 133–154; "Inequalities and stratification in the nineties," in *China Review 1995* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1995), pp. 1–25.

16. Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 12; Maris Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); James Watson, *Golden Arches East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Yunxiang Yan, "The politics of Chinese society," in Tyrene White (ed.), *China Briefing 2000* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), pp. 159–193.

income inequalities but they integrated this knowledge within personal memories of past political repression and material deprivation of the 1960s and 1970s. As time passes, this particular historical referent will lose its salience, the key temporal comparisons may shift to the hardships and inequalities of the post-socialist economy, and consumer culture may become more generally experienced as a ruse. However, at the turn of the 21st century, earlier experiences with subordination, dependence and politicized conformity during the Mao years decisively defined the experience of consumption for those who had come of age during the anti-consumerist culture of the 1960s and 1970s and within this temporal location they spoke of a consumer culture with visible degrees of freedom.

Making a House a Home

During the first 30 years in which the Chinese Communist Party monopolized political power, the national leadership defined modernity in terms of increased industrial output and the triumph of collective ownership. Within this project of economic modernization, party-state rhetoric lionized the industrial proletariat and celebrated the state's ability to meet the material needs of the masses. For urban residents, the Maoist vision of a "new" China (*xin Zhongguo*) de-commercialized city life and concentrated consumption within locations of production.[17] Ration tickets issued through places of employment controlled the sale of basic food items as well as such varied purchases as cotton cloth, coal, furniture, light bulbs and bicycles.[18] Housing became a welfare benefit that state agents distributed to the most deserving "supplicants" in a public housing queue.[19] Urban families even turned to enterprise-operated theatres or recreation centres for films and holiday celebrations.[20]

After Deng and Jiang decisively broke with this Maoist vision of de-commodified modernity, urban living standards radically improved, and consumers became key players in the official discourse of economic

17. Piper Gaubatz, "China's urban transformation," *Urban Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 9 (1999), pp. 1495–1521; Deborah Davis, "Social transformations of metropolitan China since 1949," in Joseph Guggler (ed.), *Cities in the Developing World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 248–258.

18. Martin Whyte and William Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 85–90

19. Deborah Davis, "Urban household supplicants to the state," in Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds.), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 50–76.

20. Gaubatz, "China's urban transformation"; Hanlong Lu, "To be relatively comfortable in an egalitarian society," in Deborah Davis (ed.), *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 124–144; Xiaobo Lu and Elizabeth Perry, *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997); Shaoguang Wang, "The politics of private time," in Deborah Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth Perry (eds.), *Urban Spaces* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 149–172; Whyte and Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China*.

development.[21] Of particular consequence for understanding domestically focused consumer culture was the unprecedented upgrading of the quality of urban homes and the privatization of nearly all residential property by 2002.[22] For permanent residents of Shanghai, extensive privatization created millions of first-time home owners, for whom decorating and furnishing a home became a preoccupation completely without precedent in the previous 40 years of city living. New condominiums were sold as concrete shells furnished only with water and sewage pipes, so that new residents needed to purchase and install every item to make a liveable space. Moving from one or two rooms with a shared toilet and kitchen to a self-contained two-bedroom apartment – the usual transition for first-time home owners – required extensive planning and comparative shopping. A home renovation industry boomed overnight, home decoration magazines (and later websites) multiplied, and international retailers rushed to gain market share. In Shanghai, even among those who had not been able to purchase a condominium, homes became a focus of consumer spending and desire. Furnishing a flat and purchasing items to improve comfort, value or distinction gained a salience unimaginable in the previous decades of *danwei* (work unit) controlled housing.

Respondents and Field Sites

Two different groups of respondents provide the narrative material for my analysis of urban consumer culture. The first group included 41 men and women whom I first interviewed in 1987, the second group 46 men and women whom I met in 2004 through introductions by my professional colleagues. Those from the first group were "survivors" of a random sample of 100 households drawn from a residential community near one of the oldest worker settlements in Shanghai. Because the original project had been a study of parent-child job mobility after 1949, I had restricted my sample to families that included an ever-married woman born after 1925 who would have been a young adult during the 1950s and whose children would have entered the labour force after 1966. Using these gender and birth date criteria I subsequently collected the occupational histories of more than 500 family members who represented

21. Deborah Davis, "Introduction," *Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). The official embrace of consumers as positive agents of change can be summarized by the dramatic increase in the number of articles published in *Renmin ribao* that use the word consumer, and the very limited number of times the words consumer and waste are ever linked in one article. Not only does the basic frequency increase over time, but between 1995 and 2003 consumers became even more visible than either workers or university students The *Renmin ribao* archive that is accessible through http://willard.library reported 681 articles that included at least one reference to consumers, 504 to university students, 1,231 to workers in 1995. For 2003, the comparable frequencies were 1,126 to consumers, 1,058 to workers and 814 to students. Accessed in May 2004.

22. In 1980 less than 15% of urban residential property was owner-occupied; by 2002 80% of non-migrant residents had become home owners and almost 100% of migrants rented from private landlords. Xinhua News Agency, 9 August 2002.

the established working class and lower rungs of middle management.[23] I returned to re-interview members of these households in 1990, 1992 and 1995, and between 1997 and 2002 I returned four times to meet a subset of ten households. In spring 2004, I re-interviewed three-quarters of the households still living in the neighbourhood.[24]

In contrast to those in the neighbourhood-based sample, respondents in the second group were younger and primarily worked as municipal employees, entrepreneurs or professionals. Nine were in their late 20s and early 30s, the rest were born between 1945 and 1964. As in any snowball sample, the strength of the data is the richness and relative spontaneity of the conversation. In this analysis, I draw primarily on conversations with a subset of 37 men and women from both samples who were in their 40s and 50s. Many of these conversations took place in their homes, and a third stretched over several visits in multiple venues. As a result, the respondents often set the agenda and initiated the discussion.

All interviews, however, turned around conversations about the respondent's current living situation. Initially I had planned to orient the interviews around ownership of 20 household appliances or furnishings where I had survey results from earlier years and had also gathered comparative price estimates.[25] However, because most respondents owned 15 or more of the basic consumer durables, I found that open-ended questions about expectations for future purchases or renovations produced more sustained conversation. Before turning to the substance of these personal narratives, I briefly review the role of the decorating magazines that became extremely popular in the second half of the 1990s and provide examples of the vocabulary and grammar of urban consumer culture.

Visualizing a Home

From the mid-1950s until the late 1980s, municipal and enterprise housing offices distributed urban housing stock according to the size of the family and the seniority and political standing of the household head; price or ability to pay played no role.[26] In crowded Shanghai where little new residential space had been built after 1962, families rarely occupied

23. Only 5% of the fathers and 15% of the mothers worked outside the state sector, 24% of fathers and 66% of mothers were manual workers, 14% of fathers and 13% of mothers did routine white-collar jobs, 22% of fathers and 14% of mothers did non-routine white-collar work, 29% of fathers and 2% of mothers were middle management, and 10% of fathers and 4% of mothers were professionals.

24. Materials from occupational and housing histories collected from these families have been previously analysed in Deborah Davis, "Social class transformation," *Modern China* (July 2002), pp. 251–275; "Self-employment in Shanghai," *The China Quarterly*, No. 157 (March 1999), pp. 22–43; "Job mobility in post-Mao cities," *The China Quarterly*, No. 132 (December 1992), pp. 1062–85, "Urban households: supplicants to a socialist state."

25. The 20 items were: sofa, desk, radio, colour television, electric rice cooker, microwave oven, exhaust hood for stove, DVD/VCD, desk computer, laptop computer, fixed line phone, mobile phone, carpet, piano, hot-water heater, electric fan, air conditioner, exercise equipment, refrigerator and washing machine.

26. Davis, "Urban household: supplicants to the state," pp. 50–76.

more than two rooms; communal showers or bathrooms were the norm and kitchens were set up on the pavement, in hallways, or in alcoves built on porches and roofs. Even in the new residential area built in 1979 where my first group of respondents lived, families cooked around a window into the public corridor. If two families shared the apartment, each household piled up pans and dried foodstuffs in a locked cupboard around the single burner attached to their canister of bottled gas. In 1987, when most families had purchased a refrigerator, it stood in the inner room that served as bedroom and living room. Floors and walls were bare cement and thin curtains or bamboo shades offered a veneer of privacy.

The explosive growth of commercial housing after 1992 introduced entirely different possibilities for urban residents. New estates consisted entirely of self-contained flats, with internal walls and doors subdividing the interior space into several functionally specific enclosed spaces. After 2000, city regulations barring sales of homes with shared entrances or communal bathrooms and kitchens pushed forward further the segmentation and privatization of domestic space. In 1990, only 31.6 per cent of Shanghai households lived in self-contained flats; by the end of 2002, the percentage rose to 87.4.[27]

When I first began to collect renovation guides and decorating magazines, most new homeowners, like the respondents of my community sample, occupied two rooms totalling less than 30 square metres of interior space. Not surprisingly the magazines featured modest investments in window frames, flooring and cabinets that neighbourhood-based contractors or owners themselves could install. Magazines published in 1994 and 1995 routinely provided extensive directions on dimensions and use of each piece of hardware needed to hang a new door, install a sink or lay a wood floor.[28]

However, even as instruction focused on the mundane and immediate, a new language of style and taste as well as personal distinction rhetorically framed the practical instructions on moving walls or installing squat toilets. In one introduction, the editors promised readers who carefully planned each step of their renovation that they would experience feelings of greater openness and refinement.[29] In another, they offered to instruct readers on how to possess a cosy and harmonious family life.[30] These practically oriented magazines published in the mid-1990s also reproduced images from European and North American magazines to illustrate the importance of careful design and placement of furnishings. Thus, as

27. Hanlong Lu (ed.), *Shangahi shehui fazhan lanpi shu* (*Blue Book of Shanghai Social Development*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shekeyuan chubanshe, 2004), p. 65.

28. Li Xuan, *Shinei zhuangshi xinkuan* (*New Sincerity of Interior Decoration*) (Chengdu: Chengdu keji daxue chubanshe, 1995); He Sheng *et al.* (eds), *Jushi zhuangxiu jisu yu shili* (*Techniques and Examples for Home Renovation*) (Beijing: Zhongguowujia chubanshe, 1996); Zhen Tiegang (ed.), *Xiandai jushi de kongjian yu secai* (*Colour and Space in Today's Rooms*) (Tianjin: Tianjin daxue chubanshe, 1995); all these magazines purchased August 1997 in the bookstore of the state-owned Parkson Department Store on Huai Hai Road, Shanghai.

29. Zhen Tiegang, *Colour and Space in Today's Rooms.*

30. Li Xuan, *New Sincerity of Interior Decoration.*

they browsed magazines, Shanghai residents visualized domestic settings that connected them to global consumer practices and furnishings.[31]

By 2004 the elaborate shower fixtures, modular furniture and illuminated cabinets that had only a few years earlier been fantasies of commercial hype had become widely available throughout metropolitan Shanghai. In the age of the internet and global marketing, consumers no longer needed to purchase expensive decorating magazines or even enter a book shop. Instead, merchants distributed complimentary copies of glossy promotional materials funded by Chinese retailers who promised readers all they needed to know to create "a tasteful family and a tasteful life."[32] For the ever-growing number of consumers who surfed the world-wide web, there was hardly a Chinese or foreign product that they could not view and price online.[33] Nevertheless, thousands of city residents still spent weekend afternoons window-shopping and looking for bargains in furniture shops and department stores. And in 2004, one venue of choice was the Swedish global retailer Ikea.

Ikea

Ikea arrived in Shanghai in 1998 and by 2004 the Xujiahui store was the franchise's largest in Asia. In layout, size and basic goods it was identical to Ikea's 200th store that opened in New Haven, Connecticut in autumn 2004. As customers entered the signature blue and yellow big box store, they were immediately guided to the second floor where they followed a floor plan that required that they walk slowly past furniture samples for living rooms, storage units, dining rooms, kitchens, bedrooms and children's furniture. Interspersed, were complete apartments for different demographic groups.[34] In New Haven there were four household prototypes; in Shanghai there were seven. In the United States there were model apartments for a single male, a young unmarried couple, a couple with a three-year-old daughter, and a couple with two teenagers. In Shanghai, there was no prototype of a person living alone but neither was any unit as small as the one for the single American man.[35] In Shanghai

31. All the magazines cited in the footnote above were bought as I systematically viewed customers in four Shanghai bookshops in August 1997. All the magazines I bought were read or purchased during the time of my observations by people who had been reading the magazines, and the one edited by Li was particularly dog-eared.

32. "Pinwei jiating, pinwei shenghuo" cover slogan in *Deco Times*, 16 January 2004.

33. See for example advertisements accessed February 2004: www.artdeco.com for bedding; www.dulcet.com for stereo equipment; www.haier.com for all appliances; www.hangang.com.cn for high quality paint; www.hongda.com.cn for door hardware; www.hukla.de for Danish furniture; www.shjustep.com for flooring; www.shfugao.com for electronic products; www.sodun.net for luxury furnishing; as well as individual designers only some of whom were actually based in Shanghai, such as for example Tai Yun at www.taiyun.com or Rex Chan at www.xalpcc, both of whom claimed to offer sophisticated designs at economical prices.

34. Based on visits and floor plans in the two stores during February, March and December 2004.

35. The studio for the single male was 24 square metres, the smallest unit in Shanghai was 36 square metres for an elderly couple whose only son had moved out but occasionally returned to visit.

there also was no four-person household, but there was an unmarried couple introduced under the same English slogan: "moving in together." Despite these slight differences, the lay-outs of the Shanghai and US stores as well as the choices of furnishings were interchangeable.

Ikea's global promise is to provide customers "affordable solutions for better living,"[36] and in China this slogan translated into targeting households with monthly incomes of 3,350 *yuan*, or roughly US$5,000 per year.[37] In Shanghai where the average annual wage in 2003 was 30,828 *yuan*, and average household size was 2.99 with 1.55 employed persons, households in the top 60 per cent of registered (non-migrant) households qualified as Ikea's target customers even when taking into account the growing income inequality documented in Figures 1 and 2.[38] In Shanghai Ikea has, in fact, already spawned a blue and yellow imitator in the Yuexing furniture mall on the edge of the JingAn district, and Ikea prices for decorating apartments of 45 to 60 square metres of useable space fit within middle-income budgets.[39]

At least as significant for understanding the centrality of the Ikea experience for contemporary consumer culture in Shanghai are the consumer expectations associated with shopping at Ikea. Shopping at Ikea is built around imagining complete domestic interiors and then breaking down the vision into hundreds of individually sold components from screws to sofa beds. Even customers who lack a private bathroom or kitchen can purchase a wooden dish rack or assemble a cupboard and later move them to their future home. The store also has a large cafeteria strategically located on the second floor where shoppers are encouraged to review their notes, discuss their purchases, or simply socialize over Scandinavian fast food and free refills of Italian espresso or brand-name fizzy drinks. It is possible, therefore, for families or young couples to spend an entire day roaming through the cavernous store and buy nothing more than one coca-cola.

Ikea promotes a vision of an ideal ultra-modern home interior that offers sleek European designs but profits by selling the experience – if only temporary – of individualized, personal service. Thus, just as important as the price of the furnishings are the free designer service, delivery of all modular units throughout the city, and, most importantly, a guarantee of satisfaction or money-back refunds. Like much of the post-industrial consumer focused economy, Ikea profits by rationalizing

36. http://www.ikea.com, accessed in December 2004.

37. Alexander Brenner, based on interview with the Ikea representative in Beijing, "The Ikea-man cometh," *Institute of Current World Affairs Letter*, 20 January 2004.

38. Per capita monthly income for the middle 20% of the 2003 income distribution averaged 3,150 *yuan*, barely lower than Ikea's 3,350 *yuan* cut-off, and those in the top 40% of the income distribution all fit the Ikea profile. *Shanghai tongji nianjian 2004* (*Shanghai Statistical Yearbook, 2004*) (Shanghai: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2004), pp. 99, 102 and 106

39. For example, sofas which were generally the centrepiece in new living rooms cost less than 1,500 *yuan*; sofa beds were under 3,000 *yuan*. By contrast prices in a state store such as Seashore were usually 50% more expensive and, in the eyes of my colleagues, of poorer quality. For Ikea prices, I consulted http://www.ikea.com/ms/zh_CN/virtual_catalogue/main.html. Accessed in December 2004.

individuated experience and services as much as efficient production of material goods. In Shanghai these seemingly ephemeral but deliberately commodified practices systematized for profit are deeply embedded and positively valorized in the contemporary experience of urban consumer culture.

Consumer Desire and the Life-Course

The phrases *laosanjie* and *xinsanjie* or "old three" and "new three graduating classes" identify a specific generation with a shared history of hardship. Narrowly it defines those who graduated from junior or senior high school between 1966 and 1968 or junior high school between 1970 and 1972, and were subject to assignment to the countryside after graduation. In terms of birth year, most *laosanjie* were born between 1948 and 1953, *xinsanjie* between 1954 and 1956. Therefore, they were the first generation whose fertility was dictated – and radically restricted – by the one-child policy; they were also the first cohort of state employees to become targets of the massive industrial layoffs that began after 1992. More generally, *laosanjie* and *xinsanjie* refer to all those whose adolescence was stunted by political machinations of *jieji chengfen* (class status) during the Cultural Revolution. Throughout most of the 1980s they represented a lost generation, and much of the early "scar" literature used them as tropes for the brutality of Maoist class struggle and the crushed dreams of youth. Today, the two phrases rarely surface in the public media, but for my respondents in their 40s and 50s, *laosanjie* and *xinsanjie* resonated deeply as they reviewed their life's trajectory or their orientation towards contemporary consumer desires.

Among those who graduated from junior or senior high school between 1966 and 1968, all but two spent many years labouring in the countryside before returning to Shanghai. They delayed marriage until their late 20s or early 30s, did manual work in low wage urban collectives, and crowded into their parents' small apartments with other adult siblings. Even those who did not face rural job assignments and loss of urban *hukou* shared memories of early adulthood as a time of limited horizons and politicized shortages. Because of these experiences, conversation about contemporary purchases – especially about purchases for their homes – spontaneously invoked comparisons to a past when they "had nothing," when they slept on the street to escape summer heat, or when the fumes of the charcoal brazier used to boil drinking water created toxic fumes. Only two of my middle-aged respondents began marriage with a self-contained (*chengtao*) apartment of their own.[40] The others all shared toilets and kitchen facilities with neighbours, and a third began their married lives sharing a room with adult siblings of the wife or husband. Not surprisingly a key parameter of their current narrative of

40. In one case the husband was a PLA officer newly returned from a posting outside Shanghai; in the second, the couple were both on the faculty of a university in Tianjin.

domestic consumption emphasized the pleasures of creating a physically comfortable (*shufu*) home.

The animating consumer desires of these men and women, however, transcended desire for material comfort. Household spending during the 1960s and 1970s had necessitated hoarding coupons and frequent queuing that often resulted in purchase of shoddy goods. Thus, even when they bemoaned high prices or criticized extravagance of a recent purchase, they would spontaneously compare the situation favourably to the past when there had been no choices, when no one dared complain, and all their personal belongings fitted in one suitcase. By contrast, their every day lives of 2004, even for those who were struggling financially, included personal space in which consumer investments gave them repeated pleasure. I quote from an interview with a 50-year-old taxi driver, who had recently remarried.

> When I was first divorced, I was still working as a bar tender. But it was no good for my son, so I took the test to become a taxi driver four years ago and I passed. Now I drive a second or third class car, and am off every other day. When I get home I am beat. When I first started with the taxi company, I would come home so exhausted that I would just collapse and lie there looking at the ceiling. When I come home now I want to close out the job and all the pressures, and feel comfortable and restore myself. It is important that I get rest and not drive when I am exhausted … . [When I decided to remarry] I first knocked out the wall to the veranda, and made a small front bedroom, bought new flooring, paint and furniture. Then I made a dining area so we can all sit down together. My friends laugh at me and say I was extravagant (*tai guofen*) spending too much [for a second marriage], but I did it for myself, and I am happy … I think back to how we first lived here [in 1979], all eight of us, or I think of my tiring job, and then I am satisfied. (Interviewee No. 23, 21 February 2004)

Consumer Culture and the Collapse of the Danwei

The *laosanjie* and *xinsanjie* cohorts came of age within the *danwei*-dominated economy of "massified consumption."[41] They began their married lives during the 1980s when urban reforms had not radically changed the material constraints on domestic spending or increased housing choices. They moved to their first apartment – or room – of their own by rising through the housing queue at their place of employment, and only after urban housing reform accelerated did they become home-owners.

In 1992 15 per cent of non-migrant residents had purchased some form of ownership of their homes; by 2002 urban home ownership rates exceeded those in the United States.[42] All the elderly respondents in my

41. Hanlong Lu, "To be relatively comfortable in an egalitarian society," in Deborah Davis (ed.), *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 124–144.

42. Xinhua News Agency, 9 August 2002. In Shanghai 80% of non-migrant residents were homeowners. By comparison in the United States, which has one of the highest levels of home ownership, only 68% of all residential units were owner-occupied in 2003, and this percentage was the highest level in over 100 years. For US census data, see www.calvert-henderson.com/shelter2. Accessed in May 2004.

community sample had purchased their apartments during the mid-1990s when sitting tenants could purchase flats at highly discounted rates. Among the middle-aged respondents, 90 per cent were new homeowners, two-thirds since 2000. Thus at a point in the life cycle when they might have been expected to be reducing purchase of consumer durables, they were in fact focusing almost all their discretionary expenditures on their first homes. Moreover, because new apartments in China continue to be sold with no interior wiring, no floors, no finished walls, often no door frames, consuming for their homes involved extensive amounts of comparative shopping as well as extensive consumeristic conversation with friends and relatives. Again, one central theme of their consuming was the celebration of choice and individuation.

Davis: Can you tell me how long it took you to furnish your new apartment?
Wife: Months, I spent most of my lunch hour looking at advertisements, visiting showrooms and talking to my friends. After I saw what I liked I would bring my husband to see it, and then we would make a plan. As you see, the result is really ordinary.
Davis: I have visited many families in the past two months, and your living room is not at all ordinary. It is very special and beautiful.
Wife: Well I did spend a lot of time, it was really a second job and I really know how to save money.
Husband interrupts: And also it is important now that you individualize your home. We spent almost three months finishing the apartment, and we both came everyday after to work to inspect it. (Interviewees Nos. 74 and 75, 4 April 2004)

In shopping for every plumbing fixture, appliance and light switch, consumers were also using consumer activity to separate themselves – and their consumer practices – from their place of employment. For the two city employees quoted above, this separation was unalloyed freedom. During my visit to their home, they repeated that no one from their offices lived here, that they saw "no connection" to either of their units, and they took special pleasure in their ability to socialize with only their closest friends and relatives. Others, whose *danwei* had gone bankrupt and who were struggling to find steady employment, could hardly afford to purchase two air-conditioning units, two hot-water heaters and an Ikea model kitchen, but they could – and did – spend weeks, sometimes months shopping for supplies and one or two appliances. For example, one new bride of 30 who had lost her job in a state electronics factory and worked part-time in a private cake shop, explained with relish how she and her new husband spent every weekend for two months biking to various warehouses on the outskirts of Shanghai for floor coverings, paint and spackle. They slept in one room as they renovated the other. After several months, she said "I had the home I wanted; the renovation made us very happy (*kaixin*.)"[43]

Others I interviewed whose units had disappeared felt marooned and thrown back on their inadequate resources. The taxi driver quoted above

43. Interviewee No. 74 on 4 April 2004.

emphasized how in today's world "youth is your only capital. Now I have no capital." However, as illustrated in the quotation above, when asked to talk about what he had purchased recently for his home, he became expansive, and spoke about his acquisitions and improvements with pleasure. Pun Ngai is correct to see stratification, frustration and envy in the acts of consumption. She is also correct that the neo-liberal spin on consumer freedom has served the interest of capital more than labour. Where the conversations with these Shanghai residents refute Pun's equation of consumption with capital's ruse is in their articulation of equally authentic consumer experiences that emphasize choice and personal pleasure against individual memories of political repression and meaningless sacrifice.

Regret as the Mirror Image of Desire

Desire, choice and celebration inflected my respondents' conversations about their recent purchases and coloured subsequent use or display of the objects in their homes. But expressions of regret and disappointment also ran through their narratives. Returning home after shopping trips to furniture stores or meetings with contractors, people shared explicit regrets, and sometimes I heard a more general malaise and sense of loss that stemmed from consumer purchases that had failed to meet the original expectations. For one friend the colour of the walls did not match her image of the perfect bedroom, but the contractor refused to admit a mix-up and financially it made no sense to repaint. For another, the new floorboards were of lower quality than advertised and the stain was darker than they had imagined. However, by the time they realized the problems, they had paid the contractor and had no energy to pursue him. In 1996, a phone in the bathroom had seemed the height of sophistication. Within a year, cheap cordless models made a mockery of the purchase. On days when business was good, this respondent saw the bathroom phone as a humorous joke; on days when he saw no way to get beyond the red ink on the monthly balance sheets, it mocked his earlier ambition and his disdain for a feckless father. In 1999, other friends spent one-quarter of their renovation money on a colour television; soon after the expiration of the warranty, the picture tube failed. In 2004 watching the news on an older model taken from the bedroom stirred bitterness about the stagnant wages and insecure employment that prohibited replacement of the big-screen Sony that had previously documented their financial success and comfort.[44]

Conclusion

Focused on the daily experience of Shenzhen factory workers, Pun Ngai describes the consumer revolution in China as the newest "ruse

44. From home visits to interviewees No. 20 on 3 April 2004, No. 37 on 28 March 2004, No. 27 on 27 February 1997, No. 50 on 4 March 2004.

of capital … whereby the extraction of surplus value of labor is … suppressed by the overvaluation of consumption and its neoliberal ideologies of self-transformation."[45] For Pun consumption is neither the economist's essential twin of production nor a neutral information system.[46] Rather it is a "new mode of governmentality" that manipulates and exploits individual desire in the service of domination by capital and an alliance of party-state officials and private business owners against the interests of manual labour. My fieldwork in Shanghai confirms the stratified character of consumption practices. However, as I listened to how my respondents placed contemporary home-centred consumption into their longer life histories, I discovered a more reflexive and critical narrative that signified agency and individuation more than manipulation and domination. As Elisabeth Croll observed during the conference, Chinese citizens who for decades subordinated individual preference and desires to conform with the party-state's priorities are particularly likely to understand expanded consumer choices within a larger "re-exercise of agency."

When reporters in *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*) praised consumer autonomy, they wrote in the banal rhetoric of marketers and official endorsements of private entrepreneurship and neo-liberal economics. When, however, one listens to consumers themselves reflect on purchases as part of a larger conversation about their leisure time or expectations for the future, the sociological terrain becomes a complex performance space with observable degrees of freedom. Unequal distributions of wealth and income restrict the ability to purchase desired consumer goods and services, and my poorest respondents were explicit about the disappointment – even anger – that they felt when the newest consumer offerings were beyond their reach. For example, the taxi driver who had remarried also noted: "Now in Shanghai we can see everything, but we also know that we can not have it. So in comparison to before we know there is a lot out there, but we can't have it."

Among my interviewees, skilled technical workers in foreign multinationals and white-collar professionals and managers more easily realized the freedoms of consumer choice than wage workers or self-employed service workers. However, it would be a mistake to use unequal access to consumer goods to conclude that consumer culture is nothing more than a ruse or manipulation. Among this cohort of middle-aged Shanghai men and women visited in their homes during the early spring of 2004, personal memories of the exploitative use of class struggle by Maoist elites informed their reaction to contemporary inequalities and emotional investments in consumer culture. Viewing their

45. Pun, "Subsumption or consumption?" p. 469.

46. Mike Featherstone, "Life style and consumer culture," *Theory, Culture and Society*, No.4 (1987), pp. 55–70; Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing*; Nicola Green, "How everyday life became virtual," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (2001), pp. 73–92; Michele Lamont and Virag Molnar, "How blacks use consumption to shape their collective identity," *Journal of Consumer Culture,* Vol. 1 No. 1 (2001), pp. 31–45

current consumer choices against a past of shortage, crowding and bureaucratic controls, respondents of different income levels discussed recent purchases as representing expanded autonomy, even freedom. As a result, even as they openly criticized growing income inequalities, they commented on their consumer activities with pride. These conversations with Shanghai residents therefore illustrate the complexity of consumer culture at the level of individual practice. Consuming for their homes these urban residents have created an intimate sphere through which they make sense of their own life trajectories as well as make claims for a personal realm beyond the reach of the party-state. As Jing Wang has argued in her earlier work on expanded leisure activities in Beijing, urban consumer culture simultaneously incorporates contradictory experiences of emancipation and disempowerment.[47]

47. Jing Wang, "Culture as leisure and culture as capital," *Positions*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2001), pp. 69–104.