

Revisiting Conspicuous Consumption: Continuity and Change in Consumption Patterns in China

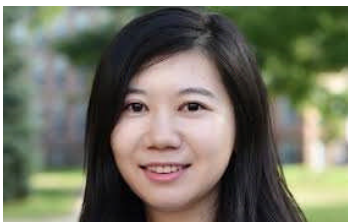
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Lecture in English
Open to Public / No Registration Required

Theories of the sociology of consumption tend to be Western-based and they are embedded in a sociocultural context. My research attempts to contribute to a refinement of an understanding of how Western- based sociological theories play out in a non-western society, especially one with a different cultural, political, and historical system. Concretely speaking, this research aims to explore how Veblen's status-seeking model manifests itself before and after China adopted the opening-up policy. Based on my empirical research, during the Cultural Revolution, unlike Veblen's conspicuous consumption theory, instead of showing off their wealth, consumers displayed their poverty during this era. "Status goods" during this period were based on a person's "revolutionary background" and loyalty to Chairman Mao, rather than on individual consumption preferences. After the opening-up policy, China entered the consumer society. The varieties of conspicuous consumption are identified. Some among the upper-middle class attempt to differentiate themselves from other groups by emphasizing their frugal moral qualities in what I have called "conspicuous frugality". In contrast, others among the upper-middle class choose brand products with no logo or subtle logos in what I have called "unostentatious conspicuous consumption" to distinguish themselves from the new rich. The driving-force behind these phenomena is that culture has a profound influence on materialism, spirituality and people's orientation toward life. Therefore, Chinese people have their own ways to stand out in certain situations. That is, Chinese traditional values and culture directly and indirectly influence Chinese consumption practices and this legacy seems likely to continue in the future.



Weiwei Zhang receives her Ph.D in Sociology from Boston University and she is currently an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Hartwick College. Before she joined Hartwick College, she was a postdoctoral fellow at Georgetown University and taught at several universities. Her research interests include consumer behavior, culture, globalization, and Chinese society.

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