Chapter 1

Introduction

A Revolution in Consumption

Deborah S. Davis

Chairman Mao Zedong was not gone two years when his successors jettisoned core principles of the Communist revolution and assigned private entrepreneurship and consumer demand central roles in a new blueprint for economic growth. Initially these deviations from Maoist orthodoxy were endorsed as short-term compromises to spur efficiency and jump start a stagnant economy.\(^1\) There was no intention of allowing individuals to accumulate significant capital or property rights, and any link between economic and political reform was explicitly rejected. However, by the early 1990s, when the initial reform had produced a decade of double-digit growth and ensconced Chinese industry firmly within the global capitalist economy, the leadership discovered that they could not reverse course. Neither could they control the social consequences of the economy’s dependency on market transactions and private entrepreneurship. 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.

For the urban residents who are the subjects of this volume, the financial gains from post-Mao economic reform have been rapid and impressive.\(^2\) Adjusted for inflation, per capita income doubled between 1978 and 1990, and

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\(^1\) In 1980, chief economist Chen Yun encouraged a focus on the consumer industries both to provide material incentives for higher labor productivity and to prevent the bottlenecks that he expected if there were no new outlets for increased agricultural inputs. Naughton 1995, pp. 77–79.

\(^2\) In the 1950s the Chinese government instituted a household registration system that di-
between 1990 and 1994 it increased another 50 percent.\textsuperscript{3} Savings of city households rose from $1.85 billion in 1978 to $62.5 billion in 1990 and to $192 billion in 1994.\textsuperscript{4} Consumer durables like washing machines and refrigerators that had previously been available to a minority with special connections became routine purchases (see Table 1.1), and a host of previously exotic products became commonplace in retail outlets throughout urban China. In 1990 there were 20,000 cellular phones in China; by 1995 there were 3.4 million.\textsuperscript{5} English-Chinese dictionaries had no official translation for greeting card, but by 1995 a street stall in Beijing reportedly sold 80,000 cards in one day.\textsuperscript{6} In Shanghai in 1985 there were 52 dance halls and discos; by 1994 there were more than 1,000. In Shenzhen the number of bowling alleys grew by a factor of 40 in one year.\textsuperscript{7} When within less than a decade millions of people gained access to new modes of communication, new vocabularies of social discourse, and novel forms of leisure through newly commercialized outlets, it does not seem an exaggeration to claim that there was a revolution of consumption. Moreover as the contributors to this volume explain, this rapid commercialization of consumption did more than simply increase consumer choice and raise the material standard of living. It also broke the monopolies that had previously cast urban consumers in the

\textsuperscript{3} vided the population into those with agricultural status (\textit{nongye hukou}) and nonagricultural status (\textit{feinongye hukou}). Every person needed police approval to change residence, and migration from rural to urban areas and from small towns to cities was prohibited. These policies were linked to consumption. Those with agricultural registration had to grow their own food and were excluded from the subsidized state grain market. With the creation of the People’s Communes in 1958 the registration system became formalized on a national scale, and even after the elimination of the communes in the early 1980s it continued to control rural migration and exclude the rural majority from most government-subsidized goods and services.

In 1993 there were 430 million people living in 570 cities and towns. However, only 177 million had nonagricultural status. It is this group that can best be described as urbanites. \textit{Zhongguo chengshi tongji nianjian 1993–1994}, p. 3. Within this nonagricultural population, there are further distinctions based on the size of a metropolitan area. The consumers described by the authors of this volume come from cities with populations in excess of 2 million where the standard of living is higher than in other cities and the choice of goods and services more diverse. In 1993 they represented 25 percent of all city dwellers. \textit{Zhongguo chengshi tongji nianjian 1987}, p. 1 and \textit{Zhongguo chengshi tongji nianjian 1993–1994}, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{4} In 1978 per capita income was 316 renminbi (rmb), in 1990 it was 1,387 rmb, and in 1994 it was 3,179 rmb. Indexed with 1978 as 100, per capita income had grown to 197 in 1990 and 273 in 1994. \textit{Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1995} (hereafter \textit{ZGTJ/NJ 1995}), p. 257.

\textsuperscript{5} These U.S. dollar estimates are based on a rate of 8.3 rmb to the dollar. Household savings totaled 15.45 billion rmb in 1978, 62.5 billion in 1990, and 1.6 trillion in 1994. \textit{ZGTJ/NJ 1995}, p. 259.

\textsuperscript{6} See Chapter 7 by Kathleen Erwin.

\textsuperscript{7} On dance halls, see Chapter 10 by James Farrer. On Shenzhen bowling, see Chapter 11 by Gan Wang.
role of supplicants to the state. When party and government officials reduced their control over the flow of commodities, they also ceded greater autonomy to everyday sociability. In granting market principles new legitimacy to coordinate economic transactions, the reformers became increasingly indifferent to how citizens used their new commercial freedoms. And in this more lightly censored terrain, urban residents initiated networks of trust, reciprocity, and attachment that differed from the vertical relationship of obedience between subject-citizens and party or government officials. The extent to which these investments in unofficial social relationships threaten the political monopolies claimed by the Leninist state remains open to debate and empirical investigation. No contributor to this volume argues for a triumph of the private over the public. But all agree that the greater affluence and new consumerism of the 1990s have weakened the hegemonic sureties that defined urban life throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

In Part 1, the contributors analyze the implications of new consumer behaviors surrounding domestic spending, the everyday purchases of food, clothing, and transportation and the more unusual expenditures for wedding finery and a special vacation. Part 2 brings together chapters that explore experiences outside the domestic sphere: radio call-in shows, exchanges of greeting cards, feasting, dancing, bowling, and “having a good smoke.” No master narrative unites the chapters. There is no central hypothesis that commercialization heralds the triumph of the private over the public. Nevertheless, a common thread ties together each setting and group of consumers analyzed. Each author documents an increasing reliance of urban residents on horizontal ties of friendship, kinship, or informal sociability that challenge the vertical relationship between subject-citizens and state agents. Thus when read as an integrated whole, the volume tells a story of how changing consumer behavior can enlarge the social space for urban residents to invest in nonofficial initiatives. Whether these actions seriously threaten the monopolies claimed by a Leninist state remains unclear. But none of the contributors found Chinese society untouched by consumerism.

A REVOLUTION IN DOMESTIC CONSUMPTION

In the 1970s the resources of the workplace determined a Chinese family’s standard of living as much as, or even more than, the wages earned by the household head. Not only did enterprises distribute social welfare benefits that were otherwise unavailable, but they also allocated apartments and provided many consumer items that in capitalist societies were discretionary personal expenditures—a weekly movie, fresh fruit at holidays, plastic sandals for the summer, even the cake to celebrate a baby’s birth. Through these noncommercial, redistributive practices urban residents experienced what
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<td>Xi'an</td>
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<td>90</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>52</td>
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Hanlong Lu calls “massified” consumption (Chapter 6). Whether a household was headed by a professional or a blue-collar production worker, their family members lived in comparable homes, took the same buses to work, confronted similar food shortages, and faced an equally limited choice of leisure activities and selection of clothing. Material inequalities existed, and behind the closed doors and high walls of cadre compounds the political elite enjoyed a distinctive lifestyle. Overall, however, living standards were remarkably homogeneous within enterprises, and differences among city families were attributable more to variations in the resources of employers than to individual or family wealth.8

Distributing consumer goods and services by bureaucratic fiat rather than through markets also affected social relationships. Politicized ties between subordinates and superiors in the workplace could define the quality of one’s personal life, and it was virtually impossible for employees or their family members to prosper without the active support of enterprise leaders.9 If an employer denied or failed to provide a benefit, there was rarely an alternative source. Even leisure time and venues for socializing were rationed through bureaucratic channels under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).10

By the mid-1990s, higher incomes and new retail markets had reduced the obligations on the workplace to satisfy consumer demands. Independent hawkers filled daily markets and sold such previously rationed items as seafood, meat, milk, and grain products. Private restaurateurs or subcontractors (chenghao) replaced workplace canteens, and a largely commercialized entertainment industry multiplied opportunities for individuals to relax or conduct business in the unofficial world away from work.

Even during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when the Maoist party-state was most intrusive, families retained some autonomy and the domestic sphere provided a modicum of privacy. The law dictated that children and parents be financially responsible for one another, and only the childless elderly or orphans could rely on the state in time of need.11 Enterprises paid employees’ medical costs but only partially reimbursed the expenditures of their dependents. Wedding and funeral expenditures, although modest in comparison with what they would become in the 1990s, required years of saving.12 Home furnishings usually included workplace-issued desks, tables, and chairs, but the home was also decorated with personal possessions and

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9. This argument is made most strongly for employees of state-owned industrial enterprises, but it applies more generally to most urban adults (see Walder 1986).
12. Studying Guangdong urban residents in the 1970s, Martin Whyte and William Parish found that grooms and their families spent on average three to five months of family income,
furniture inherited from older relatives or received as personal gifts. According to CCP orthodoxy, families were the cells of society embedded in the matrix of public life. Nevertheless, they retained duties that distinguished one family from another and made kinship roles exclusive. Accelerating marketization and the retreat of state supervision have heightened these distinctions.

Weaker redistributive policies and increased reliance on markets also ended “massified” consumption patterns and widened economic differences between households. Economic reforms ushered in a decade of aggregate growth, but a minority experienced a decline in their absolute as well as relative standard of living. The story of the urban revolution of consumption therefore is how market-based differentiation fostered both new forms of social solidarity and new patterns of inequality. Let me first summarize the gains; a subsequent section will consider the issue of increasing inequality.

Food

In cross-national comparisons, household expenditures on food provide an inflation-proof metric for assessing a population’s economic progress. The general assumption is that as real incomes rise consumers spend a lower percentage of their income on food for home cooking and eat more animal protein, fruits, and prepared foods. During the early 1990s, urban Chinese conformed to these expectations. But as Ann Veeck demonstrates in her study of Nanjing food shoppers (Chapter 5) close examination of household expenditures for food reveal much more than the relative share of protein in average diets. China has one of the great cuisines of the world, and buying, preparing, and enjoying food have cultural, medicinal, and ritual meanings that make food shopping a template for a wide range of social attitudes and behaviors. Older residents have searing memories of the near starvation they endured after the failure of the Great Leap Forward, and few adults have forgotten the monotonous diets of the 1970s, when many foodstuffs were distributed to workers at the end of the week or before a holiday, and grain and oil were sold through designated state outlets that required customers to use coupons and a ration book. Throughout the

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14. Between 1990 and 1994, per capita purchases of grains fell by 30 percent, while those of seafood and edible oils grew by 10–20 percent. The correlation between income and food choices also conformed to international patterns. In 1994 urban households in the lowest income decile spent 18 percent of their food budget on grains; those in the top decile spent only 11 percent. ZGTJNJ 1995, pp. 260–61, 263.
1980s, economic reforms fundamentally changed the experience of shopping and the dynamic of food retailing. The expanded food offerings of the 1990s and the end of rationing, therefore, created an environment in which grocery shopping became a lively social context for observing the consequences of the consumer revolution.

Veeck’s Nanjing respondents spent six hours a week shopping for food, and in her community sample, families on average spent 52 percent of their household income on food. Veeck herself focused on the interpersonal dynamic of consumers and retailers, and through extended interviews with shoppers (many of which she recorded verbatim while accompanying respondents on their trips to the market) she probed the impact of marketization on the exercise of personal taste and choice. During the time of her observation, class differences had begun to emerge, and Veeck predicts that over time Chinese food expenditures will follow world trends and become clearly differentiated by household income level. However, to her initial surprise the appearance of thriving, competitive street markets did not foster behaviors common in African and Latin American cities, where families also buy daily from individual food vendors. In those other settings buyers often return to the same vendor for months and even years, and the marketplace creates enduring bonds of social solidarity. In Nanjing, by contrast, customers were extremely mistrustful of food peddlers and routinely carried a scale to market to verify the weight of their purchases. The marketplace was quite atomized and socially unpredictable, in part because of the instability of retail environments in an era of reform. The government repeatedly forced markets to relocate, many salesmen were migrants with no fixed abode or identity as vendors, and—perhaps most important—in 1995–96 during Veeck’s observation, vendors did not extend credit.

Based on the policy announcements of the municipal government, Veeck predicts that the turbulence of the retail scene will stabilize. The workplace will withdraw completely from stocking domestic larders, and vendors will lease stalls in large market halls either as agents of state enterprises or as independent hawkers. There are even indicators that supermarket chains may come to dominate the retail sector. However, what is unlikely to change is the cultural code that equates care in food shopping with concern for family members. Thus for Chinese families, shopping for food will always reflect the attachments and intensity of the domestic sphere.

*Spending for Children*

One of the most radical components of the reforms undertaken by Deng Xiaoping, and quite at variance with the general pattern of a “retreating” party-state, was the one-child campaign launched in 1979. Fifteen years later the campaign had successfully reduced the number of third or higher-order
births throughout the nation and made the one-child family the urban norm (see Table 1.2). Against this demographic testimony to the persistence of party-state authority and power, in Chapter 3 Julia Sensenbrenner and I explore the impact of increased commercialization on the character of childhood. Focusing on parental purchases of toys, clothes, and leisure activities for Shanghai’s singletons in the summer of 1995, we analyze the multiple ways in which commercialization spurred the separation of work and home and expanded the legitimate realm of the personal and individual. Most parents of Shanghai’s singletons came of age during the Cultural Revolution. Their living standard was spartan, and consumption was oriented to the collective. They therefore eagerly examined each new product or service as a means not only of giving their children happier childhoods than their own, but also of allowing them to fully develop their individual talents. China’s draconian birth quotas denied young couples the freedom to define family size, but the vast flood of affordable consumer goods enabled Shanghai mothers and fathers to spend money on toys and leisure activities that they believed would cultivate their children’s individuality and strengthen attachments to the immediate family.

Housing

In the 1970s most urban housing was a “public” good owned and allocated by enterprises or municipal real estate bureaus. The first decade of economic reforms did little to change the ownership structure and instead concentrated on upgrading the quality and quantity of collectively owned housing. Public funds, primarily from state-owned enterprises, poured into urban housing construction, and between 1978 and 1992 average living space doubled from 3.6 square meters per capita to 7.1 square meters. In the 1990s, however, policy shifted to spur commodification of residential real estate.

At the Second National Housing Reform Conference in October 1991, the leadership announced three initiatives. First, rents were to be raised to cover the costs of maintenance; second, renters were to be encouraged to purchase their flats on the installment plan; and third, an increasing share of new housing was to be offered for direct sale. Within a short time, these policy shifts developed far-reaching consequences. By the summer of 1992, 5 million urban households held twelve-year mortgages from the Chinese Construction Bank, and by December 1994 30.5 percent of urban households held some type of ownership rights. Most home buyers purchased

17. Basically, there were three levels of ownership: ownership with right to resell in the marketplace, ownership with obligation to resell to the employer, and ownership of use rights with no right to resell. Ming bao, Oct. 6, 1992, p. 9; and Renmin ribao, Sept. 14, 1995, p. 1.
TABLE 1.2 Changing Birth Parities in the PRC, 1970–1994

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of births that were</th>
<th>first</th>
<th>second</th>
<th>third or higher</th>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>62.2</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>44.5</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>25.5</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>50.2</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>31.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
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the rental units they already occupied at a highly subsidized price, but others bought newly built homes sold by commercial developers. A private real estate market had existed before 1991 but was concentrated in areas where overseas Chinese could purchase homes for themselves or their PRC relatives. In the 1990s, commercial developments appeared throughout the country, and new homes were sold to individuals with no overseas connections.

In part, China’s immature financial institutions spurred home ownership. Families were accumulating substantial savings, and in the face of inflationary pressures the purchase of a home was an attractive investment. However, as David Fraser explains in his interpretation of Shanghai real estate advertising (Chapter 2) considerations were not entirely financial. Urban residents also bought their own homes in order to enjoy both greater privacy and a sense of exclusivity.

Given the high price of most commercial real estate, only 5–10 percent of Shanghai residents could actually afford to purchase the accommodations advertised in the evening paper. However, 40–50 percent of city residents could realistically become home owners if they purchased their current apartments. In this way central government policy shifted to commodify a welfare good of the Mao years and allowed a broad cross-section of urban residents to respond positively to the advertisers’ exhortations to “buy a home and become a boss!”

Even when home ownership was impossible, urban residents could real-

ize dreams for enhanced domesticity by redecorating, and in the mid-1990s home renovation emerged as a mass phenomenon. Publishing houses all over China produced a range of lavishly illustrated home-decorating guides, and bookstore shelves were well stocked with magazines dedicated to installing new floors, elaborate window treatments, and recessed lighting. Television stations broadcast do-it-yourself shows that simultaneously promoted local retailers and demonstrated how best to refurbish a home. Typical was the half-hour program sponsored by a Changzhou wallpaper factory I saw August 30, 1997, at 7 a.m. on Shanghai channel 2. A modestly dressed young man first discussed the practical advantages of wallpaper and then introduced a wide range of designs, commenting on which would be most appropriate for different family members. For elderly parents he recommended muted colors, for newly married couples silky textured bamboo weave, and for children a washable wall covering with patterns of animals or flowers. During the second half of the program he narrated a step-by-step demonstration of a young couple papering a small sitting room.

In 1994, Shanghai’s Orient television station introduced a home-decorating contest, and People’s Art Publishing House then published the top 100 designs, complete with floor plans and photographs of the winning entries. Some designs were extravagant, but most concentrated on how best to renovate a three-room apartment of less than 300 square feet. Of particular note were renovators’ efforts to separate adjoining households and reconfigure interior space to provide more privacy. Even as late as 1992 only 45 percent of urban households lived in self-contained (chengtai) flats. Most families shared a bathroom or kitchen with neighbors, and many did not have a separate entrance. By 1996, 62 percent of urban households had achieved this level of privacy, and the goal was to make self-contained apartments universal within ten years.

Family Rituals and Celebrations

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s government and party officials pushed policies to secularize family life and simplify domestic rituals, and even in cities populated by national minorities, official efforts succeeded. The Bureau of Civil Affairs issued marriage licenses, new couples celebrated with simple tea parties or meals in their homes, and there was little wedding finery or elaborate public display. Funerals were similarly frugal. Cremation was nearly universal, and memorial services were often held at the deceased’s place of work. After 1978, family rituals, especially those connected to a child’s marriage,

became increasingly elaborate, expensive, and independent from the workplace. By the mid-1990s many urban couples spent more than 3,000 renminbi (rmb) on wedding photos, and expenditures for the banquets, new clothes, and household furnishings routinely surpassed 40,000 rmb, a sum approximately ten times greater than a young man’s yearly salary.

In studying Hui weddings in Xi’an (Chapter 4), Maris Gillette was impressed not only by the enormous financial investment but also by the ways in which brides in their new role as savvy consumers served as agents of change. One revealing episode took place just hours before a bride was to leave for her wedding banquet. For that occasion the young woman had rented a floor-length, rose-colored evening gown, but when her sister brought the dress to her home she found stains on the bodice and dirt along the hem. The gowns originated in Taiwan and were sold to PRC bridal shops when no longer fashionable. Xi’an customers knew the gowns were used and would be rented to many brides, but it was expected that they would be cleaned after each use. Discovering the dirt on the hem and stains on the bodice, the bride raced by taxi to the shop and insisted she be given a replacement on the spot. But as Gillette’s analysis makes clear, Hui brides were not primarily “free agents.” Rather, what Gillette finds most striking in the behavior of these young women was their conformity to the expectations of female relatives, who demanded Western-style wedding gowns and elaborate coiffures as necessary public displays of family wealth and status. Thus even as young Xi’an brides became aggressive consumers and flouted religious leaders’ criticism of these purchases, they deferred to the demands of their kin that they be richly dressed brides of whom the family could be proud.

For Xi’an brides, Shanghai parents, and Nanjing shoppers, the expanded role of market transactions multiplied the opportunities to exercise personal choices and to invest in their homes and family celebrations. As the reforms pushed factories and other enterprises to concentrate on production and to shed responsibility for feeding, dressing, and sheltering their employees, the character and resources of a site of production became increasingly distinct from those of a site for consumption. Consequently, as individuals went about their daily routines they could ignore the importuning of state agents in ways that were unthinkable during the first three decades of CCP rule. But increased autonomy in one dimension could mean new or intensified constraints in others. Moreover, as Hanlong Lu illustrates with his Shanghai survey data (Chapter 6), many employees still “ate heartily from the big pot.” And one should never forget that high levels of parental spending on sin-

gletons was the direct result of the state’s extraordinary power to enforce the one-child quota.

By the 1990s the CCP party-state had ceased to closely monitor domestic consumption. As a result urban families were no longer suppliants or clients of the state as they had been in earlier decades. Yet the degree to which the new small freedoms in the domestic realm substantially realigned political power between the state and the people or, in the vocabulary of James Scott, provided “hidden transcripts” of insubordination that might precipitate fundamental political change, is unclear.23 First, family investments increased in areas from which the party-state had willingly evacuated; thus the increased reliance of individual consumers on lightly regulated commercial transactions well served the self-interest of the party-state. An examination of the ways in which urban consumers have used their new affluence and the multitude of new commercial venues outside the home to socialize, however, suggests that the self-interests of the party-state may have been less well served, and new patterns of consumption may have more clearly challenged the political status quo.

SOCIABILITY IN A MORE COMMODIFIED CHINA

In years when the redistributive economy prevailed, urban social life was highly constrained. People worked six days a week, twelve months a year. Few had more than a week’s break at Lunar New Year, and nonofficial travel between cities was expensive and hard to arrange. Personal telephone calls were rare and had to be made in public locations such as the post office, the workplace, or the office of the neighborhood Residents’ Committee. Even personal letters sent through the post office were subject to seizure and inspection. City parks provided what little space existed for socializing outside the home or workplace, and even there one did not escape the watchful eye of city employees.

Separating locations of production from locations of consumption in the context of increased affluence has fundamentally altered the experience and consequences of socializing outside the home. When the workplace lost its obligation to provide recreation activities, the commercial sector went into high gear. Whether it was pool tables at the roadside or multilevel discos, entrepreneurs saw profitable niches, and the number of commercial venues where residents could relax beyond the purview of their employers and their relatives grew exponentially.

Chinese society’s new access to the outside world also brought a flood of videos and movies. Within a span of just three or four years, urban residents, especially young adults, had a lengthy and ever-changing menu of topics and

leisure activities to discuss and experience. In the 1970s, personal networks (guanxiwang) helped people secure scarce goods and protection, but the explosive growth of new venues and modes for socializing with others expanded and altered the character of social networks. Using the language of Pierre Bourdieu, one could say that the expansion and commercialization of leisure enabled people from all strata to accumulate private caches of “social capital” whose acquisition “presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability.” Thus to move ahead in the 1990s one did not necessarily need to have privileged access or control over scarce goods; one could also build capital by forging dense and varied social connections.

In Chapter 7, Kathleen Erwin explores one expression of this new sociability by analyzing the discourse of radio call-in shows and counseling hotlines spawned by the telecommunications revolution. In part, she found what one might expect from the explosive growth of anonymous forms of public speech: when talk of private suffering and desire goes public, it liberates social discourse. Yet the spoken exchanges of Shanghai hotlines and call-in shows were not entirely “free.” Counselors were party members, and several programs survived at the sufferance of corporate sponsors. In addition, Erwin detected a clear reassertion of traditional mores and norms of hierarchy that constrained the disembodied exchanges over the telephone wires and radio waves. In general, men talked explicitly about their sexual problems, while women were more inclined to express their dissatisfaction in terms of emotional needs. Erwin also found that when counselors spoke with women rather than men they were more likely to encapsulate the callers’ complaints within regimes of traditional family expectations that subordinated individual sexual desire. Thus following Michel Foucault’s analysis of “modern discursive power,” Erwin interprets the telephone- and radio-mediated dialogues at two levels. At one level, they exemplified greater individual freedom and expansion of social space that was unreachable through old forms of control or punishment. On another level, they facilitated a moral discourse that ultimately constrained listeners by reviving traditional family regimes of hierarchy and power.

In Chapter 8, Mary Erbaugh uses greeting cards she received or purchased over a twelve-month period beginning in November 1995 to look at another innovative form of communication that gained currency during the 1990s. The cards Erbaugh collected celebrated only happy events and were purchased primarily by young urban women to send to other young urban women. Exploring the composite images and happy sentiments engraved on the cards, Erbaugh finds that the cards “reinforce affiliation with an imagined community.” Like Erwin, she places her discussion in the context of the changing economy, which challenges previous Communist moral sureties,
but unlike Erwin, she does not explore the new discomforts of emergent capitalism. However, as is illustrated by her concluding story about Hong Kong residents who sent boxes of winter-solstice cards to former political prisoner Wei Jingsheng, Erbaugh is aware that new modes of communication are polyvalent. In most exchanges, greeting cards reinforced ties of affection or investment in private relationships; in another context, they could express ideological insubordination and articulate a critique of the state.

Throughout the world, feasting and eating out offer ideal conditions for transforming informal sociability into instrumental economic and political networks. And in the Mao era, China was no exception. However, in those years dining someplace other than the workplace canteen or one’s home— not to mention banqueting—was a prerogative largely monopolized by those with political prestige and position. Thus one of the most telling indicators of China’s consumer revolution is the rapid proliferation of restaurants and the increasing percentage of household budgets ordinary families spend on eating out (see Chapter 6 by Hanlong Lu). But as Yunxiang Yan demonstrates in his ethnography of McDonald’s in Beijing (Chapter 9), consumers do not eat out just for the food or the chance to cement social networks. They also eat out because certain social settings allow diners to realize powerful fantasies, which in the case of McDonald’s the producer willingly facilitates. Thus, on one hand McDonald’s has succeeded in China because it sells meals more efficiently than local competitors. But McDonald’s has also flourished because the chain came to represent an extension of America. Ordering a Big Mac provided a “bridge” to the affluent, industrial West and thereby allowed Beijing customers to realize, if only temporarily, their emergent identities as discerning, modern individuals.

In the Shanghai dance halls where sociologist James Farrer went to observe changing attitudes of city youth toward romance and love, the newly liberated zones for private pleasure forged new identities in an even more sustained fashion (see Chapter 10). Shanghai dancers did not limit themselves to enjoying a quick glimpse into an exotic foreign land; they returned week after week to throw themselves into energetic, erotically charged “play” with partners who enabled them to explore new desires and identities. In the 1990s, Shanghai commercial dance halls appealed to a wide range of consumers. Men and women went out dancing in about equal numbers, and the middle-aged were as likely to be avid dancers as the young. Over the three years Farrer worked in Shanghai, 1993–96, facilities became increasingly differentiated by cost of admission, décor, and music, but at all price levels they offered customers a place of escape where through dancing people could temporarily set aside their everyday lives and personae. Throughout the city,

dance halls were locations of social flux and emotional complexity where proprietors deliberately distorted everyday appearances and customers searched for intimacy with strangers. Farrer was not in a position to discover whether the dancers he met extended these new social connections to the workplace or their neighborhoods. We therefore have no evidence that dancing functioned as anything more than an escapist fantasy. But as with greeting cards, oppositional intentions remain a latent potential, and it is thus premature to conclude that the dancers’ networks of connections had or will have no disruptive social consequences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LUXURY

Both Shanghai dance halls and Beijing’s McDonald’s were within the budgets of many residents of metropolitan China in the 1990s. A morning session at a local dance hall cost less than 5 rmb; a small burger, fries, and a coke 10 rmb.27 Fancy discos on the weekend could cost 50 times as much, and if one wanted a Big Mac, apple pie, and coffee one could spend 40 rmb. But the basic price of admission made dancing and meals at McDonald’s items of mass culture. By contrast, a night of bowling in Shenzhen as described by Gan Wang in Chapter 11 could exceed 400 rmb. Bowling therefore did not provide easy access to global mass culture; instead, the bowling alley became a new enclave of luxury.28

However when bowling alleys first appeared in Shenzhen and offered an exotic, sophisticated entertainment, those who could afford the exorbitant charges did not use the cost as a means to exclude others. On the contrary, they deliberately used their ability to play host as part of a strategy to advance their careers and gain protection from government bureaucrats. Given the power of state agents to constrain or sponsor commercial activity, ambitious entrepreneurs needed good relations with cadres, and luxury leisure activities provided an ideal opportunity for businessmen to make officials sympathetic to their interests. Historically, established elites have resisted efforts

27. In 1995, residents’ per capita daily consumption averaged 18 rmb in Beijing and 21 rmb in Shanghai (see Table 1.3). In May 1997, I paid $1.19 for a meal in the McDonald’s adjacent to the Tianjin railroad station.

28. Arjun Appadurai has used the term “enclaving” to explicate the dynamic process of commodification. It refers primarily to the process by which a powerful minority restrict access to certain items—either through sumptuary laws or astronomical prices—to maintain their identity as a self-recruiting elite. Nonelite, particularly enterprising entrepreneurs continuously try to divert the enclosed items into the larger market. Thus, over time, few objects sustain their enclaved status, and the processes of decommodification and recommodification are dynamic and political. The use of bowling alleys by Shenzhen entrepreneurs also speaks directly to their political insecurity in an only partially marketized Communist polity. See Appadurai 1986.
of the nouveaux riches to commodify enclaved goods,\textsuperscript{29} but in Shenzhen old and new elites shared the commercialized luxury entertainment to achieve mutually desired ends. The entrepreneurs used their ability to play host to build personal ties to further their own commercial careers. The government officials enjoyed luxury goods beyond their incomes but in accord with their position of authority.

In Chapter 12, David Wank looks closely at another luxury good—high-priced cigarettes. Although by the 1990s premium-brand cigarettes were neither a new commodity nor as costly as an evening of bowling, they remained an extravagance through which private businessmen in Xiamen displayed their status and manipulated social interaction. In the early 1980s when Wank first worked in China, the best cigarettes were unavailable to the ordinary citizen. High-ranking cadres could buy them in special stores, and people with foreign-exchange certificates (FECs) could buy limited quantities at Friendship Stores. A decade later, expensive high-quality cigarettes were being sold by street vendors. Nevertheless, they continued to serve as markers of social distinction that elites used to signal and control their relationships with others. In particular, they were central in rituals entrepreneurs choreographed to send complex social messages both as they negotiated business deals with government officials and as they exercised power over subordinates.

Participants in the exchange of premium cigarettes and in the conspicuous consumption at bowling alleys were cognizant of who stood on the side of the state and who represented the market. But in the commercial cities of southern China such as Shenzhen and Xiamen, the boundaries between the state and the market were deliberately transgressed by new business elites who depended on special favors from state agents to advance their careers. In the process, the state realm was colonized and public resources were subverted. In earlier years, citizens used gifts to obtain scarce goods and services, but in those exchanges government officials had allocated items already designated for public consumption (e.g., a hospital bed for a sick patient). By the 1990s, however, the gifts were used to gain access to items the state should have retained for itself (e.g., tax revenues or confidential information). As a result, state agents not only squandered state resources; they also inadvertently subverted their own positions of domination.

GROWING INEQUALITY IN A MORE MARKETIZED CHINA

When Deng Xiaoping launched the policies of decollectivization and legitimated private entrepreneurship, he defined success as realizing a relatively comfortable (xiaokang) society with a per capita annual income of $800

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
by the year 2000. But the connotations of that achievement were broader. As Hanlong Lu explains in Chapter 6, the popular understanding of 小康 derives from its origins in the Confucian Book of Rites, where the appearance of a 小康 society signaled the demise of a society of equality (大同) in which “all under heaven is public” (天下一为公) and its transformation into a stratified society where “all under heaven belongs to the family” (天下一为家). Thus in proclaiming the goal of reform to be the establishment of a 小康 society the CCP leadership legitimated a society stratified by financial inequalities. Moreover, the reform policies to enlarge the cash nexus and increase efficiency virtually guaranteed that gains would be unevenly distributed.

Until 1990 the majority of urban adults worked in state-owned enterprises and enjoyed the “iron rice bowl” of lifetime employment, egalitarian wages, and generous welfare benefits.30 The introduction of bonuses and piece rates during the 1980s chipped away at workers’ security, but most managers still felt obligated to distribute wages and noncash benefits evenly within their enterprises.31 However, as nonstate employment surged, and especially after the third plenum of the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1993, the iron rice bowl turned to clay. State firms furloughed hundreds of thousands, workers moved quickly to maximize their individual advantages, and income disparities widened.32

Not surprisingly, the greatest wealth and some of the greatest inequalities emerged in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen, where the export-processing zone established in 1980 attracted thousands of investors from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Subsequently fourteen other coastal cities were given permission to deviate from the plan and allow market forces greater leeway. By the mid-1990s, cities on the coast had moved furthest from the planned economy, and coastal residents enjoyed the highest per capita income, the greatest supply of new consumer goods, and the most improved infrastructure. Cities farther inland and in northeastern China lagged behind, and their residents experienced less dramatic gains in their standard of living (see Table 1.3).

Substantial regional inequality and the advantaged position of such cities as Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai had existed during the Mao era, but the decentralization of the economy and disappearance of redistributive policies exacerbated the differentials. For example, in 1985 per capita consumption expenditures in Shanghai were only 299 rmb higher than the na-

TABLE 1.3  Yearly per Capita Expenditure on Consumption (Shenghuo Fei) in the Ten Largest Cities and Shenzhen, 1985–1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban Average</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>1,387</td>
<td>3,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>1,787</td>
<td>5,868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chongqing</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>1,552</td>
<td>4,053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>1,044</td>
<td>2,592</td>
<td>8,556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harbin</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>1,264</td>
<td>3,374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanjing</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,506</td>
<td>4,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>6,822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>1,534</td>
<td>3,721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenzhen</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>3,660</td>
<td>11,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianjin</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>1,440</td>
<td>4,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wuhan</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>1,465</td>
<td>4,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>1,518</td>
<td>3,914</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*8.3 rmb = one U.S. dollar.*

Tional urban average, but by 1990 the gap had grown to 663 rmb, and by 1995 it had jumped to 2,929 rmb. In Guangzhou and Shenzhen the 1995 differential reached 4,663 rmb and 7,134 rmb respectively. By contrast, consumption expenditures in inland cities like Nanjing, Wuhan, and Xi’an remained close to the national average, while in the northeastern city of Harbin consumers actually experienced a decline in relative rank (see Table 1.3).

Certainly these financial inequalities affected the extent to which urban residents in different cities owned such consumer durables as color televisions, refrigerators, or cameras (see Table 1.1). Moreover, the mere fact of ownership did not mean that everyone owned items of the same quality and style. For example, by 1995 almost all urban families owned a washing machine, but only a minority of wealthy individuals could purchase a European-made Siemens washer-dryer, which was five times as expensive as the basic model produced by the Jiangsu Province White Swan group.33

Since Thorstein Veblen’s work on conspicuous consumption and Georg

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Simmel’s studies of fashion, sociologists have found consumer behavior a rich subject for the study of social emulation and social-class differentiation. In the contemporary period, Pierre Bourdieu has integrated the study of lifestyles with the processes of social-class reproduction. Yet to the extent that the essays in this volume document social differentiation, the distinctions are as much along lines of gender and generation as social class. Shanghai parents of different social classes held similar aspirations for their singletons and often made identical purchases. Among Hui brides in Xi’an generational differences were most striking, while for the diners at McDonald’s and the Shanghai dancers variation in gender and age structured consumers’ participation as much as differences in monthly income.

Official surveys and observations in urban homes tell us that those with the least income purchased few consumer durables and never engaged in expensive new leisure pursuits unless they were invited as guests. We also know that poorer families spent more of their incomes on food and had simpler diets and fewer housing options. In the cities, even the rich coastal cities visited by the contributors to this volume, millions of rural migrants lived in wretched shacks and worked for months without ever visiting a disco, a McDonald’s, or a bowling alley. Moreover, many of these migrants were not short-term sojourners; in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and other metropolitan centers they have settled down and created a dual society.

By the mid-1990s urban wealth was far more concentrated than in the 1960s, and both policy makers and Chinese intellectuals feared greater inequality would destabilize urban Chinese society. Yet recent investigations by Beijing sociologist Li Qiang revealed a surprising tolerance of income inequality and even a perception that urban life is less stratified than it was in the more egalitarian 1970s. Li’s explanation for this apparent contradiction is that urbanites retained an optimism about the uneven gains because political status was of less consequence in determining an individual’s social position and lifestyle than in the past. Thus while increased income inequality certainly suggested increased stratification, the decline in the consequences of political discrimination created the perception of a more open opportunity structure and less oppressive class hierarchies.

On the basis of the observations of consumer behavior presented in this volume, I would suggest that the decline of political stigma and the narrower scope of political repression only partially explain why a minority of Li’s respondents were resentful. First, despite the considerable commodification, several core elements of the prereform “public goods regime” survived into the

1990s. As a result, low or stagnant salary did not necessarily exclude individuals from experiencing the consumer revolution. Seventy percent of urban residents continued to rent their apartments from a municipal real estate bureau or from their employer, and even after a decade of government reforms to commercialize rents, tenants rarely paid more than 6 percent of their official income for housing. Canteens at the workplace were routinely subcontracted out, but meals remained subsidized. Similar practices reduced the direct cost of public transportation. Thus, through the mid-1990s, many necessities remained relatively inexpensive, and therefore even low-income families felt able to participate actively in the new consumer markets. As further withdrawal of subsidies raises the price of necessities and an increasing number of state employees lose their jobs, low-income households will likely develop lifestyles more congruent with their incomes, and one may see a “culture of necessity” similar to that which Pierre Bourdieu found to distinguish the French working class from the bourgeoisie. But during the 1990s commodification in urban China was less complete than in postwar France, and therefore income inequality did not consistently predict differences in lifestyle.

A second reason income differences did not immediately segregate consumers by social class was that many of the new goods and services—stylish accessories, fast food, discos, greeting cards, radio call-in shows—were disproportionately targeted at young people and often required only an eagerness to try something new, not high expenditures. When urban men and women called a sex hotline, bought birthday cards for close friends, or danced away a boring Saturday afternoon in a dark disco, they were cultivating an identity that distinguished them from an older generation or someone of the opposite sex. They were not necessarily cultivating a lifestyle tied to a particular financial position or drawing on codes of cultural etiquette tied to positions of social superiority or subordination.

In addition, the high percentage of households in which two adult generations co-reside allowed the younger members more discretionary funds than their incomes might have predicted. Before marriage, very few urban residents lived separately from their parents, and although many reimbursed their parents (usually their mothers) for the cost of their meals, they spent most of their wages on personal discretionary goods and services. Because young workers could spend a third of a month’s wage at a disco or on the newest-style shoes, personal income was an imperfect predictor of many consumer choices, and lifestyle distinctions varied as much by generation as by socioeconomic position.

COMMODIFICATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

After June 4, 1989, it was difficult to be sanguine about the emergence of a robust Chinese “public sphere,” especially the classic Habermasian version, which requires open critical discourse of the state as well as the ability of citizens to defend individual rights. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the Beijing massacre some observers even argued that Chinese society was culturally incapable of developing a true public sphere.\(^{40}\) While not explicitly sharing the pessimistic views of Eastern European intellectuals such as Vaclav Havel, who disdain mass consumer culture as anathema to critical public discourse and active citizenship,\(^ {41}\) some post-Tiananmen pessimists have treated increased autonomy in informal socializing as apolitical escapism with no connection to formal advances in the area of property rights or civil liberties.\(^ {42}\) However, by restricting the field of vision to politically well-institutionalized activities, we may overlook alternative locations of and pathways to structural change and underestimate the ability of increased sociability in nonofficial activities to incubate loyalties that ultimately generate the actions capable of weakening or toppling an authoritarian state.

The failure of the 1989 protesters to create an effective organizational buffer to protect speech and actions critical of the regime undoubtedly delayed political reforms. But that failure did not eliminate the corrosive potential of nonstate market forces. Living in urban China during the 1980s, Mayfair Yang and Thomas Gold observed that unofficial socializing created personal networks that challenged the monopolies of state agents and reduced the earlier domination of ordinary citizens by state agents.\(^ {43}\) However, there is some disagreement among the contributors to this volume about the degree to which market reforms increase the freedom of urban citizens or erode the power of the state. For example, in her analysis of radio call-in shows, Erwin uses Foucauldian theory to reject the linear connection between market choice and antiestablishment behavior. Instead, she finds urban residents repressed and disciplined by emerging bourgeois forms of hierarchy. In an earlier discussion of Xiamen businessmen, Wank also discounted the connection between increased market involvement and anti-state ideology or action. Rather, when observing the interaction of wealthy capitalists and state cadres Wank was most impressed by the strength of the

41. Havel wrote, “A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization and who has no roots in the order of being, has no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival and is a demoralized person.” Havel 1985, p. 43.
“symbiotic clientelism” that bound together agents of the state and representatives of the market.\(^{44}\)

In the family shopping activities observed by Veeck, Davis, Sensenbrenner, Yan, and Lu one also can not easily trace a causal link between intensified reliance on the cash nexus and heterodox political ideals or antistate action. However, as Richard Kraus demonstrates in his study of public art in Nanjing (Chapter 13), when the CCP leadership redefined the essence of socialism as economic growth, they granted the masses new grounds on which to question party orthodoxy. And by ceding an increasing proportion of public space to personal use and by allowing the disparate desires of urban consumer-citizens to make legitimate claims on societal resources, the CCP inadvertently reduced its own leverage and legitimacy. Therefore when Richard Kraus introduces Nanjing residents who tango in the ruins of the Ming emperor’s palace, he rhetorically asks whether it is always possible to distinguish clearly between dancers and demonstrators. The answer provided by this volume is that it is not. Deng Xiaoping knew that a xiaokang society would demolish the “massified” conditions of the Mao era, but neither he nor any of his immediate successors could control the attachments and investments spawned by the promotion of commercial mass consumption. Whether or not the millions of apolitical market transactions have realigned institutional power and authority, the multiplicity of horizontal ties and the increased invisibility and privacy of personal life have already created a society for which the past conventions of the authoritarian rule appear ill-suited. Eating a Big Mac will not bring down a dictator, but it can send a million daily messages that old ways have changed.\(^{45}\)


45. In July 1997, less than a year before the resignation of President Suharto, New York Times reporter Thomas Friedman interviewed several Indonesian reformers about how Indonesia’s integration into the world economy affected the prospects for political reform. Military analyst Jowono Sudarsono emphasized how global markets force “discipline we cannot internally generate.” Another reformer told Friedman, “My son and I get our revenge on Suharto everyday by eating at McDonald’s” (Friedman 1997). Without a doubt, the international currency and banking crisis played the central role in Suharto’s fall from power, but it is of note that among those who actively worked to promote political change, the small freedoms of consumer culture were explicitly linked to toppling an authoritarian regime.