Taste, discourse, and the making of Chinese middle class identities

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1. China’s (new) middle class

- “Middle class” as a problematic notion world-wide
- Chinese middle class
- Taste as a soft indicator
2. Taste

* Bourdieu’s notion of taste
* Taste and consumption
* Taste and space boundaries
3. Ethnographic fieldwork

- Ethnography has its roots in anthropology and follows a particular ontology, epistemology and methodology situated within wider traditions of anthropology.

- The fieldwork:
  - Three stages (2009-2016)
  - Online and offline ethnography
  - 271 field notes, 18 hours of audio-recorded interviews, 7 hours video-taped group activities, 153 pieces photos, 147 online chatting entries, 43 pieces of still and moving images collected from the SNSs.
4. The informants: Chinese “Saabists”

- Saabist: not only drives a Saab car but also identifies him or herself as a Saabist through particular identity discourses.
- Online forum in 2007: technical information, driving experiences and their passion for Saab.
- Go offline around 2009: more similarities among them than just their shared preference for the brand.
- 30 active members, 5 key informants.
Example 1: *Mēn sāo* (闷骚)

1. Author: … so what did you say, the similarities (between Saab and its fans)?
2. Liu: Hmm… how should I put it, well, to be straightforward, it is the personality of *mensao* {in a hushed, excited voice, a mixture of shyness and pride }
3. Liu: Hahaha {laughing loudly suddenly}
4. Author: {laughing with him in a lower voice}
5. Liu: That is to say {he quickly returns to his usual calm and serious tone}, they are not those who love to show off their wealth… they’re not arrogant, but deep inside (they are) quite self confident, and we want to show (ourselves), but not show off openly you know, Saab’s like that
6. Author: Not flaunting
7. Liu: Yeah not flaunting. And yeah Saab is like that, the appearance of a Saab car isn't very attractive, but its technical advantages, its performance, really fast when accelerating...there is another side (of Saab), but (both Saab and us) don't like showing off
Example 2 ‘No one suits Saab’

1. Li: What’s up?
2. Lin: {turns to Li and says} She is asking me whether I would recommend Saab to my friend, = I say I wouldn’t
3. Li: I wouldn’t recommend Saab, hahah~~
4. Author: That is::what if ___suit___ it (Saab)?
5. Li: No one = (suits Saab)
6. Lin: =If they never heard (of it)…
7. Author: What if they really don’t know (about Saab)?
8. Li: [Impossible~!]
9. Lin: [Impossible~!]
10. Author: But then how did you know (about Saab)? How did you know? Who told you (about Saab)?
11. Lin: Me? A friend told me
12. Author: That’s right! See! There must be a way to know it in the first place
Example 3 ‘Georges Dubceuf’
Example 3‘Georges Dubceuf’

1 Text above the photo: (I) don’t know (much about) wine. Georges Dubceuf

2 The photo {A bottle of wine in the center of the photo, other items including a glass of wine, a box of cigar, a igniter, a black wallet, an empty bowl}

3 Responses: (103) Like

{22 response items from Ping’s Weibo friends}
5. Conclusions

- The dynamic and complicated society press us for more nuanced and sophisticated methods.

- Taste offers an alternative perspective to understand an emergent middle class in China’s rapidly reshuffling society.

- As consumption culture penetrates Chinese urban societies, individuals start to pursue ‘new social norms of middle-class identity’ which are often defined by consumer practices and reproduced in taste discourses.
References