The construction of an urban, middle-class Chinese consumer culture: The case of cultural intermediaries in the Shanghai wine market


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Introduction

China is a society in transition: while a middle-class market has increased dramatically in size in recent times, an associated middle-class culture of consumption has yet to be fully realized (Elfick, 2011). Although government-led reforms may have facilitated the redistribution of economic capital and created the potential for middle-class wine consumption, wine appreciation has yet to become established in the patterns of middle class taste and behaviour. As China’s production, importing and consumption of wine continue to expand significantly, wine has emerged as a significant site for the cultural construction of a Chinese middle-class culture. The Chinese wine market thus offers a critical case study of the dynamics and actors at work in the development of markets, tastes and middle-class identities.

This paper offers a preliminary and partial account of findings from a larger research project that investigates how processes of market formation and taste formation are intertwined. This broad, theoretical focus is approached via the empirical question of how cultural intermediaries (such as wine writers, educators, distributors and sommeliers) frame domestic and imported wine, and wine consumption for the Chinese middle class. The research focuses specifically on Shanghai. Arguably the most important wine market in China, Shanghai is home to significant numbers of wine importers, retailers, wine bars, wine clubs and educational classes, world-renowned sommeliers, as well as international commercial wine exhibitions and events. In contemporary China, the significance of such cultural intermediaries as the vanguard of new class and taste practices is arguably magnified, because of the nascent state of the cultural field and its associated products, practices and forms of expertise. And yet, the roles of such market actors remain largely unexplored in the existing research on the development of Chinese consumer culture. There is now a timely opportunity for an investigation of the strategic and formative role of cultural intermediaries in the construction of Chinese middle-class tastes and markets.

The paper proceeds with a brief overview of literature pertinent to conceptualizing the links between class, consumption and cultural intermediaries in the context of the field of wine in China. After a summary of the research design, the paper presents some of the initial findings from the preliminary analysis of the project data.

Class, consumption and cultural intermediaries in China:
Two broad bodies of literature help in framing this research. The first concerns the relationship between class and consumption. Since the introduction of Chinese economic reforms in 1979, there have been significant developments with regard to the size, consuming habits and cultural values of China’s middle class (e.g. Croll, 2006; Elfick, 2011; Lin and Wang, 2010; Podoshen, Li and Zhang, 2011; Tian and Dong, 2011; Zhou, 2008). The Chinese middle class represents an estimated tenth of the population (although the actual size remains subject to debate: Flew, 2006; Goodman, 2008). Research has called attention to the internal divisions of the middle class(es), which tend to fall along occupational/educational lines and find expression in spatialized stratification between different Chinese regions, and especially in a rural/urban divide (e.g. Elfick 2011; Goodman, 2008).

With an eye to this developing class culture, research on consumption in China in the post 1980-era has highlighted that goods—and especially luxury goods—are associated with ‘the Western’ or ‘the global’, and that the consumption of Western—and especially luxury—goods is perceived by consumers as significant for producing and displaying an appropriate ‘modern’, ‘global’ and prestigious social identity (e.g. Podoshen, Li and Zhang, 2011). The rise of the Chinese middle class has been regarded as part of a cultural shift from ‘comrade to consumer’ (Croll, 2006, p. 16). As Tian and Dong (2011, p. 23, passim) persuasively argue in their review of the literature, scholars have tended to approach this class wielding a Western ‘emulative model’ of middle class consumption. Like Veblen’s nouveaux riches aping the established leisure class (1934), Chinese middle class consumers’ choices and habits are seen as an expression of emulating Western consumers, whose affluence and freedom are deemed desirable. However, suggestions of a wholesale Chinese cultural shift, or of emulation as the primary driver of Chinese consumption of foreign brands, are at odds with ethnographic and qualitative research that reveal significant variation in the values, motives and behaviours associated with consumption (e.g. Tian and Dong, 2011; Xiao, 2005). Thus, better, empirically-grounded research on the perspective of Chinese consumers (and their taste leaders) is required.

Such findings apply to the case of wine in China, where the consumption of domestic and imported wine have significantly different social meanings and status implications. Wine was historically a drink of the social and religious elite in China (grape wine making and consumption date back at least to the Han period), but production remained small-scale (Li, 2011). The contemporary development of wine production dates from the 1980s, and has involved government initiatives, partnerships with foreign (notably French and Californian) wineries, the emergence of some large, domestic brands, and an increasing (if uneven) focus on the production and regulation of quality (Li, 2011; Moslares and Ubeda, 2010). Some Chinese wine producers have made gains in terms of international credibility—for example, the He Lan Qing Xue winery won first prize in a 2011 Decanter World Wine Award Bordeaux category. However, Chinese wine is generally considered by Chinese consumers to be inferior in both objective quality and status associations. Imported (‘foreign’) wine, however, is associated with status and prestige—at times irrespective of objective quality. Flew (2006), for example, highlights how the Chinese culture of face value (mianzi) helps explain both the consumption of inexpensive imported red wine for private special occasions and the consumption of super-premium, French red wine for important public occasions. In both cases, red wine is regarded as a foreign, elite good, the consumption of which offers a display of distinction.

Reinforcing the link between wine and prestige, wine consumption in China is closely linked to class both at an individual and regional level (e.g. the wealthiest provinces—Shanghai and
Guangzhou—also have the highest rates of wine consumption; Moslares and Ubeda, 2010: 78). Nevertheless, wine consumption makes up only 1 per cent of the Chinese alcoholic drinks market, which is otherwise dominated by ‘traditional’ drinks such as beer and hard liquor. While a cadre of Chinese wine connoisseurs may be emerging, consumers tend to choose wine based on price alone (with a higher price offering greater face value; Moslares and Ubeda, 2010). There remain significant gulfs between the taste for wine as a symbol of prestige and the taste for wine as a hedonic good, between consumer knowledge and perceptions of domestic versus imported wine, and between the potential and actual size of the middle-class market of wine consumers. Thus, the Chinese consumption of domestic and foreign wine offers an ideal window on how global products are adopted and adapted in a local context (Smith Maguire and Hu, 2014; Robertson, 2007).

The second body of literature of particular relevance to this research concerns the strategic and accomplished role of market actors in intervening in the formation of tastes and markets. That is, attention is required not only to the accomplished meaning of goods from the point of view of the consumer, but also to the work that goes into the symbolic framing of the goods that the Chinese consumer confronts. And yet, the material practices through which Chinese consumer tastes for wine are framed and mobilized remain unexplored. Existing, related research typically treats Chinese consumer attitudes toward wine as the unproblematic object of measurement (e.g. Flew, 2006; Moslares and Ubeda, 2010)—and this reflects the general tendency within socio-cultural research on food and drink markets to focus on consumer motivations and perceptions, while the market and the goods therein are taken for granted.

Advances within cultural economy and new economic sociology have made clear that this is a major lacuna in our understanding of markets (e.g. Callon et al., 2002; McFall, 2009), and have helped redress the imbalance through a growing body of qualitative work that explores the social construction of markets and the production of value within cultural industries (e.g. Bovone, 2005; Entwistle, 2006; Molloy and Larner, 2010). In addition, within industrial marketing there is a growing recognition of the need to look at the motivations, dispositions and practices of specific, embodied network actors in accomplishing marketing (Lenney and Easton, 2009). Of particular use, here, is the concept of cultural intermediaries: market actors who are involved in framing particular products and practices as socially legitimate and desirable (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2010; 2012).

Focusing on the role of cultural intermediaries in forging connections and commitments between consumers and wine is all the more pertinent in China, where personal relationships are central to marketing and business networks (Beverland, 2009). An examination of cultural intermediaries in the Chinese wine market offers a critical opportunity to gauge the material practices involved in constructing and legitimizing an emerging market, and the subjective dispositions of those who embody the market’s ideals and are their own ideal consumers.

**Research Design and Respondents**

The project explores how the Chinese wine market is actively constituted through the material practices of cultural intermediaries involved in the qualification of goods and the mobilization of tastes, focusing on Shanghai as a critical case study. The research design builds on previous work on the cultural production of super-premium wine markets in Australia and France (Smith Maguire, 2010, 2012; Smith Maguire and Charters, 2011), which has focused on the devices and dispositions of market actors who claim professional expertise in wine, taste and value—i.e. cultural intermediaries such as wine educators, retailers,
importers, writers and marketers—and their particular political economic context and constraints.

Given the lack of existing knowledge about the character, roles and practices of cultural intermediaries in the Chinese wine market, the research necessarily adopts an exploratory and interpretive approach. The research design relies primarily on semi-standardized interviews, which were carried out in January 2013 in collaboration with Professor Dunfu Zhang of Shanghai University. Interviews were typically 45 to 60 minutes long and were co-conducted to accommodate language barriers; the majority of the interviews were conducted in English, with occasional questions (or in one case (R10, see below), most questions) answered in Mandarin. Questions focused on the individual’s market context (e.g. generic responsibilities linked to their present occupation, length of time and different work experiences within the wine market, overseas experience); the characteristics of their work (e.g. usual work practices, major obstacles to accomplishing desired ends, perceptions of their typical consumer), and their engagement with wine consumption as a consumer/in their personal lives.

There were thirteen respondents, grouped loosely into three major intermediary roles: wine writers and educators (those presenting information about wine to consumers); sommeliers and retailers (those selling wine directly to the consumer); and brand representatives of importers/distributors of foreign wine (those presentation information about imported wine to other market actors, such as wholesalers, retailers and restaurants). Table 1 (below) provides a summary of the respondents. With regard to their primary, current role, there are 5 writers and/or educators, 5 sommeliers and/or retailers, and 3 brand representatives. With the exception of R1, all are Chinese (R7 Singaporean/Chinese; R5 and R10 Taiwanese). The majority of respondents had had experience abroad, usually wine-related; only R4 and R6 had never been abroad (and R10 at a young age with family). All are based in Shanghai, with the exception of R1 who is based primarily in Beijing.

Table 1: Summary of Interview Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Intermediary Role</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Career in wine</th>
<th>Gender, Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>Writer/educator</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Male, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Writer/educator</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Female, 50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Brand representative</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Male, 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>Sommelier</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Male, 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>Writer/educator</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Male, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Male, 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7</td>
<td>Sommelier/retailer</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Male, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R8</td>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Male, 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R9</td>
<td>Retailer</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Male, 50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R10</td>
<td>Brand representative</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Female, 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R11</td>
<td>Brand representative</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Male, 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R12</td>
<td>Sommelier</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Male, 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R13</td>
<td>Sommelier</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Male, 30s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts is presently underway, involving an iterative process of deductive coding— theoretically-informed by the literature on cultural intermediaries and consumption in China—and inductive analysis, which entails ‘a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis’ (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 4). For the purposes of this paper, some initial
findings have been identified via deductively-derived themes, and within those, inductively-derived sub-themes.

**Initial Findings**

As for cultural intermediaries more generally, the wine intermediaries are understood as both professional taste makers (Bourdieu, 1984) and proxy consumers (Ennis, 2005; in Moor, 2008); their responses provide data on both the material practices and subjective dispositions that shape the market. Three major themes emerge from the deductive coding: the cultural intermediaries’ perceptions of a ‘new’ middle-class consumer culture vis-à-vis a new kind of wine consumption; the cultural intermediaries’ articulations of the connections between this ‘new’ performance of taste and existing cultural frameworks; and the construction of cultural legitimacy for the intermediaries’ roles and the ‘new’ wine culture. These three themes are introduced below with reference to some of the inductively-derived sub-themes.

*Perceptions of a new kind of wine consumption culture*

Bourdieu (1984) suggests that culture is a significant site for the contestation of social prestige and ranking by social (especially class) groups; changes to class structure are thus likely to manifest as changes in the notions of esteemed forms of consumption. New class groups will seek to achieve and defend their upward mobility and new (precarious) social position through the legitimation (and monopolization) of new forms of consumption. Wine appears to be such a case for the new middle class of contemporary urban China.

A new form of wine consumption was articulated by respondents in two major ways. The first worked through a juxtaposition with ‘typical’ Chinese attitudes to wine. For example:

- Eight of the respondents made explicit reference to the tradition of *gan bei*—a ‘bottom’s up’ mode of drinking—with reference to wine and/or traditional Chinese alcohol (rice wine or spirits such as baijiu). This was often associated with an older generation, or markets outside of first tier cities:
  - Here’s an example. A three and a half tier city, half a million population: a *baby* city compared with Shanghai. We ran a wine dinner there—it was the *first time* they’d had a wine dinner in their top hotel. For half of the attendees, it was their first time drinking wine—I mean the first time sipping wine, not just ‘bottom’s up.’ (R3)
  - I help to organize the wine [events] and tell them some knowledge about the wines and routines about the wine. The most important thing is to talk about the wine: its taste, it’s aroma. [Do they know much already?] No. (*laughs*) Hangzhou is good, but I went to Luoyang—they served the wine in a whiskey glass! (R10)

- The narrow association of (good) wine with French and/or expensive French wine (especially elite, *premier cru* Bordeaux producers, such as Châteaux Margaux, Latour and Lafite), and a characterization of the typical consumer as only interested in the ‘top’ well-known brands was cited by seven of the respondents:
  - I always keep two bottles of Margaux back there [in the stock room] in case some guy comes in and asks for ‘the best’ and he thinks best means the most expensive. But I don’t put that out here [in the shop]. (R7)
  - I met a lot of so-called ‘wine lovers.’ They bring an important guest and they order Latour, or Lafite: the most expensive. But when they come on their own, they order the cheapest wine. For these people, they drink for the function;
they drink wine not because they understand the quality. A lot of guests in the restaurant order by looking at the price, not the varieties. (R12)

- Other characteristics of the ‘typical’ view was that wine necessarily meant red wine, that wine was largely viewed as a tool for guanxi via gift giving.

Through such narratives, an established wine culture in China is positioned as belonging to an older generation (and/or a rural or lower tier urban China), against which a ‘new’ wine culture is emerging.

The second mode of articulating a new wine culture was through the references to an ideal type—the new wine consumer. Generally, this consumer was understood as young and relatively affluent but these were neither necessary nor sufficient criteria. More important was a new mentality about wine consumption. For example:

- Distancing ‘good’ wine practice from the existing traditions, seven of the respondents juxtaposed the practice gan bei with a new attitude about wine, which involves intellectual engagement (and reflected their personal approach to wine):
  - You drink gan bei, so after 1 or 2 hours you don’t know what you’re drinking. It’s not a culture of wine, of tasting. (R6)
  - We’re teaching them to drink properly. People are drinking ‘bottom’s up.’ We’re encouraging them to sniff the wine, to taste the wine. (R9)
  - I don’t go to wine bars—there, you only drink, not taste. You only drink the alcohol, not tasting. To taste, you have to really taste the flavours. It’s quite different. When you drink, you don’t think too much. It’s totally different. (R8)

- Characterising this new cadre of connoisseur consumers, seven respondents also noted an interest in and pursuit of good quality wines irrespective of narrow ideas of ‘high quality’ wine regions. Of these, four respondents noted a shift of interest for these new consumers from Bordeaux to Burgundy (with Burgundy taken to represent a region that invited greater intellectual engagement with the product), and beyond, to different regions and varietals:
  - ...it’s almost as if Bordeaux has become passé. Instead they’re turning to Burgundy, which you can spend a lifetime on and not exhaust. And some—a minority—are turning away from the really expensive wines and looking for more value, looking for different wines, and looking at wine as an everyday product. ...So you can see a search for value in that minority, and it’s value irrespective of where it came from. That’s surprising. People skip and jump from wines from everywhere and anywhere—it could be some obscure Greek wine. (R1)

- Other characteristics included a notion of intrinsic interest in and passion for wine (‘real’ wine lovers as opposed to the ‘so-called’ ones; R12), and a thirst of knowledge about wine.

Through such narratives, cultural intermediaries affiliated themselves with this new wine culture (as this ideal type of consumer is also their desired market), and positioned themselves at its vanguard (as they are their own ideal type of consumer, as was reinforced through their personal narratives about their own ‘style’ of wine consumption or relationship to wine).

In summary, respondents framed the new wine culture as one through which particular types of (young, urban) consumers can mark their difference from an older (and, to a lesser extent,
a less affluent) generation. A hallmark of this new culture is a pronounced discerning mentality—a shift from drinking to tasting—that affiliates it with cultural omnivorousness and, by association, its proponents with a global, cosmopolitan constituency demarked not by nation borders but by the parameters set by educational and cultural capital (e.g. Saito, 2011; Warde et al., 2007).

Attachments between ‘new’ wine and existing cultural values

Cultural intermediaries are understood as significant market actors for the promotion of consumption. Informed by new economic sociology and theories of governmentality, recent research examines how cultural intermediaries attempt to mobilize the attachment of intended receivers to goods (McFall, 2009). Beyond producing goods and experiences for sale in the consumer marketplace, cultural intermediaries are also, crucially, involved in the coordination between consumers’ perceived aspirations, fears and desires and particular, strategically singularized product qualities (Miller and Rose, 1997). For the wine intermediaries, this is a question of how the properties of wine—as an object and an organizing object around which a host of practices and rituals develop— are understood in relation to the existing cultural values that pattern existing consumption patterns. (It is also a question of the material devices by which such attachments are constructed and made durable (Latour, 1991), such as—for our respondents—the use of blind tastings, conventional ‘how to’ information on assessing wine via colour, smell and taste; and typical components of ‘stories’ told about wines. However, this is beyond the scope of the paper.)

Two main relationships between the new wine culture and existing cultural values emerged in the interviews. The first relates to the Confucian notion of mianzi (face) and the emphasis on social reputation and in-group conformity. There is already a well-established positive association between foreign goods and a socially-valued status displays (e.g. Podoshen et al., 2011); however, the issue here is with the connection to a ‘new’ kind of wine culture—not the overt display of wealth (as disparaged by R12, above, and other respondents), but the pursuit and performance of knowledge. For example:

- Five respondents explicitly characterised the new consumers (e.g. students in their wine education classes, readers of their wine blogs, consumers in the shops) as seeking not wine per se, but knowledge about wine:
  - They’re interested in it [wine] but they don’t know how to get the knowledge about it. (R6)

- A common way in which knowledge was demonstrated was through the use of personal wine microblogs (weibo). This dovetailed with the wine education device of teaching students to make tasting notes, and was especially important for the intermediaries themselves, for whom weibo represents a significant promotional device for demonstrating their expertise, developing their market and forging connections with other intermediaries (as such networks are fundamental to their work, as noted by all of the respondents).
  - Even if I don’t have to work in the holidays, I still drink wine. I still take notes and I still share my notes on Weibo or Facebook. I think it’s helpful for me to always keep notes so I can remember the performance of that wine. And also, I have many readers, and they are happy to read more and that’s helpful for them to choose the wines. (R5)

- Four of the respondents (one brand representation and three of the sommeliers) made explicit reference to the importance of participating in informal tasting circles or panels with their peers—these events enabled on-going development of their palate,
awareness of changes in the market, and the performance of that cultural capital, including demonstrating access to exclusive wine.

- We’ll get together—they’re all sommeliers. Each of us brings a bottle, and we’ll taste. (R13)
- [Do you drink [your brand’s] wines in your leisure time?] No (laughs). After eight hours at work, I want to try something from our competitors, or something that’s not even imported to China yet. That’s very interesting. (R11)

Through such narratives and devices, the cultural intermediaries articulated a link between new modes of wine consumption and an established cultural emphasis on status display—and, more importantly, new kinds of status display that privilege the display of knowledge and other forms of cultural capital (Skeggs, 2001). Consumers are thereby potentially mobilized by connecting existing desires and aspirations to the objective properties of wine culture, which—through the performance of bringing a ‘good’ wine to a party or tasting panel, or posting detailed tasting notes on weibo—allow an overt display of cultural and social capital (i.e. knowledge of wine and membership in wine-related networks).

The second linkage—not as prevalent in the interviews as the first—connected the new wine culture to existing cultural fields. For example:

- Five respondents made reference to using established Chinese practices around the hedonic and intellectual engagement with food and tea in order to build consumers’ cultural competence with wine. This link was made through material practices (e.g. R9 sold tea in his wine store: ‘It’s the same for tea as it is for wine.’) and educational strategies:
  - I want a Chinese wine culture. I want the East talking to the West, tea talking to the wine. In China, people understand the tea, so that will help them to understand it. (R2)

Through such affiliations, cultural intermediaries build on existing vocabularies and mentalities of discernment and aesthetic appreciation.

In summary, respondents positioned participation in the new wine culture as a socially esteemed mechanism for accomplishing a long-standing social need to display status, which echoes established forms of discerning cultural consumption (e.g. of tea) while remaining in opposition to the established (low status) form of wine consumption. Wine is thus ‘rescued’ from the culture of gan bei and rehabilitated as a mode of achieving mianzi—not through shows of money but of knowledge.

(Re)producing notions of cultural legitimacy

Post-Bourdieuian research on cultural intermediaries has highlighted their work in constructing value ‘by framing how others (end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries) engage with goods, affecting and effecting others’ orientations towards those goods as legitimate’ (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012: 552). Such framing work relies upon their own explicit claims to professional expertise, and their knowledge and mobilization of established markers of cultural legitimacy. Thus, while remaking the contents of the category of ‘good taste,’ cultural intermediaries also reproduce the master status of cultural legitimacy as the device by which social stratification is constructed.
Of the many ways in which legitimacy is afforded to wine intermediaries and the new wine culture, two broad categories of devices emerge in the analysis. The first concerns ways in which status is claimed for the wine intermediaries themselves. As noted above, for example, wine blogs and tasting notes are a way for intermediaries (and consumers) to demonstrate their credibility. This was especially apparent for the occupation of sommeliers, which is undergoing a process of quasi-professionalization. For example:

- The expert status of sommeliers is objectified through specific educational qualifications (e.g. R12 was preparing to take the exam of the Court of Master Sommeliers) and various competitions, the winners of which become minor media celebrities and pawns in the status competition between elite hotels and restaurants.
  - Sommelier is a mystery job in China. Before, we think of it only as the guy pouring the wine, but it’s not. Now, they [the public] know what he does. They see the money he can earn. They see that he is shown respect; he is on magazines. The hotels pay a lot of money to build this guy as a star in their hotel. (R8—previously a competition-winning sommelier and now an educator)
  - I asked myself, ‘How can I make the most of my wine marketing [degree] as a career?’ Wine sommelier was a very good choice for my career, because you can touch and taste the wines every day. … That would be a very honourable job for wine marketing. (R4)

Thus, the cultural legitimacy of the new mode of wine consumption is intertwined with the construction of legitimacy for its evangelists.

The second category of devices has to do with lending legitimacy to the new mode of wine consumption and/or the wine intermediary via connections to other, established markers of legitimacy. This included reference to:

- The social esteem attached to educational qualifications: nine of the respondents have some form of wine-related qualifications, either through higher education (e.g. degrees in hospitality and hotel management) or wine education certifications. The Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) is most commonly cited (with China set to be the largest market for WSET courses as of this year; Siddle, 2013).
- The prestige associated with overseas travel, through which the cosmopolitan credentials and insider status of the intermediary are affirmed.
- The elite status of the new middle class field of consumption, within which this new mode of wine consumption is located. This includes the status of the core of ‘new’ consumers, which affirms the place of wine within a ‘fashionable lifestyle’; the sites of wine intermediation and consumption (especially five-star hotels); and the associated media that document the people, places and practices associated with wine.
  - Now it [wine] seems like a fashion, a symbol of the lifestyle of higher class people in China. You can see a lot of articles in lifestyle magazines, so that may attract people, and they get interested. (R5)
  - [On why high status restaurants ask him to organize wine tasting dinners] Because I bring the best customers: my customers! They’re already filtered by me. And then they’ll know the restaurant, and they’ll go back. (R7)
  - [With regard to an annual wine tasting event organized by the brand:] That’s one of the style events in China now… There are others following our step…but they can’t compete with [us]—we are larger and also we launched much earlier, so people know about us. (R11)
Through such affiliations and forms of cultural and symbolic capital, the practices and practitioners of the new wine culture—organized around discerning taste and the display of knowledge—are framed as ‘worthy choices’ (Johnston and Baumann, 2007: 170). Thus, cultural intermediaries are implicated in the reproduction and circulation of repertoires of cultural legitimacy that are used to justify, explain, position or make credible wine (specific wines or wine consumption) as socially and cultural appropriate (cf. Wetherell and Potter, 1988).

**Concluding Thoughts**

Through a preliminary account of findings from an exploratory study of wine intermediaries in Shanghai, the paper has attempted to outline some of the dynamics and devices involved in the emergence of a new, middle-class wine culture in urban China. Several themes of note have been beyond the scope of this paper, including the role of cultural intermediaries as gatekeepers who filter what makes it to the market, their own consuming passions and class anxieties and how they inform their work, and their perceptions (explicit or not) of their role in the marketplace as a bridge between cultures of (wine) consumption. By way of a conclusion, let us consider two questions, framed as opportunities to think about the relationship between a past, present and future China vis-à-vis the middle class and the development of a specifically Chinese consumer culture.

What is ‘new”? It is important to remember that such modes of consumption—high-involvement, connoisseur-oriented, discerning, quality (rather than prestige) led—are not new to China per se; what is new is their diffusion from a restricted elite to a much larger middle-class mass. With that in mind, we can see from the data that the framing of such a wine culture as new serves not only to define a middle-class wine market and affirm the necessity of wine intermediaries, but also contributes to the broader construction of middle-class identity, which is not simply urban, but also cosmopolitan. This echoes findings more generally of the use of foreign goods and consumption practices as glocal bridges, that link China to the rest of the world (Lin, 2012; Smith Maguire and Hu, 2014; Tian and Dong, 2011).

What is old—or at least remains the same? Cultural intermediaries do not—cannot—simply impose their own tastes on the market. They work through ‘old’ cultural habits and habitii to orchestrate connections between a ‘new’ wine culture and an established set of cultural conditions. If a quality-oriented, hedonic engagement wine resonates with individualistic cultural values, it nevertheless operates through and reinforces collective values, such as mianzi and guanxi (Hofstede, 1980). New modes of wine consumption provide new means of achieving face or bestowing favours: the shift from drinking to tasting allows a performance of status or a payment of respect based on knowledge and aesthetic discernment, rather than simply the power to consume. Such shows of status are arguably both less exclusive (in purely economic terms) and more exclusive (as the acquisition of cultural capital requires investment of time as well as money).

**References**


