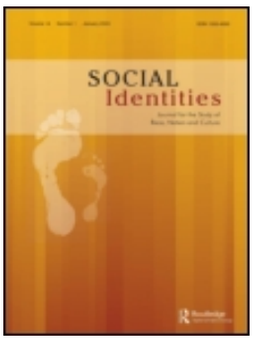

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Not a simple coffee shop: local, global and glocal dimensions of the consumption of Starbucks in China

Jennifer Smith Maguire[a]* and Dan Hu[b]

[a]*Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK;* [b]*Tianjin, China*

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This article examines the ways in which Chinese consumers engage with foreign brands, looking specifically at their perceptions and experiences of Starbucks. Rather than assuming an inherent conflict between global and local meanings, or collectivist and individualist values, we examine the accomplished meaning of foreign brands: how Chinese consumers make sense of Starbucks, and what their engagements with the brand can tell us about the interplay between the local, global and glocal in the consumption of Western goods. Based on interviews with urban, middle-class consumers, the article explores four major themes in respondents' narratives about Starbucks. First, we discuss the strategies and cues respondents use to understand and authenticate Starbucks as a foreign brand; second, we focus on the local socio-cultural context for engagements with the brand as a symbol of status; third, we discuss the respondents' associations of Starbucks' global status with quality and trustworthiness; and, finally, we consider how respondents use Starbucks as a glocal bridge, to experience a Western way of life. We suggest that these findings highlight the role of foreign brands – and consumer goods more generally – in the problems of individual and collective identity formation.

Keywords: China; consumption; foreign brands; identity; middle class

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed significant developments with regard to the middle class (or classes) in China (e.g. Goodman, 2008). Research on contemporary China has linked the increased access to foreign goods in the wake of *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening-up policy) to new forms of middle-class identity and an emerging consumer culture (e.g. Croll, 2006; Elfick, 2011; Lin & Wang, 2010; Tian & Dong, 2011). Running through much of this literature is the question of what such changes portend for Chinese culture. Put simply: does the influx and enthusiastic embrace of Western goods herald the decline of traditional Chinese cultural values? Such concerns resonate with the empirical focus of this article: a Starbucks café in the Forbidden City – opened in 2000 at the invitation of local and cultural officials – was closed in 2007 after a high-profile online campaign protested that the presence of the café had 'trampled over Chinese culture' (cited in Han & Zhang, 2009, p. 396). These concerns mirror wider discussions (and fears) of an increasingly standardized, homogeneous and distinctly Western (if not outright American) global consumer culture (e.g. Mazzarella, 2003; Smart, 2010).

*Corresponding author. Current address: School of Management, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK. Email: jbs7@le.ac.uk

However, arguments along these lines tend to invoke Western goods as taken-for-granted objects, and confuse a convergence between China and the West in terms of what is bought with why it is bought and what it means. If, for example, research suggests that Chinese consumers perceive Western – and especially luxury – goods as significant for producing and displaying an appropriate 'modern', 'global' and prestigious social identity (e.g. Podoshen, Li & Zhang, 2011), or that the consuming habits of China's upper strata are converging with those of their Western counterparts (e.g. Garner, 2005), it is by no means clear what those goods and habits mean vis-à-vis Confucian, communist or consumerist norms, or individualistic or collectivist values (Hofstede, 1980). However impressive the rate of Chinese consumption of Western brands, one cannot deduce from it the cultural values and taste practices at work – the 'why' and the 'how' of Chinese middle-class experiences and expressions of their preferences cannot be read from global sales figures or advertising campaigns, nor can they simply be explained as Chinese emulation of the West (Tian & Dong, 2011, p. 18). Notwithstanding academic debates about – and intense business interest in (e.g. Doctoroff, 2005; Garner, 2005; Wang, 2010) – the Chinese middle class, there remains overall 'a lack of comprehensive understanding of Chinese consumers culturally' (Liu et al., 2011, p. 1238), of how the Chinese understand and construct urban, middle-class identities via consumer goods (Elfick, 2011, p. 190), and of how, in particular, they understand and engage with foreign goods and brands (Tian & Dong, 2011).

This article examines these issues through the specific case of Starbucks. Despite the Forbidden City controversy, Starbucks has on the whole been enthusiastically received in China: since first opening in Beijing in 1999, there are now more than 400 Starbucks coffee shops, and the brand outperforms its US parent (*Taipei Times*, 2009, cited in Lin, 2012, p. 119). Starbucks is a potent symbol of the 'new' China, popular among the middle class and young adults and a common feature of upscale shopping malls and gentrified neighbourhoods (Han & Zhang, 2009; Lin, 2012; Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008). However, the meaning of foreign brands – and Starbucks specifically – for middle-class Chinese consumers is by no means transparent. Rather than assuming an inherent conflict between global and local goods and meanings, or between collectivist and individualist values, we are interested in the accomplished meaning of global brands: how do urban, middle-class Chinese consumers make sense of Starbucks, and what can their engagements with the brand tell us about the interplay between the local, global and glocal in the consumption of Western goods?

Chinese consumers and foreign brands

Economic reforms since 1979 have played a significant role in the emergence of a consumer culture in China, not least with regard to increased access to foreign goods, and the development of a middle class, distinct from the traditional 'worker' and 'farmer' classes (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; Wang, 2010), and is defined for our purposes as households with an annual income between 30,000 and 120,000 yuan (Elfick, 2011, p. 189). 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; Xu, 2007).

The rise of the Chinese middle class has been regarded as part of a cultural shift from 'comrade to consumer' (Croll, 2006, p. 16), and – as Tian and Dong (2011, from p. 23) persuasively argue in their review of the literature – Western scholars have tended to approach this class wielding a Western 'emulative model' of middle-class consumption. Like Veblen's (1934) *nouveaux riches* aping the established leisure class, Chinese middle-class consumer 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 & Dong, 2011; Xiao, 2005). Below, we introduce three broad themes that cut across research on Chinese consumption of foreign brands.

The first theme focuses on the specifically local, Chinese cultural context for the reception of foreign goods. For example, research calls attention to how Chinese consumer attitudes and habits are shaped by the degree to which consumers identify with traditional cultural values. The typical Chinese:

> is one who wants to live in harmony with nature, has respect for the past and tradition, believes in modesty and self-effacement, emphasizes proper order, interdependence, and face in interpersonal relations, and holds a 'being' rather than a 'doing' orientation [as well as holds] … values such as thriftiness, social consciousness, face and moderation … [and] a high degree of self-control. (Lin & Wang, 2010, p. 245)

The consumption of foreign goods can thus be made sense of in light of these values. For example, the positive association between foreign goods and a socially-valued status display resonates both with the Confucian notion of *mianzi* (face) and the emphasis on in-group conformity (e.g. Jap, 2010; Podoshen et al., 2011).

However, the associations of Western culture – and by implication its goods – with individualism, hedonic consumption, and 'fun, gratification and pleasure' (Lin & Wang, 2010, p. 245) present what appears to be an unresolvable contradiction for the collectivist culture of China (Hofstede, 1980). At times, cultural values research aligns – implicitly, if not explicitly – with a 'homogenizing' view of globalization, in which foreign brands are understood as carrying the threats of cultural imperialism and the decline of local, traditional cultural values. This view finds popular expression in China: for example, in 2006, ten top Chinese PhD students published an internet petition calling for resistance to Western holidays and lifestyles (Li, 2006, cited in Lin & Wang, 2010, p. 245). Such fears can also be identified in the Chinese state's early resistance to encouraging consumption (Zhao & Belk, 2008) and – more recently – the Forbidden City Starbucks scenario: Western brands are deemed a danger for local culture and a conduit for a homogeneous (if not outright American) global consumer culture.

The second theme focuses on what *qua* foreign brands offer to Chinese consumers. Research suggests that the boundaries between categories of foreign brands, global brands and Western brands are blurred in the minds of many Chinese consumers, and that such brands are on the whole understood to be of superior quality to domestic brands (e.g. Kapferer, 1997; Tian & Dong, 2011). This is not only true for China: a cross-cultural survey of 12 different countries (Holt, Quelch & Taylor, 2004) found that the single largest contributing factor in consumer preferences for global brands was a 'quality signal' – the perception that by virtue of having achieved success in a worldwide

marketplace, global brands carried with them assurances of superior quality. While the focus of this theme is the *global* dimension of foreign brands as a form of quality assurance, there is nevertheless a specifically *local* context for the judgement of quality, particularly given the added expense of foreign goods:

> Chinese consumers are not simply buying Western products because of their imported status … but evaluate the products carefully before purchase, given the high price of imported products as compared to similar local Chinese products. (Liu et al., 2011, p. 1246)

Despite the suggestion that thrift and self-denial are represented as outdated in the imported genre of lifestyle television (Xu, 2007), there is nevertheless considerable evidence that traditional values of frugality and judiciousness remain central, particularly for negotiating the everyday crisis of trust in the Chinese marketplace, with regard to the problems of fake imported goods, the safety and quality of domestic goods (as highlighted in the 2008 baby milk scandal), the veracity of the information made available by the state, and the fairness with which marketplace transactions take place (*The Economist*, 2008; Hanser, 2010; Veeck, Yu & Burns, 2010).

The third theme running through some of the research on Chinese consumption of foreign brands aligns loosely with 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1995) accounts of globalization and consumer culture, which attempt to move beyond dichotomous homogeneous/heterogeneous arguments about the features and implications of global brands (Ram, 2004). The situated, local negotiations and adaptations of global brands are foregrounded; the focus is thus on the glocalized meanings that global brands take on in particular local contexts (and how these change over time relative to changing levels of economic development and access to foreign goods: R. Miller, 1998). For example, Tian and Dong (2011) examine how Chinese 'consumer-citizens' make sense of foreign brands through four major narratives that selectively appropriate brand qualities and Chinese ideologies, thereby employing foreign brands as tools to achieve locally-contingent ends, such as the everyday process of nation-making. One such narrative revolves around the transformative potential of foreign brands as means to access Western experiences and ideologies (Tian & Dong, 2011, p. 11). Thus, Chinese consumers may perceive a foreign brand as the 'glocal' site (imagined or otherwise) of intersection between the local and the global/foreign/Western (e.g. Lin, 2012; Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008).

In summary, our strategic parsing of past research highlights the local, global and glocal dimensions of foreign brands for Chinese consumers: negotiations of foreign brands reflect the local cultural context; foreign brands carry positive quality associations by virtue of their globalness; and foreign brands offer a glocal bridge to experience the West. Whereas previous research tends to prioritize one of these dimensions, we now turn to our findings to suggest how all three dimensions are at play in Chinese consumer engagements with foreign brands.

Talking to Chinese Starbucks consumers

The article draws from an exploratory study of Chinese Starbucks consumers. Our qualitative focus was on subjective perceptions and experiences; the specific, empirical focus was on consumer perceptions of Starbucks, and our more general concern was with the ways in which consumers engage with foreign brands. Semi-standardized interviews were carried out with a sample of 20 Starbucks consumers from four urban centres

(Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Guangzhou). We were interested in those who are regular Starbucks consumers and although our minimum requirement was that respondents should have visited Starbucks at least once in the past three months, most of the respondents are more frequent visitors (if not self-identified 'fans'). To facilitate recruiting such a sample, respondents were identified via personal contacts and snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Interviews were carried out in the spring of 2011, and transcribed and translated. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions – such as 'Do you have any special stories about Starbucks?' – to allow respondents to share their impressions of Starbucks from their own point of view.

In addition to all being urban residents and regular Starbucks consumers, our respondents are also all middle class. All of the respondents have household incomes of at least 90,000 yuan. Their occupations are also typically middle class: government officials/civil servants (five), private business owners or managers (three), educators (two), marketers/analysts (two), and a doctor, lawyer, dentist, engineer and editor. The remaining three respondents are university students from middle-class households. Of the respondents, nine are male and 11 female. Ages range from 20 to 49, with half the respondents in their 20s, and half in their 40s.

A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was approached through a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Informed by our literature review, we examined how local, global and glocal dimensions were articulated in respondents' narratives, while at the same time pursuing an inductive 'form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 4). A theme is understood as 'a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 161). Following this approach, translated transcripts were read and re-read to identify significant and repeated themes or ideas (being mindful to check the validity of terms across interviewees given the added layer of interpretation that translation introduces to the data: Gilbert, 2008, p. 257). These ideas were then clustered according to shared meanings, so that inductively-derived findings were clustered within four deductively-informed themes: authenticating foreignness; local context; global quality; glocal bridge. These are discussed below.

Authenticating foreignness

It is not merely that Starbucks falls into a generic category of *bolaipin* (imported products), but that the brand's otherness was central in all of the respondents' descriptions of the brand. The most commonly repeated descriptors were 'Western' (13 respondents), 'American' (13), 'famous' (nine) and 'global' (eight), with 15 of the 20 respondents using two or more of these terms. Such findings are in keeping with previous research that identifies a blurred notion of 'foreign brands as global brands from the imagined West' in the minds of Chinese consumers (Tian & Dong, 2011, p. 6).

What was particularly interesting for us was that the otherness of Starbucks was not simply taken for granted, but actively established by the respondents through a range of 'proofs' of the brand's foreign or Western origins. Consider the following three examples:

> Coffee is popular in the United States just like tea in China. Starbucks in China also employs the traditional methods of coffee making, and the coffee beans are imported from the foreign countries. In my mind, coffee comes from the Western countries. (MM, female, 41)

> I think the quality of coffee is a very important reason for me to choose Starbucks. The technology of making coffee of Starbucks is from America. Its original country has a long history of making coffee. So I think Starbucks is a good choice. (LL, female, 29)

> I think Starbucks is a trustworthy brand because it uses the original coffee-making methods and imported coffee beans. Moreover, the inner design of many Starbucks stores is the Western style, which gives me a feeling of 'modern'. (ML, male, 47)

In these examples and others, coffee itself is framed as both Western and non-traditional. This foreignness is further reinforced through reference to Starbucks' method of production: the use of 'original' or 'traditional' coffee making methods and imported beans.

Furthermore, ML mentions the store design itself, but without having visited Starbucks in the West, how can he judge that the store is credibly 'Western'? By way of a response, consider the following two examples:

> I am fond of Starbucks partly because I love the Western TV programs and movies, especially the American TV series *Gossip Girls*. The young adults like sitting in the Starbucks, which provides a social place for chatting with their friends. (YiZ, female, 23)

> Starbucks as an American brand has been promoted by many advertisements from American movies and magazines. Starbucks is about the American lifestyle rather than coffee. (WW, male, 40)

The representation of Starbucks in Western media products reinforces Starbucks as foreign – and specifically American for YiZ and WW – and provides a referent against which the 'local' Starbucks in Beijing or Guangzhou can be confirmed to be like the 'original.'

Overall, respondents singled out particular brand and product attributes and employed them as concretizing anchors or 'cues' (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) for the meaning of Starbucks as authentically American, Western or global. The most common of these brand properties were the method of production, as for MM, LL and ML above (cited by eight respondents); the representation of Starbucks in Western media, as for YiZ and YaY above (cited by six); and the foreignness of coffee *per se* as opposed to China's traditional focus on tea, as noted by MM and five others. Other respondents, like ML, also mentioned the stores' physical design and décor which were felt to be the same as the stores in the West (compare Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008), and witnessing Western individuals drinking in Chinese Starbucks stores. Thus, foreign brands are not simply constructed through advertising and promotion and passively apprehended by consumers; our findings suggest that in addition to (if not necessarily in concert with) the work done by brand management, consumers do considerable work themselves in singularizing particular attributes of a product or brand to co-construct and authenticate a brand *as* foreign, global and Western (compare Bookman, 2013).

Local context

A recurrent theme in the literature on Chinese consumption of Western goods is that such goods offer a means of status display, and this is largely explained through reference to the local, cultural context: traditional collectivist values of *guanxi* – social relations or networks that entail obligations – and *mianzi* – social status or 'face' (e.g. Jap, 2010; Podoshen et al., 2011). Likewise, nine of our respondents associated Starbucks with a

positive status display, and referred to group identity in making sense of this appeal of Starbucks. This was typically articulated in the explicit language of class:

> Starbucks coffee is good! But coffee is not the most important factor for me to go to Starbucks. Most of the Starbucks consumers belong to the upper class or middle class. Sitting in the Starbucks should be regarded as a business card in order to show my taste and status … I am worry about losing face by choosing a wrong social place. (JL, male, 48)

> From my point of view, Starbucks in China is a symbol of social status, fashion and modernity. Many professionals and upper middle class go to Starbucks frequently. I feel more confident when I am sitting with them in the Starbucks. Sometimes, I would like to go there to enjoy the exclusive atmosphere. (YuY, female, 40)

> My friends and I are always sitting in 'strategic' places, where we could be seen by others. Or sometimes we buy a cup of coffee and take it away, so that everybody on the street could see we went to Starbucks. In other people's eyes, maybe I am a modern young professional. (YS, female, 26)

As with the strategies for authenticating the foreignness of Starbucks, respondents look for cues – such as the other consumers in the stores – to confirm that the brand is, indeed, associated with the appropriate social group. However, the group identity associations of Starbucks were also articulated in more ambiguous terms:

> People who go to Starbucks generally are stereotyped into this group of the people who are quite modern, fashion, and well-educated, so I like to go to Starbucks as to be a part of that stereotype. (LL, female, 29)

> I go to Starbucks almost every Sunday morning. Starbucks is not a simple coffee shop. The symbolism of the brand cannot be ignored. As a famous coffee brand in the whole world, it represents a group of the consumers who have individual characters and tastes in many Chinese people's minds. (CW, male, 44)

For these respondents, consuming at Starbucks offered more than a cup of coffee: it offered an instrument through which to demonstrate their individual status, be it understood in terms of social, occupational or educational class, or in more fluid terms of being 'modern' or 'individual' or 'fashionable.'

Bearing in mind our small sample size, we would suggest that this theme highlights a process of negotiating between individualism and collectivism in engagements with foreign brands. The individualistic notions of class as a stylistic achievement rather than an ascribed social category, and of self-electing membership through appropriate status displays find complementary, normative support from a collective value of *guanxi*: meeting at, and treating a companion to, Starbucks can be important for concretizing and maintaining social capital. The meaning of Starbucks as a foreign brand thus reflects the local context, not only in terms of cultural values but also with regard to the social structure: displays of class membership are important aspects of everyday life in a mobile and changing society in which group membership cannot be taken for granted.

Furthermore, it also bears mention that the symbols for demonstrating group membership cannot be taken for granted. Foreign brands cannot be assumed to be credible signs of individuality and privilege (Croll, 2006) because over time such brands may cease to be regarded as 'foreign' – as is the case with the younger Japanese generation's perception of McDonalds (Watson, 1997) – or may become subject to anti-corporate sentiments (Thompson & Arsel, 2004). The ubiquity of Starbucks in urban

China would suggest that ready accessibility diminishes its connotations of exclusivity (compare Clarke, Micken, & Hart, 2002). Just as the exclusivity, cultural legitimacy and status of coffee have shifted in North America towards the artisanal, organic and small-scale (Sanneh, 2011; Thompson Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006), so too would one expect to see the banalization of Starbucks as a signifier of difference and the eventual move – of the professional middle class at least – towards artisanal and traditional alternatives, to mark their distance from other social groups (compare Elfick, 2011, pp. 203–204).

Global quality

Existing research tells us that global brands are commonly held to be of superior quality by consumers from China and elsewhere (e.g. Holt et al., 2004). Hanser's (2010, p. 317) research confirms this, but suggests that because middle-class consumers are able to afford expensive foreign brands, they tend to emphasize status rather than quality in the advantages of foreign goods (i.e. they take the quality dimension for granted). Our findings, however, suggest that these two dimensions are *both* present in the narratives of our middle-class respondents – and in fact, quality was more prevalent than status in the transcripts. Of our respondents, 16 of the 20 described Starbucks as good quality, trustworthy, reliable and of good reputation, and this was explicitly connected to the brand's foreign status. For example, consider these three examples:

> Starbucks is a famous global coffee brand and has a good reputation. I think the quality of coffee and service can be trusted due to its global fame. In addition, Starbucks comes from America. I do trust the American brands for their good quality and services. (YaY, female, 27)

> I choose Starbucks coffee because of its good reputation. I think the famous global brand provides high quality than other local coffee houses. As today's market has a lot of fake goods, I need to find trustworthy brands. Foreign-made products are better than domestic products in terms of quality or taste. (JZ, female, 28)

> Starbucks is quite famous and has a good reputation in the global context. I think it can be seen as a trusted coffee shop. (YaZ, male, 48)

The perception of Starbucks as global and therefore high quality was also found in Taiwan (Lin, 2012). More generally, these narratives reflect the widespread view that global brands *must* be of superior quality if they have achieved worldwide presence and have met the sort of strict quality controls that China imposes on its own exports (Tian & Dong, 2011, p. 7): a sort of market Darwinianism that – like the cues highlighted in the first theme – acts as an authenticating strategy for the brand.

We would suggest that respondents' positive valuation of Starbucks as high quality is not the outcome of an abstract and disembedded quality of globalness, but is rather the outcome of situated, local motives for judging and authenticating the brand in this way. Chinese consumers are motivated to judge foreign brands in terms of quality by a number of intertwined, locally-contingent factors, including expense, a crisis of trust and the cultural value of thrift. Foreign brands are typically more expensive than domestic alternatives, and at the same time, the quality of goods (foreign and domestic) cannot be taken for granted. China's *xinren weiji* ('crisis of trust'; Sun, 2003, cited by Hanser, 2010, p. 315) works at the everyday level of consumption, and manifests in 'the threat of purchasing fake or poor quality goods or being cheated by unscrupulous merchants' (Hanser, 2010, p. 316). Signs of quality and reliability are all the more relevant for the

food sector, given food safety scandals and the lack of trust in governance and regulation mechanisms (Veeck et al., 2010).

How the added expense of foreign brands and the risks of the marketplace are understood and negotiated – and how resulting choices are legitimated or not – will reflect the cultural habitus of Chinese consumers (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural values of thrift, self-control and *tiao* or *jingtiao xixuan* – careful selection for quality (Hanser, 2010; Lin & Wang, 2010; Liu et al., 2011; Podoshen et al., 2011) – shape consumers' schemes of perception and appreciation. Coffee is relatively new to China, as many respondents noted; thus, Starbucks consumers may not feel competent to judge its quality by their own palate or range of coffee-drinking experience. (Only six of our respondents explicitly stated that they liked the taste of Starbucks coffee; three said that the coffee was a secondary reason for going, and one stated that he didn't like coffee.) Thus, cultural values of thrift and careful selection place all the more emphasis on the global quality signal of Starbucks, as it potentially compensates for a lack of embodied cultural capital: one can have a taste for Starbucks, even in the absence of a taste for coffee.

Quality assurances (e.g. a brand's global status) are valuable – and consumers are motivated to strategically and selectively focus upon them – because they are means of affirming marketplace decisions and consumers' sense of self. The global quality dimension of our respondents' narratives suggests that engagements with Starbucks are not simply (if at all) about an aspirational or emulative orientation – 'I buy it because it is a status symbol' – but also have a moral dimension – 'I buy it because I have carefully chosen the best.'

Glocal bridge

The most common theme in the interviews was the perception of Starbucks as a cultural bridge, allowing respondents some experience of another way of life. This is consistent with past research in Beijing and Taiwan, in which Starbucks was felt to offer a specifically 'American' experience (Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008, p. 1019) and a feeling of being connected to the world (Lin, 2012, p. 126). For Chinese consumers generally, foreign brands serve as potential points of access to Western experiences and ways of life (Tian & Dong, 2011, p. 11). Of the 20 respondents, 18 made explicit reference to this sort of engagement with the brand. For example:

> Starbucks, a famous Western brand, has brought the Western culture to Chinese consumers. I have never been to foreign countries, but the economic reform in 1979 is the turning point. Chinese consumers become to get much more opportunities to access to the Western brand and the Western culture. Starbucks is just one of the foreign products. (LX, female, 49)

> When I was young, China did not 'open door' to the Western brands and goods in 1970s. All the people at that time wore the blue uniform. I am not free to choose the foreign goods. Interestingly, I get information about the outside world from my uncle who has been to foreign countries for business. He told me that foreigners like sitting in the coffee shops and reading newspaper. I think this kind of experience is enjoyable but is quite far away. I hope that one day I can enjoy the coffee in a foreign coffee shop in my city. Now, Starbucks is coming. My dream comes true … I feel that I will become international when I am sitting in the Starbucks, partly because many foreigners are chatting in the Starbucks. Sometimes I imagine I am sitting in the foreign countries. (LH, male, 43)

> I have no experience of purchasing the *bolaipin* [products imported from Western countries] when I was in my 20s. Life is quite simple and boring. Since the Chinese government has started the economic reform in the late 1980s, I have the opportunities to 'touch' the Western

> brands, goods and services … For me, Starbucks is a good way to connect to the outside world. (JW, female, 45)

This was a finding we had anticipated from the older half of our sample (which includes LX, LH and JW), given that they would have childhood memories of pre-reform China when consumption was highly regulated and standardized (Elfick, 2011, p. 192), and experience as adults of the transition over the 1980s and 1990s that saw an increased presence of foreign brands in the domestic market.

However, this theme was equally present in our interviews with younger respondents. For example:

> Starbucks brings a new and fresh experience for me as it comes from the Western country. Before the Starbucks entered into Chinese market, I just imagine or watch TV programs to know the Western coffee shop. When Starbucks comes into China, it offers an opportunity to experience the Western cultures, which makes me feel so happy. (DF, male, 28)

> Chinese consumers have opened their minds to the Western consumption values and accepted their lifestyle. Starbucks is a new way for Chinese consumers to learn about the Western consumption values. (SJ, female, 25)

> Starbucks enriches the life of Chinese people. It serves a good place to experience the life of American people. (YH, female, 21)

With the exception of DF's reference to a time 'before' Starbucks, the younger respondents' articulation of this theme was with reference to a general desire to experience the West – as was also common in the older respondents' narratives. Such findings parallel those from research in similar sites in Canada, which found that consumers utilize Starbucks as a symbolic bridge to otherness (European coffee culture, Third World coffee production) as part of the construction of a sense of 'cosmopolitan cool' (Bookman, 2013). The appeal of a glocal bridge can thus be understood not as an escape to 'there,' but as an affirmation of the connectedness of 'here.'

One of the ways in which the experience of Starbucks was framed as a point of accessing another – Western – way of life was in terms of socializing. Ten respondents explicitly cited Starbucks as a space for socializing as a key appeal of the brand, as exemplified by the following respondent:

> Starbucks establishes a new and comfortable social place for young people to hang out. I feel happy, relaxed, and enjoyable when I am drinking coffee in Starbucks. The taste of coffee is the second. (HZ, male, 20)

Such responses – found in both older and younger respondents – highlight that the use of Starbucks as a glocal bridge to a cultural 'other' may be partly related to quasi-public (or 'third space'; Lin, 2012) aspects of an imagined Western lifestyle, as was also found for Starbucks consumers in Beijing (Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008). Starbucks is not simply a space of consumption; it is a space that is avidly consumed. Public and quasi-public spaces in urban China are often cramped, noisy, and unheated, whereas Starbucks are relatively clean and quiet, offering spacious (and heated) seating areas. This particular dimension of Starbucks has been acknowledged at the corporate level in terms of increasing the size of the Chinese Starbucks stores relative to their Western counterparts,

and adding more food items to the menu, in order to accommodate Chinese customers' extended (and food-oriented) social uses of the space (Han & Zhang, 2009, p. 398).

We can see how the glocal dimension of the brand is locally contingent, relying on the purposeful authenticating cues and strategies of consumers who deem Starbucks to be a credible conduit of Western experiences. This requires that Chinese consumers pay selective attention to the brand's material attributes – as in the first theme – and thereby reduce the meaning of brand to this simplified core of (Western, if not American) authenticity (compare Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Thus, the received meaning of Starbucks as quintessentially and materially American, from the coffee-making technique to the décor, is accomplished in part by ignoring both the corporation's intentional 'glocalization' of the coffee shops (larger stores sizes, more food options), which creates a distance between the Chinese and American stores, and the North American stores' cultural referents, which are Italian – and broadly European – in terms of in-store terminology, décor and coffee making techniques. Thus, the respondents' strong identification of Starbucks as American does not inhibit the chain's (g)localization (compare Lam, 2010, who makes the case that Disney's strong 'global corporate cultural capital' inhibits glocalization processes in the Hong Kong Disneyland).

From our findings, we suggest that the glocal dimensions of the brand are prized in ways that exceed its local status context or its global quality signal. It is Starbucks' position as a global brand in a local context – the intersection of global and local – that offers particular attributes and advantages to consumers, expressed in terms of experiences of the 'other' and the potential for self-actualization via such experiences. This process of self-production may involve what are typically taken as 'Western' forms of hedonic consumption (Campbell, 1987) – such as LH taking pleasure in imagining himself in a foreign country – but there is no inherent contradiction with traditional Chinese cultural identity. Chinese consumers selectively appropriate and frame foreign goods relative to their collective sense of self. Seeking out glocal bridges through foreign brands can confirm national identity: a China that is connected to, and an equal partner in, the wider, global community (Tian & Dong, 2011).

Starbucks and the problem of identity

To summarize, we examined urban, middle-class Chinese consumers' subjective perceptions and experiences of Starbucks as a foreign brand. In detailing the findings from our inductive analysis of interview transcripts, we reviewed four major themes. First, we discussed the strategies and cues respondents use to understand and authenticate Starbucks as a foreign brand; second, we focused on the local context for engagements with the brand as a symbol of status, with regard to collective class identity; third, we discussed the respondents' associations of Starbucks' global status with quality and trustworthiness; and finally, we considered the use respondents make of Starbucks as a glocal bridge, offering perceived access to experiences of a Western way of life. To conclude, we now consider what our findings might tell us about the place of foreign brands in the construction of Chinese consumer identity.

Two major concerns in academic accounts of consumer culture have been the rise of a consuming subject, and the role of consumption in the formation of collective identities (Zukin & Smith Maguire, 2004). On the one hand, the historical development of consumer culture in the West has been understood as part of the broad project of modernity, linked to a long-term process of individualization, whereby identity becomes a

problem and a project. Consumption is thus understood as a field of norms, preferences and material and symbolic practices through which individuals undertake the obligation of self-production: to work on the problem of how to '*become* what one *is*' (Bauman, 2000, p. 32). On the other hand, the consuming subject is also engaged in the social reproduction of collective identities. Shared consumption preferences and practices, and negotiations around shared obstacles and opportunities to consume, are understood as part of how cultural categories and classification schemes are made manifest, including class, ethnicity and nationality (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont & Molnar, 2001; D. Miller, 1998). Consumption is thus positioned as a social process ideally suited to the modern problem of identity: it facilitates the accomplishment of individuality and distinction, as well as inclusion and belonging.

China's 'opening up' to Western goods and its shift to a market economy have created the conditions for a consumer culture, and one would expect these same concerns – with individual and collective identity – to contour how the Chinese engage with that emerging consumer culture. With these two dimensions in mind, we can see how our respondents selectively singularize specific Starbucks brand attributes as 'points of attachment' (McFall, 2009) for engaging with one or both of these 'problems' of identity. The 'fashion,' lifestyle and Western associations of the brand offer a tool for the projection of a particular sense of self, *as* an individual – someone 'quite modern' (LL) with 'individual characters and tastes' (CW). But at the same time, an individualized sense of self is bound up with the reproduction of collective identities, via class – to be seen as 'a modern young professional' (YS); via tradition – to enact cultural values of thrift and judiciousness in the marketplace by selecting a brand with a 'good reputation' that is 'trusted due to its global fame' (YaY); and via nationality – to actively partake as a consumer-citizen of a China 'connect[ed] to the outside world' (JW).

Thus, we see in our findings no inherent contradiction between individualism and collectivism, but rather negotiation between them. The relationship between collectivism and individualism is not a zero-sum game (Elfick, 2011, p. 206; Liu et al., 2011, p. 1246): it is the negotiation between them in the context of situated consuming practices that constitutes the problem of identity – be it in a Western or specifically Chinese consumer culture (Lin & Wang 2010; Tian & Dong, 2011). Similarly, the global and the local are not mutually exclusive categories; rather, foreign goods require a situated engagement between the local context (including cultural values, national identity and changing social structures) and notions of the global, the West and – in the case of Starbucks – 'America.'

As one of our respondents remarked, 'Starbucks is not a simple coffee shop' (CW). Through their narratives about Starbucks, our respondents work out the relative balance between these dimensions of individual and collective identity, the global and local. This is, more generally, what characterizes a consumer culture: a way of life in which tensions between competing cultural values and problems (which themselves will vary according to socio-cultural and historical context) are worked out by individuals in everyday life *through* consumption – through the practices of comparing, selecting, using and discarding consumer goods; through a consumer subjectivity that foregrounds issues of individuality (the obligation to choose) and collectivity (choosing in the right ways); and through interactions with institutions and regulations that enable and constrain notions of what is legitimate, good and proper. Our findings underline the need for further qualitative research on Chinese consumer culture as lived, social practice. That is, more attention to Chinese consumers' attitudes and experiences is required, to better conceptualize the global, local and glocal meaning and significance of foreign brands

as sites for the negotiation of China's traditional cultural values, its 'new' position in the worldwide community, and aspirations for China's future. Local, global and glocal; past, present and future: not a simple coffee shop, indeed.

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Notes

1. A related rendition of these debates instead regards the uptake of Western goods in China as heralding change in political culture. For example, a headline in *Beijing Today* asked (of a Chinese version of a popular Western music talent reality show): 'Is Super Girl a Force for Democracy?' (*The Economist*, 2005).
2. Interviews were translated literally (and thus will contain grammatical irregularities) in order to retain, as best as possible, the original content and sense of respondents' narratives.

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