

2-2073

Citation Information

Journal: Urban Geography

Article: Production/Consumption and the Chinese  
City/Region: Cultural Political Economy and the

Author: Cartier, Carolyn

ISSN: 0272-3638

EISSN:

Call #: GF125 .U73

Volume: 30

Issue: 4

Quarter:

Season:

Number:

Month:

Day:

Year: 2009

Pages: 368 - 390

Request ID: 788675



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PRODUCTION/CONSUMPTION AND THE CHINESE CITY/REGION:  
CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND  
THE FEMINIST DIAMOND RING<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The “consumer revolution” in the People’s Republic of China emerged after 1992 when the state deepened growth-oriented reform and justified individual consumption as a pillar of economic development. This examination of cultural–economic practices in urban China makes an argument for conceptualizing consumption in relation to production through a modified cultural political economy. It identifies a regional regime in the zone between Shanghai and Hong Kong, with the latter as China’s main center of trade in precious metals and gemstones, and citizen-consumer subject formation with “Chinese characteristics.” The argument builds on Chinese feminist theory to explain contrasts between PRC state ideology on women’s roles in the household and contemporary alternatives in the marketplace. Empirical analysis focuses on the large market for fine jewelry, its disassociation from heteronormative gifting, and its connection with leisure/tourism sites. Conclusions affirm the importance of a cultural political economy for theorizing production/consumption relations in the city, and query evolving consumerism in the PRC. [Key words: cultural political economy, consumption, jewelry industry, world city, Hong Kong, Shanghai.]

At the center of Main Street, U.S.A., in the Hong Kong Disneyland Resort, among the mix of casual restaurants, guest services, and shops selling various mouse-laden paraphernalia and other iconic tchotchkes, Midtown Jewelry features an array of gold, platinum, and diamond jewelry in Disney character designs, and traditional Chinese *chuk kam* (24-carat gold) objects including statuettes of Disney characters and the Magic Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Represented as an “anytown” gift store, Midtown Jewelry is a special branch

<sup>1</sup>Research undertaken for this paper was supported in part by a U.S. CIES-Fulbright Fellowship, held in the Department of Geography at Hong Kong Baptist University during 2005–2006. I am grateful to Kara Chan, Professor of Communications, Hong Kong Baptist University for providing jewelry industry advertising sources, and Hong Kong Baptist University student Joanne Lo Yuen-yi for conducting preliminary archival research. Discussions with Yin-wah Chu, Janet Salaff, and Elizabeth Sinn led to refinements in the analysis, but any limitations in the final interpretations are mine alone.

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<sup>3</sup>*Chuk kam* is the romanization of the Cantonese pronunciation of pure gold (足金), literally “jade gold,” and is widely used in the industry.

of the established Hong Kong fine jewelry firm, Chow Sang Sang, which holds a licensing agreement to produce the themed products. Among Disney parks worldwide, only Hong Kong Disneyland includes a fine jewelry shop, even though it is the newest and smallest park with the fewest number of visitors (Disneyland, 2004; Schuman, 2006; Patel, 2007). A high-end retail outlet, the jewelry store is an index of consumer interest, and a pivot on which it is possible to develop several general propositions about consumption in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and as constituted within the regional regime of production/consumption between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) and coastal cities of the PRC.

Chow Sang Sang's Midtown Jewelry at Hong Kong Disneyland is a representative microcosm of larger production/consumption relations taking place in urban China, as major cities of the high-growth coastal region transform into service centers, and especially leisure/tourism economies associated with the increasing size of the domestic market and consumption of nonessential goods, investment goods, and luxury products.

Without question consumerism is at present the most powerful ideology in China. The real key to this consumerism, a current if somewhat vague term, is that the consumption itself has become the end and not only a means. The emphasis of the whole society has transferred from production to consumption, so that the former is now guided by the latter, contrary to what had been the case in the planned economy. As to the individual, the value of one's work and labor would not be actualized until it has been transformed into consumption. In other words, consumption is equal to production because it can produce the status, worth, importance, and dignity of the consumer. (Zhu, 2004, p. 125)

From this perspective, all-out consumerism would be a national phenomenon in the PRC—but Zhu's characterization derives from Shanghai and a discussion of "city-maps" (*cheng ditu*), urban news magazines devoted to new urban lifestyles. Economic development in China is highly uneven, although Shanghai ranks highest in urban development among Mainland PRC cities and at the apex of consumer possibilities. Recognizing the problem of national-scale generalizations, this analysis contextualizes the new consumerism in places where it is most highly articulated—China's coastal cities. These relatively developed cities, anchored by Hong Kong and Shanghai, share historic as well as contemporary characteristics that make them regionally distinct leaders of urban change. The two cities mark the range of a highly internationalized and domestically networked coastal region, connected by a dynamic set of social, economic, and geopolitical relations that began to develop in the early 19th century (Cartier, 2001).

In the circuits of contemporary mobility between Hong Kong and Shanghai, consumption is a basic activity, and fine jewelry made from precious metals and gemstones constitutes a leading manufacturing and retail industry as well as artifact of consumer desire. Indeed, according to *The People's Daily* (2004, 2005), fine jewelry has become the new member of the *san da jian* (three big items) or the number three target of household consumption (replacing the personal computer), after private ownership of an apartment and an automobile. Since the postwar era, the Hong Kong region has been the East Asian center of trade in precious metals and gemstones and fine jewelry manufacturing. In the early 20th century, the gold trade centered on Guangzhou, inland from Hong Kong in the

Pearl River Delta, whereas trade in fine jewelry, especially gemstones, centered on Shanghai. In the early 2000s, the government of Shanghai began to attempt to reestablish this trade by promoting institutions to facilitate trade in precious metals and diamonds. This historic ebb and flow of economic activities outlines the formation of a discontinuous economic region in which, as the PRC closed to the capitalist world economy between 1949 and 1978, Hong Kong served as a significant center of relocation for merchant and industrial capital (Wong, 1988).

The following discussion presents an argument for analyzing consumption in relation to production through the fine jewelry industry in China's internationalized cities. It begins with theoretical perspectives followed by an empirical analysis and a set of conceptual and critical conclusions. First, the theoretical section develops an urban and regional approach to production/consumption that queries scholarship on the "cultural economy" and builds toward a cultural political economy—as an approach—with feminist characteristics. Next, the empirical account examines the dynamic geography of production/consumption realities and gendered consumption practices. This section argues for a cultural political economy that understands local and regional cultural practices in space and time, and based on archival research and urban ethnography including qualitative data obtained from focus-group interviews carried out in Hong Kong and Shanghai in 2006, and from firm interviews in Hong Kong in 2007.<sup>4</sup> It also necessarily introduces the history of the reform economy in the PRC, but from would-be normative world city-city/region accounts to contextualize production/consumption through perspectives on urban and regional culture, gender, and mobility. Finally, the concluding section raises questions about the promise and problems of Chinese consumerism, and points toward a cultural political economy of urban and regional production/consumption.

## THEORETICAL POSITIONS

### *Modernity and the World City*

The proliferation of the jewelry retail industry in Hong Kong reflects local and regional production and development, but not as traditional geography's ideography of the unique. Rather, it is to comprehend realities of urban and regional developmental trajectories and their social and economic transformations or "multiple modernities" (Esiensstadt, 2000), and in turn, the centrality of capitalist modernity in any stage of industrialization and class formation and its basis in the institutionalization of consumption as a pillar of domestic market development and social life. In the geographical literature, for example, Robert Sack (1992) has argued for assessing the fundamental relationship between modernity and place through consumption. In assessing European mercantilism

<sup>4</sup>Qualitative information from firm and focus-group interviews informs the overall research design. Firm interviews were conducted with principals of jewelry firms handling large stones in the Central District of Hong Kong, and addressed the production process. The focus groups, one each in Hong Kong and Shanghai, addressed consumption values and decision making. The groups were made up of 12 women; most were employed professionals who had completed some tertiary education while those unemployed members were their mothers or older relatives. Shanghai focus group participants were initially identified through members of the Hong Kong group, which reflects the history of migration from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

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and industrial expansion, Werner Sombart (1967) examined urban demand for luxury goods as a principal cause of capital expansion and its realization in the urban built environment.

Across East and Southeast Asia, industrial modernity has proceeded unevenly and in stages from the late 19th century to the present, while the shift to urban service industries, from Japan to Singapore to South Korea to Thailand, is largely a phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century. This shift occurred later in China (after 1978) and thus roughly corresponds to the onset of the global economy's phase of late capitalism. Despite the relatively recent emergence of consumer modernity, high-rent commercial districts, including Shanghai—characterized by pulsing crowds, sleek shopping malls, and world brands—give the appearance of global consumerism, which has been widely treated through the lens of postmodern urbanism (cf. Baudrillard, 1975, 1998; Featherstone, 1991; Clarke, 1997, 2003; Zukin, 1998; Lash and Lury, 2007). Such treatments generally assume a break with cities as centers of manufacturing production and tend to make assumptions about pan-urban lifestyles.

Yet the literature on consumption in Asia concurs that political economic contexts and cultural practices vary within the region as well as by comparison to cities in other world regions (cf. Chua, 2000; Davis, 2000; Croll, 2006; Latham et al., 2006; Goodman 2008a). The state in Asia also maintains power in diverse political economic and social arenas. As Chua Beng-Huat (2000, p. 19) has observed,

it should be apparent that the discourse on consumption in the countries of East and Southeast Asia is still very much tied to issues of their respective political economies. This serves as a corrective to the ... conceptual concerns of contemporary European and American studies of consumption, where the context of an already developed economy is explicitly assumed.

In effect, it should not be possible to draw conclusions about the realities of consumption in Asia without embedding the analysis in a local and regional cultural political economy. Urban and regional realities demand a theoretical and empirical analysis that delves beyond the surface appearance of things.

#### *Problems of the Cultural Economy*

This proposition for a contextual and relational assessment between production/consumption in the city/region arises from five main problems. First, considerable writing on consumption in human geography and related fields more often concerns urban spectacle and place representation, such as themed environments and venues of the so-called postmodern built environment, than located and contextual logics of consumption and how and why they fuel an industry. Furthermore, the theoretical literature on consumption and the city, as above, largely assumes that production has left town. Rather, we have in Hong Kong the continued presence of manufacturing design and high-end production, and the relocation of standardized manufacturing production within the Hong Kong–Shanghai production/consumption region.

Second, economic geographies of production rarely consider consumption and thus short-circuit cultural practices and symbolic meanings in located contexts, producing

“geographies of nowhere.” Fine jewelry consumption in Hong Kong and China continues to be replete with cultural economic meaning, trailing histories of gender-specific ritual and property rights. Third, geographers concerned with the fundamentals of the urban process also demonstrate disinterest in the role of consumption in driving fundamental capital processes, even as we know that household consumption regularly accounts for upward of two-thirds of annual GDP in developed economies. This no doubt reflects the binary between literatures on production and consumption and lack of sustained effort to integrate their causal processes and dialectical relations. Fourth, recent work on the cultural economy—which would appear to provide the basis for urban economic analysis—does not treat cultural practices and knowledges or factors of difference; on the contrary, it treats culture via brands or cultural content in products of the information and knowledge-based economy. By contrast, sociologists and anthropologists are producing critical interpretations of class that incorporate both cultural and economic conditions, transcending the historic Weberian–Marxian divide in urban studies (Hanser, 2008). And fifth, in its two-word phraseology, cultural economy also tends to neglect the political in political economy. Normative analyses of China under reform in the geographical literature assume that China is experiencing transition to a market economy and therefore seek evidence of state retreat and market advance. In reality, the PRC state apparatus is enlarging in some sectors and retains power over critical aspects of reform transformation, including production and consumption.

Contemporary treatments of cultural economy in geography (e.g., Scott, 2000; Amin and Thrift, 2007; Lerner, 2007) tend to reproduce these problems. For example, one central topic associated with the concept of “creative industries” is largely a renaming of service industries in the knowledge-based economy. Even as some treatments include fashion and artisanal manufacturing (Scott, 2007), the inherent cultural concept, such as it is, equates to appropriation of unique design content for the product. As one critical review of the concept finds, this largely economic work tends to make loose equations with “a singular ‘cultural’ or ‘creative’ economy or city” (Gibson and Kong, 2007, p. 549). In its slippage between the meanings of culture and creativity, the concept elides culture as well as the urbanization process—taking us simultaneously to a world city and nowhere. In these formulations, what is culture is referential, signed, and commodified—the commodity’s “cool”—and we often do not know whether we are in Sydney or Seoul. Such work is not without recognition of its limitations: “What seems to be strangely absent from most writing on cultural economy is an importation of ‘cultural’ perspectives, those poststructural/feminist insights that have unsettled understandings of ‘the economic’ in economic geography more generally” (Gibson and Kong, 2007, p. 555). Although one might hear back from the economic geographer—“wait, I never intended to deal with *culture*”—distancing from the possibilities of difference contributes to flattening the world city landscape and discursive reproduction of a global neoliberal subject. Work in the cultural economy vein has also stopped short of defining the cultural political economy, with some exceptions. Bob Jessop’s (2004, 2005) formulation of the cultural political economy depends on the idea of a knowledge-based economy, and either its discursive conditions and/or its contexts in the U.S.- and Atlantic corridor-based model of intellectual property rights and information industries.

If we ask about the knowledge-based economy in the PRC, the Ministry of Information Industry oversees the project to transform China into a developed information economy.

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But the reality of the Party-state's surveillance over information and its circulation makes informatization an inadequate context for conceptualizing what is culture. The PRC has also adopted a creative industries policy (Keane, 2007), and as one of the design industries in contemporary China, fine jewelry production is a creative industry in the new cultural economy lexicon. Shanghai promotes revival of the jewelry industry in these terms, while the Hong Kong government also has adopted a creative industries platform to highlight the design component of its fashion industries (Home Affairs Bureau, 2005). This analysis, instead, develops an alternative to the normative world cities discourse in order to focus perspectives that break through the "flattening" treatment of globalization, the one that finds similar places and processes at stake no matter whether we are in Mumbai, New York, or Shanghai.

In order to pursue a cultural agenda, we look instead to realities of cultural meanings and practices in the Chinese city under reform, causes of cultural continuity and change, and their integration with complex processes of consumption and production. This treatment, in its concern with a particular industry, points to a spectrum of cultural dimensions, their embeddedness in social life, and their expression and interpellation in economic decisions, practices, and institutions. In the broad sense, this concerns culture as meanings and values embedded in daily life contexts and as a signifying system, including contexts of personal and household activities, social relations, and familial and professional institutions. Such a perspective provides the basis for assessing culture geographically and anthropologically (i.e., in local values and knowledges associated with places and as invested in actual things, whose production and consumption give rise to social meaning in urban life). These priorities draw from a lineage of intellectual thought tied to Raymond Williams (cf. 1958, 1980, 1982) and interpretations of his work in urban and cultural geography (e.g., Agnew et al., 1984; Jackson, 1989; Harvey, 1995, 2001; Mitchell, 2000). In *The City in Cultural Context*, Agnew et al. (1984, pp. 2–4) introduced the cultural context as a basis for resolving binary formulations of geographical knowledge (i.e., structure and agency, Eurocentrism and [anticultural] structural Marxism). Contemporary research concerning class, drawing on the work of Bourdieu, also argues for transcending the structure and agency dualism (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Such perspectives are at stake here, and as a basis for problematizing the production/consumption dilemma and any notion of an "East–West" binary. In the process, this approach can ground semiotic representations of products and things, yielding perspectives on how "commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge" (Appadurai, 1986, p. 41) in diverse cultural contexts and phases of development.

In an era of cultural studies, complex understandings of social, material, and symbolic worlds have decisively influenced human geography's concerns with positions of difference and knowledge formation, and how diverse knowledges are evaluated in the context of power relations (Mitchell, 2000). In contemporary China, the conceptualization of class itself—especially what is middle class—is under debate. The "new rich," or those with wealth sufficient to allow disposable income, often have Party–state connections, so a liberal democratic concept of class does not reliably map on to the Chinese case (Goodman, 2008b, 2008c). Ideas about what is feminist have also witnessed substantial debate during the reform period (Barlow, 2004). Recent research in Chinese urban sociology examining both cultural and economic contexts of class formation finds how "key social divisions—along the lines of class, gender and even generation—solidify in the course of [consumer]

service interactions,” producing Bourdieu’s social distinctions (Hanser, 2008, p. 3). This analysis, in making connections across typically disconnected fields, draws on such gender and class perspectives in China studies, and simultaneously recognizes how certain topics and approaches are accepted in particular fields of scholarship while others are not. For example, rendering this project in terms of “shopping for jewelry,” performed as a snide comment, would serve as a discursive marginalization. Feminist analyses of globalization, however, have identified such tactics. In reflection on feminist critiques of historiography, for example, Nagar et al. (2002, p. 258) have queried, “How is it that only certain parts of the process [economic globalization] have entered the lexicon while others remain neglected?” Moreover, against the contemporary onslaught of patriarchal neoliberalism and its erasure of feminist values, we need to recall that a feminist approach also often prioritizes relational, contextual, and grounded research—and certainly not at the expense of theory (Nagar et al., 2002, pp. 258–259).

#### URBAN/REGIONAL FORMATION AND PRODUCTION/CONSUMPTION

The rapid transformation of city and society in China complicates understandings of production/consumption, urban conditions, class and gender relations, and cultural knowledges because values, practices, and priorities in urban society have been subject to multiple extraordinary upheavals since the end of the imperial era in 1911. Indeed, across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese city has been the geographic focus of political–ideological debates over production and consumption. In the first half of the century, cities were sites of state projects to promote modernization through domestic industrial development, which included various consumer campaigns to support Chinese-made goods (Gerth, 2003). After the Chinese Communist Party took control in 1949, the Party-state sought to transform “consumer cities” into “producer cities” (Murphey, 1980). Impacts of this Maoist vision included a dearth of investment in the built environment of the coastal cities, especially Shanghai, and the socialization of the urban population as productive masses, whose appearance of laboring uniformity, in the Mao suit, symbolized the realities of the state-planned economy and a political barrier to individual consumption. The reconstruction of cities in China under reform is nothing less than the production of vast new urban landscapes for emerging citizen-consumer subjectivity.

As centers of the new services sector and retail economy, China’s major cities are primary sites of the state-sanctioned consumer revolution.

In 1992 Deng Xiaoping went south and gave a series of lectures known as the Southern Excursion Talks to speed up the market economy. That year marked the beginning of a Chinese “consumer revolution” and the making of a popular culture that has cultivated consumers’ desires for soap operas, fast food, convertibles, and much more. Culture has gone hip for some. Lifestyles are in. A new common sense is born: cultural capital and economic capital are mutually transformative. (Wang, 2000, p. 1)

In the early 1990s, the macroeconomy was at a pivotal point. The Tiananmen Incident in 1989 had left serious doubts about the political economy of reform. The country also increasingly required development of a national market to sustain and stabilize growth. In

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response, the PRC sought to deepen the reform trajectory by turning pro-consumer and exhorting the otherwise high-saving population to go out and spend (Croll, 2006, pp. 269–270). Consumerism became a veritable policy arena.

Crucibles of Chinese consumption, Hong Kong and Shanghai are cities at the apex of Chinese modernity and development, whether examined historically or assessed by contemporary measures, such as the UN Human Development Index (among Chinese cities, Hong Kong ranks first, Shanghai second). Their surrounding economic regions, the Pearl River Delta and the Yangzi River Delta, respectively, led the PRC's first two decades of export-oriented production, while most of the rest of the country remained closed to foreign investment. The geographical specificity of reform—centered in the city-regions of the South China coast, beginning with Shenzhen on the Hong Kong border, was, from the state's economic development perspective, a path-dependent decision that drew on the historic cultural political economy of the region (Cartier, 2001).

Among later entrepôts in the integral Asian regional trade, Hong Kong and Shanghai were wrenched into the mid-19th century imperialist globalizing economy by the Treaty of Nanjing as well as the Opium War settlement of 1842, which ceded Hong Kong to Britain and opened Shanghai and four additional southern ports, including Guangzhou in the Pearl River Delta, to foreign trade as “treaty ports.” Hong Kong was a free port from the start. It and Shanghai became interconnected through governing institutions, transport and communications systems, and trade and migration networks, and thus one among regions with long histories of connection with global processes. Their contemporary globalization, including transnational investment networks and human capital expertise in trade and finance, even stereotyped in such outlooks as “the practical nature of the mercantile Chinese,” is the current phase of a set of historic social processes that was affirmed by the opening of the PRC to the world economy after 1978.

A certain unrequited character of the Hong Kong–Shanghai relationship lies in economic competitiveness and comparative regional imaginations about leadership, achievement, and distinction, whether measured by business and finance, property development, skyscrapers and modern infrastructure, or style, fashion, and cuisine. Scholarship on the region commonly pairs the cities in comparative perspective (e.g., Abbas, 2000; Wong et al., 2004) and as rivals (e.g., Chan, 1996; Schenk, 1998). Shanghai initiated reform in the 1990s, not so much by redefining the new Chinese city as by building multiple Hong Kongs (*Tokyo Business Today*, 1992; *The Economist*, 2002). As 1997 loomed and Hong Kong assessed its fate—summed up in the sardonic observation that the city would be trading one colonial power for another—critical observers of the region had already noted a certain “northbound colonialism” (Hung, 1997; Law, 2000), or the influence of Hong Kong modernity on Mainland China. By the 2000s, restructuring in Shanghai led to a new round of economic competition with Hong Kong, including the trade in precious metals and diamonds.

#### *Production/Consumption: Urbanization of the Industry*

The production of fine jewelry and precious metals in Asia is an historic urban trade based in the region's port cities. The industry has restructured within the city-region under reform, maintaining a significant urban presence in Hong Kong and Shanghai. This section examines facets of the urbanization and regionalization of the industry, especially



Fig. 1. *Chuk kam* figurines, Hong Kong. Source: Photograph by the author (December 20, 2008).

the manufacturing and urban retail contexts of actual products and as the interface with consumption demand!

In Hong Kong, branches of fine jewelry firms effectively decorate the main retail trade districts of the city, Central District on Hong Kong Island and Tsimshatsui and Mongkok on the Kowloon Peninsula. Shop windows glitter with Hong Kong specialties: large and colored stones, *pavé* diamonds, and dark green jades set in 18-carat gold or platinum, as well as a startling array of objects in dark yellow 24-carat gold. These *chuk kam* objects, including traditional forms and styles as well as contemporary anthropomorphized animals and figurines, are a Chinese specialty (Fig. 1). Several industry organizations in the city support production and trade in precious metals and fine jewelry, including the Chinese Gold and Silver Exchange Society, the Hong Kong Jewelers' and Goldsmiths' Association, the Hong Kong Jewelry Manufacturers' Association, the Hong Kong Jewelry and Jade Manufacturers' Association, and the Hong Kong Trade and Development Council (HKTDC). The HKTDC sponsors annual jewelry industry fairs, which rank as the largest in Asia and among the top three in the world.

Fine jewelry and *chuk kam* in Hong Kong are synonymous with the companies Chow Tai Fook and Chow Sang Sang. Each firm maintains multiple outlets on Nathan Road in Mongkok, the traditional Chinese shopping district. Chow Tai Fook, Hong Kong's oldest and largest manufacturing and retail jewelry firm, originally traded gold in Guangzhou in the 1920s and gained its reputation by establishing the 999.9 pure yellow gold form of

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*chuk kam* that has become the industry standard. Chow Sang Sang also has roots in Guangzhou and moved to Hong Kong in the 1940s. Although they originally specialized in gold and jade, both firms have become De Beers sightholders, or two among less than 100 diamond manufacturers worldwide allowed to purchase "rough" from De Beers' Diamond Trading Corporation. With restructuring in the Pearl River Delta after the opening to foreign investment, these firms shifted their standardized design manufacturing to lower-cost regional locations. Retail expansion followed into China. Chow Sang Sang's branches are primarily in nearby Guangdong Province, whereas Chow Tai Fook has pursued a nationwide strategy, opening 500 jewelry stores in medium- and large-sized cities across the PRC (Chow Tai Fook, 2006). Not unlike high-technology production, new designs and high value products are still manufactured in the industry's Hong Kong core, in Hung Hom on Kowloon side, as well as in Central District high-rise workshops where staggering rents, among the highest in the world, are less a concern than maintaining control and security over some of the world's largest stones (Interviews, 2006).

But the vast majority of diamonds manufactured in China are small, typically 0.01–0.15 carats, reflecting the mass production/mass consumption conditions of the industry. Most jobs in manufacturing, especially diamond cutting and metalwork, are gendered male and pay wages that are predictably higher than those of female-gendered manufacturing jobs. Firms in Hong Kong have also developed the lower-end regional market, especially MaBelle, one of Hong Kong's more ubiquitous brands, which promoted the "everyday life diamond" and the "\$1,000 diamond ring" (US\$129) in the 1990s (MaBelle, 2005). The average price of most diamond jewelry sold in the Mainland during the early and mid-2000s was under 1,000 *yuan* (US\$122 in 2005), though up to 2000 *yuan* in Shanghai (HKTDC, 2002; Yuan, 2005). Yet the demand for large diamonds is increasing rapidly in the PRC because they have become first among investment targets for the new rich (HKTDC, 2008).

Since the early 2000s, Shanghai has gradually facilitated the PRC's trade in precious metals and diamonds. The International Platinum Association established offices in Shanghai in 1992, and by 2002 China had become the world's number one consumer of platinum, displacing Japan (Han, 2002). Deregulation of the gold market proceeded with the PRC's membership in the World Trade Organization. The Shanghai Gold Exchange opened in 2002, and by 2007 individual consumers were able to purchase gold bullion (*Shanghai Daily*, 2007). The PRC itself is a major producer of gold, ranked third in the world in 2006 after South Africa and the United States. The Shanghai Diamond Exchange was established in 2000, and began to see activity in 2007 after the state abolished value-added taxes on imported rough diamonds and cut the tax on refined diamonds from 17% to 4% (*Xinhua*, 2007). China became a member of the Kimberley Process in 2003, the international agreement to control conflict diamonds. Thus the development of favorable conditions for the trade and production of precious metals and fine jewelry exhibits central state coordination and provincial-level institutionalization (Shanghai is one of four municipalities in the Chinese administrative system that is ruled directly by the central government). Shanghai's emergence as a center for metals and diamond trade demonstrates the city's vertical organization plans for the industry, from commodity trading to local manufacturing and retail expansion, which reactivates its early-20th-century role before the concentration of the industry in Hong Kong.

The role of Shanghai as a rising center of trade in diamonds and precious metals is also evident in plans for the consumer landscape. In 2006, the local government of Huangpu District, the area behind the historic Bund whose major axis is Nanjing Road, Shanghai's traditional shopping artery, announced a "5-3" plan for retail redevelopment (*Shanghai Morning Post*, 2006): five gold consumption areas and three jewelry design and production zones, including the existing Shanghai Urban Industrial Design Center and Shanghai Tourist Souvenirs and Handicrafts Design Center, in addition to a stone and jewelry exhibition site for the new diamond consumer. Through this plan, Shanghai seeks to place higher value products in existing facilities, transforming craft goods centers with traditional characteristics into creative industry centers for luxury goods with global investment characteristics. Shanghai adopted a creative industries policy in 2006 that prioritizes information industries and fashion and home design as a basis for increasing urban production and consumption (HKTDC, 2006).

*Production/Consumption: The New Diamond Consumer*

Production/consumption processes in city/regions take place in contexts and networks that link firms, people, and places at a distance. Global consumer studies theorize how societies develop interests in positional goods and Veblen's "conspicuous consumption" through world brands and their symbolic circulation, but such a global perspective fails to recognize local and regionally based regimes of production/consumption, and the role of cultural-political-economy histories and their contexts at an apprehensible distance. Indeed, the latter regularly informs understanding of how people acquire knowledge about desirable things, and make consumption decisions about things produced in places of comparative modernity and development (James, 1987). We learn about realities of these formations from the region's discerning consumers.

In a group interview of 12 women of mixed ages and professional backgrounds conducted in Shanghai, a 30-year-old office manager explained that when her father went on a business trip to Hong Kong, in 2002, she dispatched him with cash to purchase her diamond solitaire wedding ring (Interviews, 2006). Compared to assumptions of "Western" cultural norms, she had no primary interest in whether her fiancé purchased the ring or made a ritual presentation of it. What mattered most to her was that the quality of the materials would be excellent and the design would be contemporary—which has been the prevailing reputation of consumer goods in Hong Kong in the collective mind of the knowledgeable, prudent consumer in China. The woman took charge of the purchase decision—not by purchasing herself—but by ensuring that the purchase was made in the region's leading center of fine jewelry production/consumption. No one in the focus group of 12 participants contradicted her decision, although three women said that they liked the romantic perspective and would want their fiancé to ritually present the ring—after it was brought back from Hong Kong.

Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the PRC in 1997 according to the "one country-two systems" policy platform. This SAR maintains a distinct citizenship system, documented by Hong Kong Permanent Resident identification cards and SAR-PRC passports, either of which is required to cross the border from Hong Kong into Mainland China. Most Hong Kong residents can cross the border at will, but citizens of the PRC cannot travel freely into Hong Kong, which reflects the

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differential levels of development between Hong Kong and the Mainland and the state's recognition of the desirability of the Hong Kong standard of living. Thus after the 1984 Joint Declaration, which defined the timetable for the Hong Kong handover in 1997, Hong Kong became an attractive yet unattainable destination for citizens of the PRC. At first, only small numbers of officials on government travel and other VIPs were able to gain a visa to enter Hong Kong. Yet no matter their status or travel purpose, the opportunity was widely understood, on both sides of the border, as "the shopping trip." Hong Kong's famous malls and quality shopping presented a fully developed landscape of consumer goods, whereas Mainland cities were just starting to rebuild.

By the 1990s, the border opened to tour groups and Hong Kong became the primary and most common destination for business and leisure travelers outside the Mainland (Croll, 2006). Then in 2003, in the aftermath of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crisis, and in the wake of the 1997–1999 regional financial downturn, Hong Kong and Beijing agreed to implement the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to increase economic activity between Hong Kong and the Mainland. CEPA also established the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS). Not unlike the geographic trajectory of reform itself, the IVS scheme first became available to residents of the relatively wealthy coastal cities in the Pearl River Delta, followed by Beijing and Shanghai. By 2007 the scheme included all 21 cities in Guangdong Province, three cities each in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian provinces, two cities in Liaoning, and 13 inland provincial capitals. Partly as a consequence, Hong Kong has now become a relatively regular business and leisure destination for Pearl River Delta residents, and the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb, 2007a, p. 33) calls such multiple short journeys "consumption visits." In contrast to HKTb representations of Hong Kong as an "East meets West" experience for the international tourist, the Board specifically markets Hong Kong to the PRC as a shopping destination for "office ladies" and professionals (Sum and So, 2004; Cartier, 2008). In the mid-2000s, three-quarters of Chinese outbound travel was to the Hong Kong and Macau SARs, while Hong Kong's 40% of the national total accounted for just over half of its ca. 25 million annual visitors (HKTb, 2007b, 2007c).

The IVS scheme is also designed to spur travel during so called "Golden Weeks." In 2000, the State Council and the National Tourism Administration announced three week-long holidays commencing with Chinese New Year, the May 1 Labor Day holiday, and October 1 National Day, which quickly became the leading periods for domestic leisure and overseas tourism. "Golden Week" is more than an auspicious name. As a survey in five Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Dalian) by the HKTDC (2002) confirmed, "consumers have the habit of visiting jewelry shops, especially on holidays. The peak seasons occur at the three 'golden weeks'." Even though Hong Kong companies do not maintain sales data on individual customer place of origin, general figures for the mid-2000s hold that Mainland visitor expenditures on jewelry accounted for up to 50% of a Hong Kong firm's total sales during Golden Weeks (e.g., *Xinhua*, 2005; Horscroft, 2007).<sup>5</sup> The Hong Kong brands Chow Tai Fook and Chow Sang

<sup>5</sup>In 2007, the State Council shortened the May Day Golden Week to three days and designated alternative national holidays throughout the year as a partial solution to problems of overwhelming travel and leisure services demand in concentrated week-long periods.

Sang are also the most popular and highly regarded among Mainland Chinese consumers (HKTDCC, 2002, p. 14). In 2006, in the PRC, sales of jewelry in the category "gold, silver, and jewelry" increased 28.5% over 2005, higher than all other categories including automobiles (26.3%), construction and interior decoration (24%), and electronics (19.2%; Lan, 2007).

### *Consumer Subjectivity and Shifting Feminisms*

As introduced above, poststructural feminist perspectives hold potential to inform the cultural arena of cultural political economy. These perspectives include the social construction of gender and differential positions of age, class, and sexuality that shape individual and collective identities and realities of citizenship experience. Citizen-subjectivity in China is also defined by *hukou*, the registered permanent residence system that has prevented rural migrants from attaining full citizenship status in cities. Nonetheless, research on gender in contemporary China demonstrates that women especially are experiencing pressures of the market economy, pressures to negotiate and embody the new possibilities of consumption as symbolic modernity and through the commodification of appearance (cf. Rofel, 1999; Schein, 1999; Zhang, 2000; Pun, 2003; Hanser, 2008). This complex set of issues comes together in scaled perspective (i.e., from central state directives to individual citizen subjectivity) when we consider how state governance has encompassed disciplinary and citizen reform, including gendered labor policy and the molding of citizen-consumer subjects to promote expansion of the domestic market.

The state's promotion of individual consumption plays out in diverse arenas. For example, in 1995 China shortened the official work week from six days to five, and simultaneously promoted leisure and consumer activities associated with molding "civil(ized)" (*wenming*) citizen behavior, especially activities characterized by educated consumer lifestyles (Wang, 2001). (This was the era of the personal computer as the number three "big item.") At the same time, the new retail economy intersected with the global arena of fashion and youth culture, quickly filling up the new consumer landscapes with a vast array of consumption experiences and retail services. In the process, the eager youthful consumer emerged as the prime embodied site of representational modernity and social mobility (Rofel, 1999; Zhang, 2000). These consumer tensions intersect the political economy through the state-promoted "spiritual civilization" (*jingsheng wenming*) campaign, which was originally conceptualized to counterbalance negative social impacts of the market economy. By promoting values like civic moral order and modern urban infrastructure, the ongoing spiritual civilization campaign forms an arena for pro-consumer policies (Lewis, 2002). Consequently, the process of becoming an information-savvy consumer-citizen takes diverse forms, and is facilitated by an incredible array of information on consumer products and decision-making, effective "how to" guides for selecting basic goods as well as for demonstrating taste in positional and luxury goods. These include specialized magazines, product exhibitions and fairs, television infomercials, and effective guidebooks for particular products and luxury items. Such immersion in consumer-information-as-discerning-knowledge combines with leisure consumption experience to produce "consumer-ability," and its place on the map of feminisms in contemporary China.

Like elsewhere, popular and academic perspectives on feminism and gender in China have increasingly diversified, reflecting differences in women's realities (Zhong, 2006; Schaffer and Song, 2007). In the early reform period, however, Chinese feminism accommodated "hypermasculinization" of the reform economy and the state's ideological policy outlook on solving the problem of urban unemployment by urging women to return to the domestic sphere. Among these, Li Xiaojiang's so-called market feminism developed an influential, state-aligned interpretation of the role of women as the new domestic consumers, linking "economic reform, female subjectivity, domestic service, the erotic agency of women, and the question of consumer choice to macroeconomic concerns about labor surplus, political demobilization, and urban development" (Barlow, 2004, p. 296). The problem, according to Li, was Maoist de-emphasis of women's sexuality, which could be recovered under reform by reinscribing women's roles in the household and through consumer practices expressing gender difference. Women would consume what the new economy produced. Such consumer feminism promoted commercialized forms of self-expression and the implication that gender equity could be achieved only under conditions of material satisfaction.

This idea of market feminism trails a symbolic history of gender relations, including the *nei/wai* (inner/outer) realms of society in imperial China in which the *nei* context or household is the proper world of women—or the circumscribed arena of proper women. Contemporary challenges to the state-household axis of market feminism are found in other economic spaces where a generation of women who grew up under reform is defining alternatives to patriarchal interests of the state-capital alliance. Prominent among these is the elite professional marketplace and its representations of new urban lifestyles, which includes substantial writing in the genre of so-called glam girls or "China Dolls," "whose explorations of women's beauty, allure and sexual prowess in popular fiction and on the Internet subvert the repressions of the past and attract a wide following amongst the young" (Schaffer and Song, 2007, p. 21). This version of market feminism does not stay at home. On one hand, critics find this new urban woman wrapped up in commodity fetishism and no less seduced by the state's pro-consumerism (Wang, 2001); on the other, such positioning gives women "a new powerful sensibility that challenges the identification of Chinese national culture with masculinity" (Zhang, 1999, p. 334). In between these apparent extremes, as I ultimately argue below, is the discerning female consumer, a citizen-consumer whose consumption practices demonstrate a cultural political economy of values that draws on the historic strength of a woman's cultural right, defined in the context of the patriarchal household and family system, to keep personal assets in jewelry and related objects.

If we take the profile of the average PRC visitor to Hong Kong, *she* (57% of Mainland visitors were women in 2006) is in her mid-30s, married, college-educated and employed (HKTB, 2007b). By national comparisons, she is among the relatively well off economic elite. She was on a single-destination repeat leisure trip to Hong Kong and traveled under the IVS scheme with friends or family members. Her primary activity was shopping and her main purchases were clothing and fine jewelry. She was from Guangdong, likely Guangzhou or Shenzhen or from Shanghai or Beijing. Here, as above, no matter which statistics we assess, the consumption of fine jewelry in China is increasing significantly, more than other personal and household durable goods. As far back as 2002, 26% of women in 17 Chinese cities already owned a piece of platinum jewelry (Courage, 2004).

Although the PRC retail jewelry market is emerging, Mainland consumers have reasons for continuing to shop in Hong Kong. The cost of fine jewelry continues to be the absolute lowest in the region because of the SAR's tax-free importing of metals and stones. Its history as a world gold commodity exchange makes local trade in 24-carat gold common practice among individuals and firms. Thus whether based on need or desire, that 24-carat gold Hello Kitty Switzerland model armed with snow skis can be sold for cash, or traded for Hello Kitty Mexico, the model topped by a sombrero and cradling a guitar. As seen above, the industry's latest designs are available primarily in Hong Kong. The city's highly regulated and service-oriented retail sector also provides strong assurance during the purchase as well as enduring guarantees. No matter the customer or cost of the object of purchase, sales associates attentively supervise the transaction from start to finish, up to several hours, explaining details of design, quality, and materials—transferring knowledge—offering comparisons and patience while the customer, often accompanied by family members, considers the decision. Commodity fetishization is high during the transaction, while the experience exudes learning and appreciation—producing the discerning consumer—in a three-way circuit between customers, precious things, and shop associates as representatives of the precious things. As Hanser's (2008) research demonstrates, the transaction across the sales counter in contemporary China is a prime site where social distinctions involving class, gender, and generational inequalities are performed and legitimated—and in which people learn to perceive inequality in terms of identity difference rather than through the realities of economic inequality. Consuming with distinction has become a context for building social distinction in urban China.

However, it is not possible to fully comprehend the significance of contemporary purchasing practices without understanding their historic counterparts. Jewelry consumption draws on ideas associated with classical connoisseurship of “precious objects,” which represent a history of elite interests in valuable miniatures (Clunas, 2004). Such precious objects were not considered unto themselves but socially contextualized within highly articulated distributions of knowledge. The consumption of such precious objects established positions of social difference in an era of extraordinary change, in which concern with authenticity and value was more important than mere appearance or esthetics. Such emphasis informs an understanding of why high precious metal content (e.g., 18-, 22-, and 24-carat gold jewelry) is standard in Hong Kong, and anything less is considered unworthy. It also informs demand for highest-quality diamonds in the PRC, and why, as above, in the early 2000s a Shanghai woman would opt to have her father purchase a diamond in Hong Kong. An etymological relationship between precious objects (*baobei*, 寶貝) and jewelry is evident through the character *bao* (寶), which means treasure or precious, and which is present in the character compounds for jewelry (*zhubao*, 珠寶) and jewel or gemstone (*baoshi*, 寶石), as well as in valuable (*baogui*, 寶貴).

Historically, jewelry is understood to have been unalloyed yellow gold, and gold jewelry was the “real money” (Gates, 1985) over the centuries leading up to the reform period. The old traditional gold jewelry was soft and symbolic—the predecessor to contemporary *chuk kam*—not worn except on special occasions, especially at the marriage ceremony when the bride would appear adorned in as much of it as her family could afford. Through dowry practices, gold jewelry was a form of wealth transfer at marriage, displayed publicly as a means of constructing status within communities. It was also a

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particular form of wealth transfer to daughters, and sometimes sisters, in the context of an otherwise patriarchal inheritance structure. Even though we might expect that traditional dowry wealth would become the property of the married household unit, as far back as the Tang dynasty (6th–9th centuries A.D.), dynastic law on dowry property held that “personal items (e.g., clothing and jewelry) which constituted the bride’s trousseau ... were always considered the bride’s personal property” (McCreary, 1976, pp. 168–169). A woman would be expected to sell the jewelry in hard times to meet family needs, but otherwise it was hers to keep and to give, as she wished, to daughters and other relatives (Chan, 2006). Such an outlook on jewelry wealth is not particularly unique to China, whereas it is the one reliable challenge to patriarchal wealth transfer in the traditional family system.

What is regionally different about consumption of fine jewelry and precious metals in China is that women in contemporary Asia more commonly purchase their own fine jewelry and *chuk kam* objects (HKTDC, 2002; Interviews, 2006; Hudson, 2007). Regional advertising reflects the reality of the “self-purchase market” and addresses women directly, including through images of the successful single woman. For example, Chow Tai Fook’s campaign for its “Achievement Collection” in Hong Kong and Shanghai during 2006–2007 featured celebrity single Karen Mok (Karen Joy Morris) gazing out above a “Love Yourself, Buy It for Yourself” tagline. When I interviewed principals of firms handling large stones in Hong Kong’s Central District, I found myself confronted by related perspectives: “What kind of jewelry do you have?” “What, you don’t have diamond jewelry; what are you doing, waiting for a man to give it to you? How American!” This reliable disassociation of the purchase of jewelry from heteronormative gift giving is common across the region. While De Beers Corporation, through its retail arm DTC, promotes diamond jewelry consumption through romantic themes—in order to enlarge market demand—it has also learned the difference. One of its television commercials in China’s major cities, called “The Map” in the company’s line-up of commercials, features a youngish couple driving through the French countryside in a Porsche convertible, heading toward a chateau. (Europe is the current hot destination for the newly rich in China.) The 20-something man, in the passenger seat, unfolds a map to check directions while the woman driver accelerates, blowing the map away. The camera zooms in on her, looking just a little older and more self-possessed than her companion, and then focuses on her right index finger, curled along the steering wheel, on which she wears a sizeable diamond solitaire set in platinum or white gold. The message seems clear: this is not an engagement or wedding ring. Did she buy it herself? A voiceover concludes the spot, socializing the man: “diamonds and women—you have to pay attention to them.”

From Mainlanders in Mongkok to young Hong Kong singles with disposable income, women across the region are buying valuable jewelry disproportionately in comparison to other discretionary purchases. Many of these items are fashionable everyday designs, representing current velocities of consumption, but they are also investment purchases in the tradition of *chuk kam*. Jewelry historically represents a woman’s inheritance from her natal family, backed by property rights, and so it symbolizes a form of wealth to which she is entitled. Traditional dowry practices have substantially declined in Hong Kong (Chan, 2006), yet contemporary women in the labor force may still receive *chuk kam*-style gifts at marriage while they now adapt the practice of acquiring and keeping valuable jewelry through their own economic power.

Women are also the primary consumers of the contemporary *chuk kam* statuettes, the little gold animals and other objects. For example, half of the sales at the Hong Kong Disneyland Midtown Jewelry store, including the gold Mickeys, have been driven by demand of Hong Kong women shoppers alone and an additional 20% by Mainland visitors (Seno, 2005). Younger women in their early twenties as well as women in their forties and fifties are consumers of this Disney chic, yet the practice is not about the brand as much as it is about regional and gendered cultures of consumption that favor contemporary precious objects located within a cultural symbolic order. Disney is global but the *chuk kam* mouse is not, and the mouse or rat is one of the 12 animals in the Chinese lunar calendar. Thus a transhistorical Chinese culture of precious objects meets contemporary consumer culture, encompassing Hello Kitty-style in Hong Kong pop culture, which, as in Japan, transcends age groups (McVeigh, 2000). Consumer acceptance of the cute object among women of diverse ages, educational backgrounds, and income levels is “not engagement with specific meaning so much as engagement with each other through a common object ... [and] may thus represent an unruly bundling of neo- and antifeminisms” (Yano, 2005, p. 70). Such are some of the complexities of diverse feminisms and lived realities in the consumer landscapes of contemporary Asia.

#### TOWARD A CULTURAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PRODUCTION/CONSUMPTION

A cultural political economy of production/consumption seeks to identify relational processes of political economy in cultural contexts and cultural actions in the context of political economy—by taking a poststructural theoretical approach in order to identify positions of difference, including class and inequality, in consumer activity. This approach is necessarily interested in realities of production/consumption dynamics and thereby in cultural values and symbolisms characterizing the production/consumption relationship, including the “thing itself” and consumer decisions. As a cultural political economy, it re-replaces understanding culture in located contexts, from local to global, and the role of the state in shaping cultural and economic possibilities. It is necessarily an urban approach because of concerns with the current velocities of consumption, but it resists accepting culture as content for neoliberal production (i.e., production that depends on securing small margins of difference for the thing—commodity’s “cool”—and its complicity in consumerism as the basis of social life). Thus it returns culture to the messy and complicated arena of people, and depends on an urban ethnographic methodology, and no less its challenge to pressures of neoliberalized scholarship.

This analysis of the manufacturing and retail trade in precious metals and fine jewelry identified a set of relational processes that underpin a regional cultural political economy of production/consumption dynamics, as the cities of coastal China restructure under reform. Two former port cities with agricultural hinterlands, Hong Kong and Shanghai, have transformed into world cities that lead industrializing regions. Yet in contrast to standard explanations of deindustrialization in North America, Japan, and Europe, restructuring industry in these city/regions moves inland, not offshore to another world region. Consequently, factories are owned and managed in proximity to urban cores, relations of production maintain an array of local and intraregional interconnections, and the production rationale of the city endures. Not just design but high-end production remains

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embedded in the city, not least because the relationship between the value and size of the materials at stake is extraordinary, which is ultimately convenient for economic élites and "office ladies" alike, who pursue precious objects as investment goods in leisure time.

By examining conditions of production/consumption through several lines of cultural political economic inquiry, this analysis accounts for the significance of the urban industry and its growth in contemporary China. As the Party-state actively seeks to drive production/consumption through new gendered consumer ideologies, such governing strategies meet complex, dynamic feminisms in East Asia that draw on historic cultural practices to negotiate consumption pressures and articulate economic power. In choosing to purchase valuable, tradable goods, women of all ages build personal capital, which elides the value-loss problem of nondurable goods and their representations in "going shopping." By understanding the complex positions and rationales of who is doing the consuming, and the object itself, we see that women decision-makers follow particular investment logics and culturally established positions of independence in the household, and by extension the entire political economy. Compared to normative accounts, such formulations of a cultural political economy appear unwieldy, yet they accomplish the work of transcending dualistic forms of research design and explanation and, in the process, unveil complex geographies-in-formation.

Hong Kong continues to occupy an outsized role for the new Chinese consumer-citizen who makes repeated leisure visits to the city's service-dedicated retail establishments, where the production of services is the consumption of services. Mainland visitors now constitute the backbone of Hong Kong's contemporary leisure/tourism industry; they form the primary group of visitors to the Hong Kong Disneyland Resort and the basis of park's local reputation—"it's for Mainlanders"—unless, of course, the goal is to purchase the latest Disney-themed *chuk kam* object. Despite such local othering of the Mainland consumer, intensification of new mobilities across the Pearl River Delta and the broader South China region is contributing to a dynamic regional formation with shared perspectives in expanding consumerism. Nevertheless, we must hold back from drawing larger conclusions about a "consumer society" in China since, for the vast majority of people, symbolic and media consumption are more realistic than acquisition of actual goods. Most people simply cannot afford nonessential things, although knowledge of such realities underscores investment-quality consumption.

Finally, this largely mesoscale study should not limit related analysis at other scales or parts of the production process. Future research should examine the urban and regional production/consumption relationship in greater detail through labor processes in manufacturing, accumulation and capital reinvestment, and wealth-holding in precious metals and gems. Indeed, it could be argued that the consumption of precious objects does a splendid job of underscoring the power of Baudrillard's economy of signs, or the seductive qualities and symbolic work of a fabulous thing, by disassociating the object from its originating material contexts and alternative economic possibilities. It is noteworthy that a consumer campaign concerned with the problems of gold and gemstone mining has not come to the fore in China, even as Oxfam International and other organizations with proactive consumer positions have become established in the region. Beyond Hong Kong's "two-systems" exception, such institutions toe a fine line under surveillance of the Party-state—the Chinese Communist Party that turned producer cities into consumer cities in China under reform.

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