Coffee, Fast Food and the Desire for Romantic Love in Contemporary China: Branding and Marketing Trends in Popular Chinese-Language Literature

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Introduction: Literature, romantic love and consumption in contemporary China

Since the 1980s, consumption has played an increasingly important role for individuals and society on mainland China.[1] A close connection between the literary field and consumption is part of this development: Firstly, literary texts are consumed. They are bought, displayed as means of distinction, and even read. Secondly, the consumption of (branded) consumer items is a central characteristic of many literary texts, and especially those that narrate stories of romantic love and (aspire to) become bestsellers. Among these consumer items, foods and drinks are frequently employed in the narratives to represent characters or settings. While the connection between literature and consumption is definitely not unique to China (bestseller markets and bestsellers around the globe attest to this), it can be noted that due to political and economic changes, this connection was brought about on the Chinese bookmarket within a rather short period of time.[2]

One prominent example for these two developments on the Chinese bookmarket is the bestselling novel T*he First Intimate Touch* 第一次的亲密接

1 This paper was first presented at the 2008 "Rethinking Trends" conference in Heidelberg. I would like to thank a number of colleagues who provided valuable comments, questions and suggestions to sharpen my arguments: Jennifer Altehenger, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Gehrig, Chua Beng-Huat, Andrea Hacker, Xuelei Huang, Susan Ingram, Nic Leonhardt, Yiman Liu, Jennifer May, Barbara Mittler, Liying Sun, Petra Thiel and the anonymous reviewers of this journal.

2 For a detailed study of the Chinese bookmarket, see: Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature. Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

触 by the Taiwanese author Cai Zhiheng (蔡智恒).[3] As one of the first Chinese language online novels it had a tremendous impact on the field and prompted a first wave of online fiction in the People's Republic of China (PRC).[4] From March to May 1998, it was first published in small sections on a Taiwanese Bulletin Board System (BBS)[5] and turned into a bestseller on the Chinese mainland after its publication as a book in 1999.[6] *The First Intimate Touch* was one of the first works to be written in a new literary form, which immediately became fashionable: the online novel. Even the printed version of the novel retains certain characteristics of the online text, such as the employment of icons and the English language note "to be continued" that divides the chapters and subchapters: the use of smaller units allowed for easier downloading and reading on the computer screen and also reminds the reader that the text was serialized like a novel written for publication in a newspaper. The novel was subsequently turned into a TV series (produced by the mainland Chinese Shanghai Film Studio 上海电影制片厂), and its transformation into a stage play in Beijing in 2011 attests to its continuing popularity in the PRC. Moreover, the novel itself generated a number of trends, among these a literary and lifestyle trend in which the consumption of fast food and coffee became intricately linked with notions of romantic love and the self-definition of a social class—the mainland Chinese *xiaozi* (小资, typically translated as 'petty bourgeoisie'). The novel may be regarded as a *trendsetter* among young urbanites on the Chinese mainland for several reasons: 1.) It can be seen as a precursor of Chinese internet literature (*wangluo wenxue* 网络文学).[7]

3 Cai Zhiheng 蔡智恒, *The First Intimate Touch* (第一次的亲密接触) (Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe, 1999).

4 Ouyang Youquan 欧阳友权, *Introduction to Internet Literature* (网络文学概论) (Beijing: Beijing Daxue chubanshe, 2008), 31f. For Chinese language internet literature, see also: Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, forthcoming).

5 In the section "works" (作品集), Cai Zhiheng's homepage (http://www.jht.idv.tw/) still gives the novel in its original form, i.e. in small postings including the date and time of day when they were originally uploaded (March 22, 1998, 01:41:45 through May 28, 1998, 01:58:54).

6 According to Ye Qingzhou, the novel stayed on the national bestseller lists for 22 months without interruption. (See: Ye Qingzhou 叶轻舟, ed., *Bestseller* (畅销书) (Beijing: Beijing gongye daxue chubanshe, 2005), 225). Kong Shuyu even indicates that the novel remained on the bestseller lists for over two years, but she alerts her readers to the fact that Chinese bestseller lists are to be analyzed with care (Kong, *Consuming Literature,* 181, 188). Yet, no matter how cautiously one treats these figures, they attest to the fact that the novel was extremely popular at the time (and still is remembered by many of its readers). Also, Cai Zhiheng has preserved the many enthusiastic responses of his readers on his homepage (see the sections "comment board" (留言板) and "old comments" (旧留言) and in the printed edition of the novel.

7 The development of online literature was, in fact, yet another transcultural process: the first online literature was written in English in the US, the first Chinese language texts were written by overseas students in the US. Ouyang, *Introduction to Internet Literature*, 21ff.

2.) Allegedly, Chinese youth[8] have fashioned their own experiences of romance after those of the novel's main characters. 3.) As such, the novel may be seen as a prime example of how a mixture of Taiwanese (or Hongkongese) and Euro-American lifestyles constitutes the quintessential fashionable lifestyle for these Chinese youth. 4.) In such a lifestyle, consumption (or the desire for consumption) features prominently. 5.) The novel may be regarded as a model for the dissemination of such a culture of consumption into (popular) literature. 6.) The novel serves as a model narrative by ascribing an important role in a literary text not only to the consumption of products, but also of concrete brands (i.e., objects that may be decisive in the emergence of trends).[9] As such, the novel makes it possible to trace trends as they move between real life and literature, between real life and the realm of imagination, and also between different literary texts. 7.) The novel like many others from the realm of popular literature therefore invites readers to read it as a guidebook that introduces, explains and interprets the latest fashion and lifestyle trends as well as their proper consumption.

Here, "trend" is employed as a descriptive category denoting the growing presence of certain objects, or, rather, notions of objects. The two specific consumption trends that feature prominently in *The First Intimate Touch*—the "coffee trend" and the "fast food trend"—are two interrelated trends that travelled across the globe. The novel exemplifies the cultural implications and interpretations which are more important to an understanding of such a trend than the mere economic facts. While trends may refer to globally available products, the example of these two trends demonstrates that the meaning attributed to such products varies greatly in different locations and at different points in time. Such trends refer to products and practices that at first glance appear to be globally uniform, but turn out to comprise diverse forms and meanings at the local level, necessitating a transcultural perspective on the phenomenon based on a "multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and

8 In this paper, the term "youth" is employed to refer broadly to those who were born in mainland China after 1980, i.e. after the end of the Cultural Revolution, and who grew up in an increasingly commercializing China, especially in the cities. They are the readers of the novels discussed in this paper. In their early years, many of them were regular customers at McDonalds, and today many of them frequent stores like Starbucks.

9 For a related study on this issue, see: Petra Thiel, "No Logo? China's Branded Youth and Their Representation within Contemporary Chinese Literature and Art", paper presented at the conference *Trends on the Move: Transcultural Dimensions of Popular Flows*, Oct. 28-29, 2012. For the power of brands in general as well as on the global book market, see Petra Thiel's contribution to the Trends series. Petra Thiel, "Tracking Trends and Brands in the International Children's Book Market", *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2012) (forthcoming).

exclusive understanding of culture"[10] (or cultural practices), as elaborated by Wolfgang Welsch. After all, the consumption of global brands is, on the one hand, firmly rooted in specific local (in this case: urban Chinese) practices. On the other hand, they have been (slightly) modified before their introduction to the Chinese market and they carry with them distinct global and international notions. At first glance, the introduction of chains like McDonald's and Starbucks and their products onto the mainland Chinese market may appear to be an issue of Americanisation. Modification of contents and their meaning by the respective companies and by their customers, however, exemplify that the processes may be more adequately described as transcultural.

Consumption, and especially the consumption of food, is connected to both the identity of the individual and the creation of a community.[11] Thus, many urban citizens in contemporary China (as well as in other parts of the world) do not consume in order to satisfy their basic needs.[12] Rather, consumption is a means to fulfil one's desires,[13] especially so in the PRC where in the past decade "'desire' is a key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a postsocialist world."[14] Parallels may be seen to similar contexts of rising consumerism like that in late 19th century America where "old inhibitions to spending—a reverence for the virtues of frugality and restraint—had to be cleared away: desire had to be created and legitimized."[15] In the process and in their efforts to maximize profits, companies used advertisements and the presentation of their stores and products for a "virtual reconditioning"[16] of the consumer. In contemporary China, McDonald's and Starbucks clearly accomplish this with their appealing new products, stores, services and the new kind of social space they offer.

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10 See Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality–the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today," in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage 1999), 194-213.

11 See Warren Belasco, "Food Matters: Perspectives on an Emerging Field," in *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*, ed. Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

12 See for example: Elisabeth Croll, *China's New Consumers: Social Development and Domestic Demand* (London: Routledge, 2006).

13 George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in Cathedrals of Consumption* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2010).

14 Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China. Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

15 Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1989), 41.

16 Ibid., 41.

Consumption may serve the purpose of social and cultural distinction as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu. In particular, issues of food consumption have turned into a matter of lifestyle and distinction, especially with the growth of wealth in many strata of Chinese society, as is spelled out by Huang Haibo (黄海波) in his description of the contemporary Chinese *xiaozi* lifestyle: "For some time, eating [as such] is no longer the question, the question has [changed to] eating with whom, where and what."[17] Accordingly, this type of consumption promises to be highly responsive to changes in consumer behaviour, not least because the consumption of drinks and food is an everyday activity. Even though McDonald's[18] and coffee are more expensive than their indigenous Chinese counterparts, they are still affordable for many urban Chinese. Therefore, these two relate to regularly occurring consumption patterns and involve a larger group of consumers than is the case of items that are purchased only once, like a car.

Moreover, food consumption has become increasingly transcultural: In many cases meaning is attributed on the regional or local level, yet the production, distribution, marketing and consumption of foodstuffs needs to be seen within a worldwide context. While the coffee trade has been global and linked to capitalism right from the start,[19] the food industry as a whole has become an increasingly global business (though oftentimes with localized implementations) over the past decades,[20] and fast food culture forms an important part of this development. For early twentieth-century China it has been argued that "every aspect of food consumption was changed by the inclusion of the country in a global economy which hugely expanded

17 Huang Haibo 黄海波, *Petty Bourgeoise* [sic] (小资女人) (Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2002), 186. The title should correctly be translated as *Petty Bourgeois Women* and, indeed, especially in the sections on clothing and hairstyle the book entirely addresses a female readership. All translations of Chinese language sources are by the author.

18 For McDonald's in China, see: Yunxiang Yan, "McDonald's in Beijing: The Localization of Americana," in *Golden Arches East, McDonald's in East Asia*, ed. James L. Watson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Yunxiang Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonald's in Beijing," in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating*, ed. James L. Watson and Melissa L. Cadwell, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 80-103; James L. Watson, "China's Big Mac Attack," in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating*, ed. James L. Watson and Melissa L. Cadwell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 70-79.

19 Gao Xuanyang 高宣扬, *Sociology of Fashion* (流行文化社会学) (Taipei: Yangzhi wenhua, 2002), 166-167.

20 See, for example: Sasha Issenberg, *The Sushi Economy. Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007). For the localization of McDonald's in East Asia see the contributions to *Golden Arches East, McDonald's in East Asia*, ed. James L. Watson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

the existing culinary repertoire."[21] Moreover, as Leo Lee argues, the coffee-house served as "one of the most popular leisure spots—decidedly Western, to be sure—a necessary site for men and women sporting a modern lifestyle, particularly writers and artists."[22] Frequenting coffee-houses was thus a means of personal expression and distinction in the early twentieth century. The evidence presented in this paper will demonstrate that similar observations can be made (again) about contemporary China.

Therefore, in this paper I shall present evidence from contemporary Chinese bestselling literature as well as from interviews and observations made in Chinese Starbucks stores in order to describe these particular literary and lifestyle trends. Following an overview of the novel as well as its Taiwanese and mainland Chinese context, I wish to demonstrate how the foreign first appeared as something exotic and luxurious—and how through a process of appropriation it was then transformed into an element of everyday life. I argue that desire and above all the power of the imagination are central to this phenomenon. Therefore cultural products—literary texts, movies, pop songs or advertisement—are crucial for understanding the meaning that is attributed to objects and lifestyle habits. Literary texts (and especially successful ones), as well as other cultural products such as lifestyle magazines, guidebooks, TV programmes[23] and movies, teach people the arts of desire and consumption.[24] Yan Yunxiang mentions that fast food "is not indigenous to Chinese society. It first appeared as an exotic phenomenon in novels and movies imported from abroad and then entered the everyday life of ordinary consumers when Western fast-food chains opened restaurants in the Beijing market."[25] I further argue that through cultural texts consumers learn how to integrate new objects

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21 Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York: Columbia Press, 2007), 218. For the impact of Western food on Shanghai regional cuisine, see also: Mark Swislocki, *Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 97-141.

22 Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 18.

23 For example, Maris Boyd Gilette demonstrates in her study on food consumption in Xi'an that TV programmes from the US and from China "played an important part in educating locals about Westerns foods and foodways." Maris Boyd Gilette, "Children's Food and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in Xi'an," in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating*, ed. James L. Watson and Melissa L. Cadwell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 111.

24 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 6; see also Karl Gerth, *As China Goes, so Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers are Transforming Everything*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 111-132; Jing Wang, *Brand New China, Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008).

25 Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space", 82.

of consumption into their daily lives and how to give meaning to new forms of consumption and to the experience of this consumption. Fictional texts in particular may function as guidebooks that help their readers find their way through the jungle of urban consumption. Cultural products thus call upon consumers to fulfil their desires through consumption and imagination.

Thus a thorough analysis of these cultural products and of their repercussions in real life grants an understanding of contemporary Chinese society and of the mechanisms that underlie such transcultural trends. The transcultural qualities of these trends allow consumers both distinct interpretations and a certain flexibility in attributing meaning to their actions. These qualities also transform consumers into transcultural subjects who are able to fulfil their desires in contemporary urban China through the consumption of transcultural objects.

The model: Romance at McDonald's and a philosophy of coffee

The story of *The First Intimate Touch* evolves over the last months of 1997. It takes place on the Internet, as well as in Tainan and Taipei. Two college students—the first-person narrator Pizi Cai (痞子蔡, Scoundrel Cai) and Qingwu Feiyang (轻舞飞扬, literally translated "Dancing lightly and flying up,"[26] both internet pseudonyms)—get to know each other and fall in love online. After exchanging emails and notes for three months they meet twice: once at McDonald's and once on New Year's Eve to watch the movie *Titanic*. Thereafter, Qingwu leaves Tainan for Taipei. Having received the password for her Internet-diary of the past months, Pizi Cai now reads about her deep feelings for him and learns that she suffers from a severe chronic illness. Some time later, he follows her to Taipei and visits her at the hospital. Before long, she is dead.

Other than the ending of the story, their first encounter is related by Pizi Cai in a light tone and as a happy event, and he employs descriptions of taste as allegories for the young girl by whose looks and laughter he is clearly enchanted:

> … Again, I heard her laughter. In old times people would often use 'the oriole flying out of the gorge' and 'the newborn swallow returns to the nest' to describe the sweetness of [such] a sound. However, as I have never heard these two birds sing, it would be unscientific to use

26 Qingwu herself also signs "her" online texts FlyinDance.

> these sayings to describe her laughter. So it would be rather appropriate to use 'crisp but not greasy, like the French fries at McDonald's' [to describe her laughter]. Indeed, her laughter resembled French fries with ketchup—crisp with a sweet-sour tang.
>
> 我又听见了她的笑声。古人常用“黄莺出谷“和“乳燕归巢“来形容声音的甜美。但这两种鸟叫我都没听过，所以用来形容她的声音是不科学的。还是脆而不腻的麦当劳薯条比较贴切的。她的笑声，就像蘸了番茄酱的薯条，清脆中带点酸甜。[27]

Qingwu in turn, soon after explains why she is dressed entirely in coffee colours—the colour of the drink she loves. Similar to Pizi Cai, she uses the taste (and the colours) of coffee as an allegory to describe her looks in her "Philosophy of Coffee" (咖啡哲学):[28]

> Even if it is all coffee… it can vary according to the roasting technique and the fragrant, sweet, pure, bitter and sour tastes... The colour of my shoes and socks is very dark, like overly roasted coffee, charred and bitter, but not sour… The colour of my bell-bottom trousers is a bit lighter, like exceptionally aromatic mocha coffee, with a rather strong sour note… The colour of my sweater is even lighter, like gentle and exquisite [Jamaican] Blue Mountain coffee, savoury, mellow and delicate… And the colour of my backpack is dark on the inside and light on the outside, decorated with some ornaments so that it is just like cappuccino...with fresh milk floating on it and enchanting cinnamon sprinkled on top... Sweet, pure, luxurious and, at the same time, rich and strong. [Omissions in the original.]
>
> 即使全是咖啡。。。也会因烘焙技巧和香、甘、醇、苦、酸的口感而有差异。。。我的鞋袜颜色很深，像是重度烘焙的炭烧咖啡。。。焦、苦不带酸。。。小喇叭裤颜色稍浅，像是风味独特的摩卡咖啡。。。酸味较强。。。毛线衣的颜色更浅，像是柔顺细腻的蓝山咖啡。。。香醇精致。。。而我背包的颜色内深外浅，并点缀着装饰品，则像是Cappuccino咖啡。。。表面浮上新鲜牛奶，并撒上迷人的肉桂分。。。既甘醇甜美却又浓郁强烈。。。[29]

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27 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 67. When the narrator heard her laugh for the first time, he had already compared it to French Fries. Ibid., 64.

28 Qingwu uses this term to refer to her elaborations, emphasizing that she does not refer to the coffee house chain of the same name, see: Ibid., 67, 144.

29 Ibid., 68. Even her bicycle is coffee-colored, "like warm French Café au lait." Ibid., 74.

These two fictional characters employ the looks and the taste of their favourite food and drink to describe the laughter and the looks of Qingwu. These descriptions, firstly, position the characters in their respective realms: Pizi Cai, a student of water conservancy, is connected to fast food and its allegedly scientific approach,[30] Qingwu is connected to coffee which to her is an all-embracing way of expressing herself. For both characters, however, these are related to desire and a highly sensual experience of romantic love. Secondly, these portrayals serve as markers of a modern, well-off lifestyle shared by the novel's characters. Thirdly, these descriptions may conjure up the tastes and smells (and sounds) of the respective foodstuffs in the reader. In fact, even before she relates the "Philosophy of Coffee," Pizi Cai noted that her clothes were some sort of coffee colour and concluded that "… she just resembled a cup of aromatic coffee." (她就像是一杯香浓的咖啡。)[31] With these descriptions, not only the visual qualities, but also the fragrant qualities of the drink are bestowed upon the adored girl—in the mind of the narrator, and, possibly, also in the imagination of the readership. At the same time, a fourth effect is created by establishing such an intimate and romantic connection between the girl and different types of coffee: the drink can now be associated with beauty and romance. Thus the desire for romance[32] is linked to desire for the somewhat exotic beverage: coffee. This is even more pronounced when Qingwu later explains that drinking coffee makes her feel good.[33] Moreover, she describes how she was prompted to buy her cappuccino coloured backpack: it reminded her of the drink she loves and made her feel like she was in love.[34] Similarly, the fast food chain is also linked to romance, even though in a tongue-in-cheek-manner. The narrator of the scene reasons that

30 After all, scientific—and hygienic—production methods and high nutritional value have been ascribed to the American fast food chain ever since it came into being and, significantly, ever since its introduction to China as well. See Yan, "McDonald's in Beijing", 44; Gao, *Sociology of Fashion*, 155-156. Likewise, in her study of the values attributed to food by the Muslim Hui population of Xi'an, Maris Body Gilette demonstrates how mass produced food such as snacks and carbonated drinks is perceived as Western and scientific. It offers consumers the possibility to consume modernity, to demonstrate "their cosmopolitanism and familiarity with things foreign" and it represents a "means parents used to prepare their children for the modern world." See Gilette, "Children's Food and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in Xi'an," 116-117. On the issues of standardization, rationalization at McDonald's in general and the resulting effects, see George Ritzer's classic study: George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* [Revised New Century Edition] (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2004).

31 Gao, *Sociology of Fashion*, 66.

32 Desire for romance is, of course, nothing new. For a rather different literary trend resulting from this desire, see Xuelei Huang's contribution to the Trends series: Xuelei Huang, "From East Lynne to Konggu lan: Transcultural Tour, Trans-medial Translation," *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2012) (forthcoming).

33 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 74. In another novel by Cai Zhiheng, the female main character's spirits are similarly improved by a cup of coffee. See: Cai Zhiheng 蔡智恒, *Between Art and Science* [sic] (亦恕与珂雪) (Shenyang: Wanjuan chuban gongsi, 2007 (2008)), 131.

34 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 126.

McDonald's offers the ideal setting for his first date with the girl he previously had only met online. After all, McDonald's constitutes a somewhat uncommon "Western" environment, albeit without the possible pitfalls of spending more money than affordable to a college student and of causing embarrassment because of lacking experience with Western food and cutlery,[35] a danger echoed in some of the lifestyle guidebooks to be discussed below.[36] Thus, this description of a first encounter with the beloved girl establishes a link between coffee and McDonald's on the one hand, and notions of romantic love on the other hand.

The narrator finds that literary comparisons which are too far removed from the reality of his life as a would-be engineer are unsuitable for describing Qingwu. "Luckily, none of these [comparisons] resemble her. So, she is not a character from a novel. She belongs to real life." (幸好她都不像，所以她不是小说中的人物。她属于现实的生活。)[37] Time and again, he highlights that she is real, not merely a virtual or fictional character.[38] The emphasis on the part of the narrator that the girl "belongs to real life" deserves further scrutiny, as this may be seen as part of the author's strategy of employing "fictional opportunities", a term coined by K.K. Ruthven. This term describes processes in which authors use paratexts to disguise the difference between the author and narrator of a story,[39] but the author of *The First Intimate Touch* goes even further. With sentences like the one quoted here, the first person narrator seems to remind himself that the girl he first got to know online is now sitting in front of him. However, as the narrator is referred to by the same internet pseudonym that the author uses for himself (Pizi Cai), the difference between narrator and author is blurred further. With the statement about the "reality" of the girl, the author-narrator establishes an alternative and more "scientific" way to regard her.[40] To him, an old-fashioned literary comparison is meaningless as it refers to something he has not experienced himself; rather, he compares her laughter to French fries, a commodity he is familiar with through his own experience and which is therefore more authentic and credible to him: not just any type of French fries, but those from the famous fast food chain. Ironically, with this

35 Pizi Cai vividly remembers what happened to a friend of his: He had invited a girl into a Western restaurant, but due to her lack of experience with Western food and cutlery and because of her excitement, she ended up spilling food all over her clothes, causing much embarrassment. See: Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 62.

36 Huang, *Petty Bourgeoise*, 187.

37 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 65.

38 Ibid., 68.

39 K.K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

40 Moreover, as a scientist he employs his mathematic abilities and quickly calculates that, given his own height and the distance between their eyes, she must be 1.64m tall. Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 66.

comparison, the author-cum-narrator Pizi Cai would establish a new literary convention as this literary trend demonstrates. However, it is a convention rooted in the real life experiences of the respective authors and readers.

All of these references to the real life of the narrator establish a contrast both to the literary realm and the online world where the two characters spend much of their time. Real life is also the opposite of the online world where the text was first published and read. Yet, the online world constitutes an important part of the lives of the characters in the novel, as well as of the lives of the novel's author and readers. By establishing the online world as the setting of much of the novel, the narrator-cum-author creates what Arjun Appadurai has described as a "community of sentiment,"[41] a community between the characters of the novel, the author and the readers. The references to real life serve to further emphasize this community as well as the tangibility of concrete objects—especially of consumer items—within the "reality" of the text: Consumable objects refer to a commodity culture as well as to the presence of the beautiful coffee girl who made her way from cyberspace into the narrator's real life, and whom he will soon touch for the first time.[42]

The quoted passages also indicate a sense of (self) irony that characterizes the novel and the two main characters. Especially Pizi Cai seems to fight his disposition towards the romantic with constant irony and recurring emphatic remarks about himself as a scientist who is not romantic.[43] Yet in the end it becomes obvious that he is a romantic character after all: He fails to forget the novel's heroine and continues to mourn for her.[44] Irony thus serves to camouflage his emotions as well as his bashfulness in front of girls; it adds a light note to the sometimes sentimental novel—and this sense of (self) irony is also typical for mainland Chinese *xiaozi*, as will be shown below.

Context (1): Fast food, coffee and popular literature in the global context

In this context, it is worth recalling that the respective products—fast food, coffee, and to some extent popular literature—travelled the globe. Firstly,

41 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 8. For a discussion of Appadurai's concept, see also the contribution to the trends series by Sandra Annett, "Imagining Transcultural Fandom: Animation and Global Media Communities," *Transcultural Studies* 2 (2011).

42 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 71.

43 See, for example, ibid., 33-34,39, 43.

44 Ibid., 166-172.

Western style fast food such as it dominates the global market originated in the United States[45]—whence it entered mainland China.[46] Fast food is literally translated into Chinese as *kuaican* (快餐), and differs from indigenous Chinese food that is also consumed speedily such as snacks (or, "small eats" 小吃) or conveniently "boxed meals" (盒饭). These differ inasmuch as they are not manufactured industrially, and often sold by street vendors. Other than these types of food, fast food is perceived as distinctly "Western". In the context of this paper, the label "Western" is employed as it is in the source materials at hand. It is a somewhat blurred category referring to elements of (US-) American and European culture.

In order to fully understand the meaning attributed to Western fast food chains in China, it is worth further considering how they interacted with the mainland Chinese context: They offered new products, services and experiences to their customers, as well as a new type of social space. During the Maoist years, Chinese urbanites moved between public spaces (such as work place or school) which were almost entirely monitored by the state, and private spaces which were scarce, mostly crowded, and in many cases supervised by other family members or neighbours. A place like McDonald's thus may be seen as an entirely new model: without the control mechanisms employed by state or family, it allows for new kinds of privacy, social interaction and therefore a certain liberation of lifestyles including romantic encounters which previously were impossible or restricted to the darkness of public parks at night.[47] This is why McDonald's in its early years in China was strongly associated with notions of romance and a certain cosmopolitan, scientific and modern luxury. Since it has now become more commonplace, especially through the presence of school children and the elderly, and since the Chinese foodscape has been further differentiated, it is now locations like Starbucks that are used as locations for romantic encounters.

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45 Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*. This is not to say that there were no other models for the fast food industry. Germany, for example, saw the rise of the Aschinger emporium in the belle époque which at its height was even registered at the stock market. Political turmoil during and shortly after the Second World War ended this success story. See: Keith Allen, "Berlin in the *Belle Époque*: A Fast-Food History," in *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*, ed. Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2002), 240-257.

46 McDonald's closest competitor, Kentucky Fried Chicken, took a different route as it entered China: the American company decided to hire former McDonald's managers from Taiwan as their first generation of management staff, reasoning that these would be familiar with the trade and the cultural specifics of the market they would be working for (Liu, KFC in China, 27). The same route may be observed in relation to the production of fake consumer products such as Louis Vuitton bags; Hsiao-hung Chang, "Fake logos, fake theory, fake globalization," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5/2 (2004), 222-236.

47 See, for example Lijia Zhang's memoirs of life under socialism: Lijia Zhang, "*Socialism is Great!" A Worker's Memoir of the New China* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 216f.

Practices at the stores and the meaning attributed to these practices differ between China and "the West": Other than in the US, customers in Chinese McDonald's outlets often linger for hours with only a small purchase, thus modifying the rules of fastness and significantly slowing down the consumption of fast food.[48] Likewise, some customers at Chinese Starbucks may be observed to stay at the stores during slack hours without purchasing anything.[49]

Secondly, coffee has been a product traded and consumed globally for centuries. As such it has acquired a multitude of meanings and cultural implications: Possibly originating in Ethiopia, it likely was brought to Egypt and Yemen and then to the Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe. While in Yemen it was used by religious practitioners to remain awake during worship; Europe developed its own traditions of coffee consumption:[50] first as a luxury item, then as integral part of commercial culture, and later in relation to the rise of the public sphere.[51] Japanese coffee culture, in turn, served as model for Taiwanese coffee culture.[52] In the United States, coffee was transformed from an expensive, elitist beverage in the nineteenth century to an everyday commodity in the twentieth. Facing dwindling markets, the coffee industry took measures to develop coffee into a product whose consumption would serve as a means of distinction: Consuming this new type of coffee was turned into an act of nostalgia with which one could evoke a (better) past —as it allegedly was before the advent of industrialization.[53] The rise of the Starbucks Company is linked to this development[54]—as is its subsequent move

48 Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space", 93ff. Elsewhere, Yunxiang Yan writes about fast food consumption in Beijing: "… the notion of fast food refers only to Western-style fast food and the new Chinese imitations. More important, as a new cultural construct, the notion of fast food includes non-food elements such as eating manners, environment, and patterns of social interaction. The popularity of fast food among Beijing consumers has little to do with either the food itself or the speed with which it is consumed." Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space", 82.

49 Observations in August 2009.

50 For a Chinese perspective on European traditions and practices of coffee consumption, see Xu Zemin 余泽民, *Looking at Europe from the Café* (咖啡馆里看欧洲) (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2007).

51 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1965).

52 Gao Xuanyang, *Sociology of Fashion*, 177-179. See also the next section of this paper.

53 William Roseberry, "The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Reimagination of Class in the United States", in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating*, ed. James L. Watson and Melissa L. Cadwell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 122-143.

54 Bryant Simon, *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

onto markets worldwide and into mainland China. In the PRC, Starbucks and McDonald's share a number of characteristics. They are American chains operating with Chinese partners,[55] they are perceived by many as the embodiment of American culture,[56] offer new types of social space, and have localized their range of services and products to meet demands of the local market. For example, like other fast food chains in China (and unlike in the "West"), they both offer delivery service.[57] Nonetheless, the meanings associated with the two differ, especially because McDonald's moved onto the Chinese market earlier. Thus, by the late 1990s—when Cai Zhiheng's novel enjoyed its remarkable success—McDonald's had already turned into a more common location while Starbucks had just opened its doors and was promising something new, more exotic and luxurious to its customers. As coffee also carried with it notions of romance (after all, it is connected in the imaginary to among other things Paris, the city of love), Starbucks also became connected to romantic experiences.

Thirdly, popular literature published in mainland China also has a global dimension. Most of the novels discussed in this paper were written by Chinese authors for a Chinese readership. However, they appear on a bookmarket and inside a cultural field that is shaped to some extent by foreign products, including novels from the other side of the Taiwan Strait like those of Cai Zhiheng, as well as bestsellers from other foreign countries, mostly East Asia, England or America.[58] Mainland Chinese popular culture in general has been greatly influenced by East Asia and "the West" during the past three decades, most notably by pop music originating from Hongkong and Taiwan as well as by bestsellers, Hollywood movies and TV programmes from the United States.[59] Cultural production in China thus has become a part of global

55 McDonald's, which operates under a franchise system, makes efforts to present itself as a Chinese company. 50% of the business belongs to a Chinese partner (Yan, "McDonald's in Beijing", 54).

56 Huang, *Petty Bourgeoise*, 204.

57 In fact, faced with dwindling customer numbers, fast food chains in the "West" have recently moved to fill in this service gap. See, for example, UK *Fast Food Delivery, Fast Food Delivery UK*, http://www.fastfood-delivery.co.uk/, 2011 (accessed Oct. 17, 2011).

58 The shelves of Chinese bookstores attest to this international dimension, as do the publications that introduce their readers to the latest or most influential books. See: Bai Ye 白烨, *Review of New Literary Books: 2004-2005* (文学新书评: 2004-2005) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2005); Xinjingbao Shuping Zhoukan bianjibu 新京报书评周刊编辑部, *Most Influential Books: China 2003-2005* (最有意影响力的书：中国 2003-2005) (Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 2006). See also Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 120-143.

59 See above, Gilette, "Children's Food and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in Xi'an," 111. For the influence of pop music from Hongkong and Taiwan, see Nimrod Baranovitch, *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10-18.

processes. However, cultural products as well as the aforementioned consumer products have been successfully localized to attract consumers on the mainland Chinese markets.

Context (2): Coffee, consumer culture and Chinese *xiaozi*

To frame the novel in its original context, it is worth considering both Taiwanese and mainland Chinese coffee culture of the mid-1990s as well as the consumption-oriented culture of the mainland Chinese *xiaozi*. In his *Sociology of Fashion* (流行文化社会学), sociologist Gao Xuanyang (高宣扬) describes how Taipei at the time boasted at least twenty-six highly individualistic coffee shops,[60] some of which could even compete with world-class coffee shops.[61] While the introduction of coffee—like the proliferation of McDonald's restaurants—attests to a Westernisation of Taiwanese food culture,[62] it is nonetheless remarkable that contemporary Taiwanese coffee culture followed Japanese coffee culture by adopting "characteristics of 'Japanese-style' Westernisation" ('日本式'的西方化的特点).[63] Considering the long-standing Japanese influence on Taiwanese culture as well as on Taiwanese coffee-house culture during colonial times, Japanese companies assumed that Japanese-style coffee would best suit the Taiwanese taste and way of life, yet another example of what Koichi Iwabuchi describes as Japanese hybridism.[64] While most Westerners consume ordinary Arabica coffee, the Japanese and hence Taiwanese markets are dominated by Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee (蓝山咖啡), a special variety of Arabica.[65] Like elsewhere on the world, Taiwanese consumers drink coffee to participate in a certain lifestyle[66] and thus to aestheticize their own lives: so drinking coffee "[can] in reality no longer [be regarded as] consumption for consumption's sake. Rather, through ways of

60 Gao, *Sociology of Fashion*, 171-177.

61 Ibid., 187.

62 Ibid., 158.

63 Ibid., 178.

64 Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). See also Sandra Annett's contribution to the trends series "Imagining Transcultural Fandom".

65 Gao, *Sociology of Fashion*, 177-179.

66 As holds true for other coffee cultures, too. See: Ibid., 159. William Roseberry has demonstrated how the American coffee industry countered declining consumption of the drink after the Second World War by shaping consumers' taste and by promoting it as a means of distinction. See Roseberry, "The Rise of Yuppie Coffees".

consumption even more elements of culture are brought into the whirlpool of life. Through the aestheticization of consumption, consumption and aesthetic appreciation are interlinked, and consumption is sublimated into a cultur[al activity]. At the same time, the processes of consumption in [one's] life attain ample new cultural meaning."[67] These parameters of Taiwanese coffee culture are important in two respects: Firstly, while the product may be associated with "the West" and is related to global economic processes, its meaning is created at the local level. Secondly, because coffee consumption is connected with aesthetic and cultural experiences, it is not astonishing to find it connected in the novel and in real life to notions of romantic love.

On the Chinese mainland, coffee and coffeehouse culture can be traced back back to early twentieth-century Shanghai.[68] After the end of the Cultural Revolution, it resurfaced, especially with the opening of independent and chain stores after 1997.[69] Of these, Starbucks opened its first stores in 1999 in Beijing and a year later in Shanghai and has since developed steadily in mainland China's major cities. The clientele, location, atmosphere and reputation of the different types and brands of coffee stores may vary (most notably, chain stores are more likely to be found in commercial districts, independent stores, for example, in the vicinity of universities). However, there seems to be considerable overlap.

As elaborated in the introduction to this paper, consumption is playing a prominent role in contemporary mainland China. The penetration of (global) brand trends into popular literature took place in conjunction with the increasing commercialization and commoditization of Chinese society which started in the 1980s and rapidly developed during the 1990s. In fact, this process forms part of what Lisa Rofel describes as a "desiring China"—a society in which desire and deliberations on the proper way to desire figure more prominently than ever before in the history of the People's Republic of China.[70] Also, recent surveys on the attitudes of Chinese youth and young adults, who are the consumers of the food and books at the heart of this trend analysis, demonstrate that "Western culture" has deeply influenced them,[71] as

67 Gao, *Sociology of Fashion*, 195.

68 Liu Suli 刘苏里, "The cradle of modern society" (现代社会的摇篮), in *Looking at Europe from the Café* (咖啡馆里看欧洲), ed. Xu Zemin 余泽民 (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2007), 5-7.

69 Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *China's Brave New World, and Other Tales for Global Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 23.

70 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 3ff.

71 Stanley Rosen, "Contemporary Chinese Youth and the State," *Journal of Asian Studies* 68/2 (2009), 365-6.

have products from Hongkong and Taiwan. As material and monetary wealth becomes more and more accepted as a source of status,[72] competition over economic resources rises in many realms of Chinese society. Consequently, young and educated urbanites increasingly embrace these changes as chances for self-development and fulfilment, both on the job market[73] and in their leisure time. Thus, Chinese society differentiates by factors such as income, wealth and lifestyle into groups like the "petty bourgeois" (i.e. *xiaozi* 小资), the "bobos" (bourgeois bohemians, in Chinese *bubo* 布波),[74] the "well-to-do" (*xiaokang* 小康, literally "small well-being"), international freemen / freewomen, DINKs (Double-income-no-kids) and the neo-tribes (*zuqun* 族群), as analysed by Wang Jing.[75] In fact, the boundaries between these lifestyle groups are somewhat vague and shifting. The focus of this analysis is the *xiaozi* as their lifestyle is most closely linked to the trends under scrutiny—and as a number of coffee lovers at Starbucks stores call themselves *xiaozi.*[76] The acceptance of commercialization and commoditization may be viewed as a precondition for the success of consumption trends or, as elaborated in the introduction to this series of Trends papers,[77] as a crucial factor of structural susceptibility.

During the Maoist years, the term *xiaozi* had a negative, even derogatory meaning.[78] It referred to the petty bourgeoisie, a class considered as ideologically backward, or even as enemies of the people. Yet, in the context of China's rising consumerism, the term was employed to refer to a group

72 Stanley Rosen, "The Victory of Materialism: Aspirations to Join China's Urban Moneyed Classes and the Commercialization of Education," *The China Journal* 51 (2004), 27-51.

73 Amy Hanser, "The Chinese Enterprising Self: Young, Educated Urbanites and the Search for Work," in *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society*, ed. Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen and Paul G. Pickowicz (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 189-206.

74 The term bobo was coined by David Brooks to describe American upper-class consumers who combine bourgeois capitalist values with elements of a counterculture hippie lifestyle. For a description of bobos in their original American habitat, see David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise, the New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks).

75 Wang, *Brand New China*, 180-210.

76 For example, in an interview with 23 year old female customer at the Joy City Store 西单大悦城店 in Beijing, August 16, 2009. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

77 Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Jennifer Altehenger, Sebastian Gehrig, "The Transcultural Travels of Trends: An Introductory Essay," *Transcultural Studies* 2 (2011).

78 As for example in the affair surrounding the author Ouyang Shan 欧阳山 whose novel Three Family Lane (三家巷) was severely criticized on account of the characterization of the main character as a petty bourgeois intellectual. See: Joe C. Huang, *Heroes and Villains in Communist China: The Contemporary Chinese Novel as a Reflection of Life* (London: C. Hurst, 1973), 21f.

of people who sought to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens through attitudes of life and towards lifestyle. The *xiaozi*-development peaked around the year 2000,[79] when Cai Zhiheng's novel enjoyed its success on the Chinese mainland and when Starbucks opened its first stores. In 2002, David Brooks' *Bobos in Paradise* was translated into Chinese and the term bobo—yet another "passing trend"[80]—began to replace *xiaozi*. In terms of content, much continuity exists between the two phenomena. Likewise, neither bobos nor *xiaozi* are really a "class" that can be defined in sociological categories. Rather, they may be seen as an imaginary class turning Bourdieu's ideas of distinction upside-down. What Wang Jing has pointed out for the bobos, similarly holds true for the *xiaozi*: Whereas for Bourdieu "'taste' is a class-determined construct,"[81] Chinese *xiaozi* and bobos become a social group on the basis of their shared tastes. With the rise of the term bobo and subsequent successors, the *xiaozi*-hype has somewhat waned, although the term *xiaozi* is still frequently employed. It refers to people who define themselves as *xiaozi*, and some employ it as an adjective to describe the quality of a particular experience or situation, as may be seen from entries in Starbucks' guestbooks (*liuyanben* 留言本)[82] that are put out in Chinese Starbucks stores in Nanjing for customers to read and write in. While one customer writes about the *xiaozi* in an ironical tone,[83] another describes how he or she whiled away a hot summer afternoon in an air-conditioned Starbucks store, drinking his or her favourite coffee and browsing through a number of good books—an experience that is rated as "oh how *xiaozi*!"[84] This illustrates that the connection between the consumption of coffee and *xiaozi* has been well established in the collective imaginary of urban Chinese consumers.

To understand what it means to be a *xiaozi* and how to behave properly as one, one may also turn to numerous guidebooks as well as online discussions

79 Wang, *Brand New China*, 182ff.

80 Ibid., 195.

81 Ibid., 193.

82 The sample of guestbook entries referred to here was collected in Nanjing in August 2009. These entries in Starbucks guestbooks are analyzed in greater depth in a separate paper: Lena Henningsen, "Individualism for the Masses? Coffee consumption and the Chinese middle class' search for authenticity", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (forthcoming).

83 Violet, "[No title]," *Entry in Starbucks guestbook at Nanjing 1912 Dian* (南京1912店, July 4, 2009, collected in August 2009).

84 "[No title]," *Entry in Starbucks guestbook at Nanjing Fenghuang Shucheng Dian* (南京凤凰书城店, no date, collected in August 2009).

and blogs.[85] Here, *xiaozi* refers to a consumerist lifestyle ("I am what I consume", or maybe even: "I consume, therefore I am") that may be found among one particular section of Chinese society—Chinese urban, well-educated and well-off middle-class young professionals who enjoy spending a considerable part of their lives in front of computers and online.[86] It is a way of living that places the "I" at the centre of attention and that serves as a means to distinguish oneself from others.[87] Their desire for consumption is linked to their desire for individuality. As a consequence, the consumption of brands (including, of course, branded foods) is important, yet *which* brands to consume varies, depending on locality and time. It seems that *xiaozi* are caught in a paradoxical situation with regard to trends: on the one hand they want to be trendsetters; on the other hand they emulate the trendsetters in order to be counted among the *xiaozi*. Publications such as the guidebooks by Sheng Hui (盛慧) or Huang Haibo cater to would-be *xiaozi*.[88] A high degree of individualism is thus defined as the prerequisite for belonging to the *xiaozi*, leaving it to the observer to ponder the inconsistency between the emphasis on individualism and the quest for a group identity.

The characterization of *xiaozi* is also contradictory in other respects. Consumption plays an important role in their lives (and their lifestyles), yet they emphasize that being a *xiaozi* is more a question of mental attitude. *Material* distinction is thus complemented by *cultural* distinction. It is important that one is familiar with a number of works of art (movies, authors, music). However, while some *xiaozi* only consider European art-house films worthy of *xiaozi* attention, others also include Hollywood blockbusters in their repertoire. To live up to their ambitions for cultural distinction, *xiaozi* may turn to the numerous guidebooks published in recent years dedicated to the most important books,[89] movies, and works of art. Like the lifestyle guidebooks, these publications provide a shortcut to the cultural distinction a *xiaozi* wishes to display. A number of *xiaozi* even claim to have literary ambitions (however, with regard to the *xiaozi* texts that have emerged, it is not quite clear what is cause and what effect). This demonstrates that the content

85 The following understanding of the term *xiaozi* was gained from reading the—at times contradictory—essays collected in: Sheng Hui 盛慧, *Open the Rose Door of Bourgeois* [sic] (打开小资的玫瑰门) (Beijing: Zhonghua gongshang lianhe chubanshe, 2002).

86 He Youran 何悠然, *Xiaozi Dictionary* (小资辞典) (Beijing: Zhongguo fangzhi chubanshe, 2006), 121ff.

87 For the increasing individualism among Chinese youth, see Rosen, "Contemporary Chinese Youth", 368.

88 Sheng, *Open the Rose Door,* Huang*, Petty Bourgeoise*.

89 For example: Bai, *Review of New Literary Books*; Xinjingbao Shuping Zhoukan bianjibu, *Most Influential Books*; Ye, *Bestseller*.

of a *xiaozi* lifestyle is not fixed but flexible, and that it is based to some extent on emulation and adaption of the practices of others and of what may be learned from books.

The realm of food consumption may serve the *xiaozi* to define him- or herself, for example by demonstrating connoisseurship in relation to wine, tea, and, not surprisingly, coffee. Wine stands for refinement and is closely connected to romance, not least because it is perceived as originating in France, the country of romantic love.[90] Herbal tea is also considered typical of a *xiaozi* provided it is consumed in the correct way: in a quiet atmosphere at night, preferably by candle light. Like wine and coffee, it is also associated with romance and / or friendship.[91] Coffee serves the dual purpose of demonstrating distinction and leisure. For the *xiaozi*, leisure is associated with peace and pleasure.[92] Yet, very few texts refer to the energizing qualities of the caffeinated drink.[93] Much as with tea, there are correct ways for *xiaozi* to drink coffee: high quality coffee should be drunk black. Moreover, both smell and colour ought to be sampled before one finally savours the taste of the drink.[94] This way of consuming coffee—especially with the smell of coffee in one's nose after dinner—may then be considered the epitome of the simple life that a *xiaozi* strives for:[95] After all, this is a combination of luxury and asceticism—the enjoyment of something special and luxurious that is, at the same time, a simple product. While Starbucks is described as not offering anything special when it comes to the actual flavour, it is certainly the most influential among Chinese *xiaozi* to relish coffee.[96] Due to its worldwide proliferation, the chain is a similar symbol for American urbanization as McDonalds and it is positively connoted for Chinese *xiaozi*: "Starbucks coffee is not just a drink to us, but, more importantly, it brings us the emotional appeal of foreign countries."[97] As in the US, the appeal of Starbucks rests on the fact that it does not only sell a drink to its customers, but offers an atmosphere (in which the *xiaozi* perceive the consumption of coffee as quite fitting).[98]

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90 He, *Xiaozi Dictionary*, 19ff.

91 He, *Xiaozi Dictionary*, 63ff.

92 Ibid., 145.

93 Relating, for example, how dependent on caffeine some young IT professionals are: Sheng, *Open the Rose Door*, 145.

94 Huang, *Petty Bourgeoise*, 202. See also Sheng, *Open the Rose Door*, 44.

95 Ibid., 53.

96 Huang, *Petty Bourgeoise*, 203.

97 Ibid., 204.

98 For the US, see: Roseberry, "The Rise of Yuppie Coffees"; Simon, *Everything but the Coffee*. For

Trends as processes: From exotic to everyday experiences

The Taiwanese novel and the first encounter described in it launched two converging trends in mainland China: one in real life and one in literary texts. In his overview of mainland Chinese bestsellers, Ye Qingzhou (叶轻舟) describes how in real life many female readers of the novel imitated the female protagonist's "Philosophy of Coffee" in their own style of dating. These young women would emulate the fictional encounter by likewise turning up in coffee colours for their first date (and their male counterparts in blue, in accordance with what might be termed Pizi Cai's "[theory] of hydromechanics" 流体力学[99]). Like their fictional counterparts, these young couples met for a rendezvous at McDonald's where they would share "a large coke and two servings of French fries".[100] Then, like the fictional characters did in their second encounter, they would watch the movie *Titanic*, stroll through the streets and buy a CD and a bottle of perfume.[101] The purchase of a bottle of Dolce Vita perfume by Dior in fact represents a secondary adaptation: after reading an online novel Qingwu longed to imitate the protagonist's stroll through a rain of perfume.[102] The movie *Titanic* is regarded by some *xiaozi* as the "really classic movie".[103] The fans of *The First Intimate Touch* who imitated the protagonists' style of dating and thus replicated the connection between romance and McDonald's are in a minority. Most *xiaozi* would not make this connection. Romance and romantic love are central experiences to them, but McDonald's is viewed as a "children's world" (小孩子的天下).[104] "For younger Beijing residents who worked in joint-venture enterprises or foreign firms and had higher incomes [many of whom may be counted among those with *xiaozi* aspirations], eating at McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Pizza Hut had become an integral part of their new lifestyle, a way for them to

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the Chinese *xiaozi*, see Huang, *Petty Bourgeoisie,* 205.

99 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 70; 144.

100 Ye, *Bestseller,* 225. In fact, in the novel, Pizi Cai purchased two large cokes. Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 64

101 Ye, *Bestseller*, 225.

102 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 139.

103 Sheng, *Open the Rose Door*, 12.

104 Huang, *Petty Bourgeoise*, 194. Random observations in McDonald's stores in China easily confirm this: the stores – especially those in neighbourhood areas, away from large shopping outlets – are often populated by school children who use the place to complete their homework and to hang around with friends – away from teachers' or parents' gaze. See also Watson, "China's Big Mac Attack", 73-74; Likewise, Kentucky Fried Chicken mainly caters to children, see Eriberto P. Lozada, "Globalized Childhood? Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing," in: *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, Children and Social Change*, ed. Jing Jun (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 114-134.

be connected to the outside world." [105] Yet, for a romantic setting they would go to Starbucks (or a similar location)—which may be seen from many entries in Starbucks' guestbooks: Individual consumers draw more or less explicit connections between the consumption of coffee and romantic love, they reflect on their consumption of coffee as well as on their lives in general: the quiet atmosphere at the stores allows them to have what they perceive as true *xiaozi*-experiences—and in their accounts of their love-lives, and especially, love-sickness, coffee features prominently. In one account by an author who refers to herself as Sussie, the bitterness of a failed love is connected to the coffee and cake consumed. After having broken up with her boyfriend the night before, the author of the text now tries to calm down at a Starbucks store and reflects on her love: "Now I am sitting here quietly by myself and ordered my favourite Latte and chocolate cake. Sweet things can always give you a good feeling. Life cannot always be as one wishes [it to be], but at least it is not too bitter and harsh." (现在一个人静静地坐下来，点了我钟意的拿铁和巧克力蛋糕，甜的东西总能让人感觉不错，生活不能总是尽如人意，但总不至于太过苦涩。)[106] In entries like these as well as through observable patterns of behaviour, Starbucks is established as a place to meet with a lover and to reflect on one's love (this may be a first encounter with a potential lover as well as the end of a love). Through the consumption of coffee at the store,[107] the connection between romantic love and coffee is made.

The second trend is a literary trend: A number of characteristics of *The First Intimate Touch* have been emulated in numerous (mostly) fictional texts written by mainland Chinese authors. To begin with, the novel is a piece of internet literature, first published on a bulletin board, and the protagonists spend much time online which is reflected in the style of the text and which developed into a trend in other novels subsequently published on the Chinese book market.[108] The novel also was among the first texts to be published online and then subsequently printed as a regular book. The printed version

105 Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space", 91.

106 Sussie '[No title]', *Entry in Starbucks guestbook at Nanjing Shuiyoucheng Dian* (南京水游城店, July 27, 2009, collected in August 2009).

107 Of course, other items are also consumed and some customers refrain from drinking coffee—nonetheless, to them the atmosphere of Starbucks as a *coffeeshop* is central to their experience.

108 Cai is not the only author to employ internet language. For example, a young Korean author, who is also popular among the young Chinese readership, also employs icons in her novels in large quantities, thus pointing to the fact that this is part of a larger East Asian trend. See Gui, Yeo-Ni (Ke'aitao 可爱淘), That Guy is Really Handsome (那小子真帅), transl. Huang Hong 黄黉 (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2003).

also turned out to be popular.[109] The move of online texts onto the shelves of Chinese bookstores is, in fact, one of the special characteristics of the Chinese book market. For many, internet literature does not apparently refer so much to texts published in a new form and medium,[110] but to a literary category that is not explicitly connected with the medium. More important for the present analysis, though, is the depiction of lifestyle as a central stylistic device in the novel. This device was adapted by authors of later novels—or *trend followers.* Firstly, brand names and consumer items, among them food stuff, appear in many texts that emulated the famous Taiwanese novel. The consumption of food is not only a means for the respective author to create a (possibly) fancy setting for the plot. Rather, the characters define themselves through their consumption habits. Of course, *The First Intimate Touch* was neither the first nor the only successful novel in which brand names and, more specifically, the consumption of coffee or fast food played a role, yet it is a characteristic of most of the writings of Cai Zhiheng.[111] Other Taiwanese and Hongkongese authors such as Qiong Yao (琼瑶), Yi Shu (亦舒) and Zhang Xiaoxian (张小娴) whose texts also travelled to the mainland Chinese book market chose bars, coffee shops or fast food restaurants as settings, and they also had their protagonists casually drink coffee.[112] It may be assumed that these texts all fed into the trend that started in mainland China in the late 1990s. While these texts may contest the status of *The First Intimate Touch* as the originator of the trend, they do not question that this novel is *one of the trendsetters*, and what is more, one of the most important ones because it remained on China's national bestseller lists for about two years.[113]

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109 Kong: *Consuming Literature*, 176-183 (in the passage, Kong also discusses Cai Zhiheng's novel).

110 Michel Hockx, "Virtual Chinese Literature: A Comparative Case Study of Online Poetry Communities," *China Quarterly* 183 (2005), 673-675.

111 Coffee features prominently in other texts by Cai: In *Irish Coffee*, most of the plot takes place in a café in Taipei. Through his consumption of Irish coffee and learning about the intoxicating drink, the narrator falls in love with the owner of the café, thus providing much space to deliberate on the meanings of coffee. Likewise, in *Between Art and Science* many scenes also take place in a Taipei café. Coffee is also central to the short story "Luoshen Black Tea": here, tea was central to the romantic relationship between the narrator and his first love. At the end of it, he stops drinking tea and resorts to coffee—so coffee here marks the end of a romantic story. While this means a slightly different subtext is associated with the drink, nonetheless, there is an explicit connection to romantic love. See: Cai Zhiheng 蔡智恒, *Irish Coffee* (爱尔兰咖啡) (Shenyang: Wanjuan chuban gongsi, 2000 (2008)); Cai Zhiheng, *Between Art and Science*; and Cai Zhiheng 蔡智恒, "Luoshen Black Tea" (洛神红茶), in: The Love Story in 7-11 [sic] (7-11 之恋), ed. Cai Zhiheng蔡智恒(Shenyang: Wanjuan chuban gongsi, 2008), 13-39.

112 See, for example Zhang Xiaoxian 张小娴, *The Lady on the Breadfruit Tree* (面包树上的女人) (Haikou: Nanhai chubanshe, 1995 (2000)), 14.

113 Ye, *Bestseller,* 225. Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 181. See also my remark in Footnote 6.

Since the early 2000s, mainland Chinese authors have also employed brand names and the consumption of branded products in their novels to characterize their protagonists.[114] An echo of the scene discussed earlier in this paper appears in a 2003 novel by Zhuang Yu (庄羽) when the female protagonist enters a McDonald's restaurant:

> Basically, I still felt a bit attached to McDonald's. When I first got to know [my boyfriend] Gao Yuan, I was still working as a journalist for a small newspaper. Comrade Gao Yuan bought me one McDonald's Big-Mac-Menu a day in order to seek the favour of my stomach. Before too long, my vexing stomach could no longer take it—if I did not get to eat [my] McDonald's [food] for a day, my spirits would simply go on strike—and I could not think of anything but Gao Yuan. Back then, my feelings towards Gao Yuan were still quite simple; I just felt from deep down that it was truly appropriate that Gao Yuan would spend money on me—one McDonald's meal a day: that was over thirty yuan!
>
> 基本上我对麦当劳还是有点感情的，刚认识高原那会儿，我还是一小报记者，高原同志一天给我买一份麦当劳巨无霸套餐跟我的胃套近乎，没多久，我这不争气的胃就扛不住了，一天吃不着麦当劳就就鼓动我的脑神经罢工，满脑子都是高原。那时候对高原的感情还很单纯，就发自内心地觉得高原真是舍得给我花钱啊，一天一份麦当劳，三十多块钱呢！[115]

The narrator of this novel thus remembers how a couple of years earlier, she had found it only natural that her boyfriend would spend a lot of money on McDonald's food as part of his strategy to win her heart. Apparently, both of them felt at the time that these were the rules of courtship and of experiencing romantic love, similar to Pizi Cai who expressed his admiration of Qingwu's beauty through the purchase of more French Fries and larger Coca-Colas than he had originally planned.[116] As such, the text may actually be read ethnographically: If we assume that the narration takes place during the late 1990s, the time when *The First Intimate Touch* was published in Taiwan and then on the mainland, McDonald's was already well established in Taiwan, but only beginning to gain hold on the mainland. While still

114 See also: Thiel, "No logo?"

115 Zhuang Yu 庄羽, *Inner and Outer* (圈里圈外) (Nanchang: Ershiyi shiji chubanshe, 2003 (2004)), 30-31.

116 Cai, *The First Intimate Touch*, 64.

lagging behind its competitor, Kentucky Fried Chicken,[117] consumers started to regard McDonald's as an attractive venue for spending time and money. With its "scientific" appearance[118] and its aura of the "exotic, American and to a certain extent modern"[119] and of "haute cuisine", "McDonald's became a place where people could gain status simply by eating there."[120] That is to say, at the time McDonald's still ranked among the somewhat more luxurious dining establishments whereas, as has been noted above, the fast food chain today is mostly popular among children and has become a casual venue for young urban professionals.

A similar assessment with regard to the trendiness of coffee can be found when the main character of a 2005 text by the same author remembers the time she broke up with her boyfriend:

> Back then, I liked Starbucks most. At the weekend, I would often dress as if I had just played badminton and go to Starbucks to drink this damned coffee. Until today, all the trivialities I would engage in before going out would often come to my mind. Whenever I think of all this I cannot help but laugh at myself. Who these days would carry [their] badminton equipment and wear white socks and shoes only to have some coffee at Starbucks? And who would pretend to be happily leafing through some English newspapers which they did not understand.
>
> 那时候，我最喜欢星巴克，我常常在周末的时候精心将自己装扮成刚刚打完网球的样子去星巴克喝倒霉的咖啡，那些出门之前的琐碎情节直到现在还常常回荡在我的脑子里，我想到这些的时候总是忍不住暗暗发笑。现在谁还会背着网球拍穿着白色的鞋袜专门去星巴克喝咖啡呢？中间还要佯装很感兴趣地翻翻看不懂的英文报纸。[121]

With ironic distance, the narrator of this fictional episode looks back at her own behaviour of some years earlier. As with the previous narrator reflecting

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117 In his book, Warren K. Liu, former Vice President of Business Development who worked for *Yum!* Brands to launch Kentucky Fried Chicken on the Chinese market, details the company's business strategy which, according to him, achieved success on the Chinese market because of its meticulous localization efforts. Warren K. Liu, *KFC in China, Secret Recipe for Success* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, Asia, 2008).

118 Yan, "McDonald's in Beijing", 44.

119 Ibid., 43.

120 Ibid., 53.

121 Zhuang Yu 庄羽, *Predestined Love Everywhere* (遍地姻缘) (Guilin: Lijiang chubanshe, 2005), 96.

her desire for McDonald's, this passage may be read as an ethnographic (self-) description. Going to Starbucks is a personal statement: the experience is not just about having coffee. Rather, it is important to wear what seems appropriate to oneself (i.e., pretending to have been working out) and to behave in ways perceived as appropriate (i.e., pretending to be reading English-language media). The protagonist, it seems, had unquestioningly internalised what she might have learned from one of the guidebooks discussed in the previous section of this paper. After all, one of the guidebooks notes that Starbucks is not so much about drinking coffee, but about relishing the atmosphere, an atmosphere with allures of the global.[122] While coffee is not directly linked to romance in this novel, the drink and the venue where it is consumed nonetheless play an important role: firstly, it appears that the character wants to be defined through her attitude—through what and how she consumes. Thus, she styles herself according to what she perceives to be appropriate (in order to be perceived accordingly by others). Secondly, this scene rises up in her mind as she thinks about the end of her relationship. She experienced her romance at the same time as she delved into consumerism, and, especially, into the consumption of coffee. Therefore, a strong indirect link between the two is established—one that is echoed by Starbucks consumers, like the real life Sussie whose lovesickness was discussed earlier.

As both passages from the novels by Zhuang Yu are written in retrospect, the narrators establish some distance between their earlier selves and who they are (or, rather, believe themselves to be) in the present. What they used to do and what they used to perceive as the most modern way to design their lifestyles now seems outdated, maybe even vulgar. This highlights the changing nature of a trend: the most popular trend today may be boring, outdated, or even ridiculous next year. What remains constant, however, is that the characters in these novels continue to define themselves through consumption.

The demystification of the exotic and romantic nature of coffee and McDonald's continues in other fictional texts that appeared as McDonald's and Starbucks became further integrated into the everyday lives of Chinese citizens. One of the *xiaozi* guidebooks contains a brief note for prospective authors of bestselling fiction: among other things, authors are advised to have their first-person narrators "have a coke at a McDonald's restaurant waiting for a person that is about to turn up."[123] This, of course, may also be read as an observation about popular fiction: In a number of texts, McDonald's has become an unremarkable setting: it is mentioned in passing that one goes there

122 Huang, *Petty Bourgeoise*, 204.

123 Sheng, *Open the Rose Door*, 38.

for a meal because the children like it[124] or to meet an unknown person for a conversation.[125] It has turned into a convenient, everyday location that does not need to be given a lot of attention,[126] thus reflecting the development of McDonald's in real life China which has now become a space primarily for children—and is no longer of interest to the *xiaozi* target group.[127] Similarly, characters in fictional texts nonchalantly drink coffee[128] while surfing the internet from home[129] or during other activities.[130] In real life Chinese cities, an increasing number of coffee shops and Western-style restaurants have been established, which is reflected in contemporary popular fiction: Increasingly, therefore, coffee shops rather than McDonald's have become the location for romantic encounters in these texts.[131] The smell of coffee forms an important part of the experience. And even in the political novel *The Fat Years: China 2013* (盛世：中国2013年) the protagonist frequents the shops run by Starbucks—which by the year of this dystopia will have been purchased by the Chinese Wangwang group (旺旺集团) and have added a tasty Longan plum Longjing Latte (桂圆龙井拿铁) to its menu.[132]

These literary texts point to a twofold change: Firstly, the notion of what is considered a "trendy" location for the experience of a (possibly romantic) tryst has shifted from McDonald's to coffee shops (not necessarily to Starbucks, however).[133] Secondly, we see a normalization of the use of these locations.

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124 Wang Hailing 王海鸰, *Chinese-Style Divorce* (中国式离婚) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2004), 208, 281.

125 Ibid., 142.

126 Guo Jingming 郭敬明, *Never-Flowers in Never-Dream* [sic] (梦里花落知多少), in: *Collected works of Guo Jingming* (郭敬明精典作品集) (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe 2003 (2005)), 121.

127 Huang, *Petty Bourgeoise*, 194.

128 Guo, *Never-Flowers in Never-Dream*, 123, 123, 135, 154, 187.

129 Zhuang, *Inner and Outer*, 20.

130 Zhuang, *Predestined Love Everywhere*; Xia Lanxin 夏岚馨, *Beautiful Cannibalistic Fish* (美丽食人鱼) (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 2004), 27, 48; Anni Baobei 安妮宝贝, *Two, Three Things* (二三事) (Haikou: Nanhai chubanshe, 2003), 116, 132.

131 Ibid., 112, 138; Zhuang, *Inner and Outer*, 213.

132 I thank Friederike Assandri for bringing my attention to this novel. Chan Koon-chung 陈冠中, *The Fat Years: China 2013* [sic] (盛世：中国2013年), in: *Shazhuwang* 杀猪网http://shazhude.net/ February 4, 2010, http://shazhude.net/20100204/606/ (accessed June 2, 2011). For an English language translation, see: Koon-chung Chan, *The Fat Years* (London: Doubleday, 2011). See also: Zhansui Yu, "Questioning the 'Chinese Model of Development', A Critical Reading of *Shengshi: Zhongguo 2013*," *The China Beat*, http://www.thechinabeat.org/ July 28, 2010, http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=2423#more-2423 (accessed June 2, 2011).

133 In the texts I analyzed, Starbucks was chosen as a neutral setting. See Guo, *Never-Flowers in Never-Dream*, 162.

Fictional characters go there, but they no longer reflect on it as is the case in Cai Zhiheng's "Philosophy of Coffee" or in the anthropological elaborations of Zhuang Yu's characters. (*The Fat Years* is to be seen on a slightly different trajectory because this is a very popular book, if a political one, but not about romantic love. However, the presence of the chain in the text also reflects its presence in Chinese reality and the proliferation of a literary trend, albeit within a different genre.) In addition, not only those characters who figure as *trendsetters* in the novels, i.e., the leading characters or those who are considered especially fashionable by other characters in the text, frequent these locations and consume food and drinks, but *trend followers* also explore these stores. With the texts just mentioned, the trend has therefore reached its peak—and has already begun to decline, or, rather to change direction as the emphasis on romantic love has given way to less memorable everyday activities. But while the concrete locations change, what remains constant is an observable differentiation: certain locations are considered suitable for the experience of romance. They are "in". The trend changes its appearance, but the greater tendency remains.

Parallels: Adaptation and Convergence of Trends

The two trends analysed here are parallel, interrelated, and converge in terms of content and temporal sequence. As noted, both the literary texts and real life allow for similar observations: McDonald's and the consumption of coffee have distinct meanings; over the course of time, these meanings change: what appeared as exotic and luxurious when first introduced has become a mainstream and rather quotidian experience for certain groups. Adaptation lies at the heart of this process: Over the course of time, authors, literary figures and ordinary consumers in China (at least those of urban middle class provenance) have been able to integrate the exotic into their lifestyles; the exotic has thus become more common.

Adaptation and emulation also link the two spheres and permit an explanation of the trends' convergence. Firstly, to a certain extent, fictional texts may be read as representations of the real world in which they allegedly play. This is not to suggest that authors of contemporary popular fiction strive for blank realism or provide documentary texts. However, part of the attraction of the texts relies on the fact that the stories can be linked to Chinese reality. The brands consumed are tangible objects in this reality. While it is clear that not all Chinese (and possibly not even all the readers of the books under consideration) frequent the Starbucks coffee shops that appear in the novels, these new stores still form part of the visible everyday culture of many urban Chinese. As such, fictional texts amount to a portrait of reality, even if abstracted and, to some extent,

imagined. And in this, the texts provide ample evidence of the importance of consumer culture to many strata of contemporary Chinese society which, in turn, permits a reading of the texts as reflections of the readers' and authors' real-life experiences, and of their desires.

Secondly, as the contents of bestselling novels discussed in this paper constitute a distinct link to reality, these fictional texts invite one to read them in a similar way to the guidebooks, as guides to the correct and most up-to-date lifestyle, instructing their readers how to emulate it. As fictional products, they also operate on a second level: These books offer their readers interpretations of how to experience this new lifestyle and how to give meaning to it within their own lives. Therefore, the increasing amount of consumer products and brand names in contemporary Chinese literary texts is not only a method for authors to characterize the protagonists of their texts, but also a means for readers to learn more and adapt a new lifestyle.

Thirdly, the depiction of consumption in novels is clearly linked to an aestheticization of consumers' lives. Consumption is not merely linked to aesthetic appreciation, as elaborated by Gao Xuanyang.[134] Moreover, as consumption is aestheticized in fictional texts (as well as in guidebooks) it is further elevated, such that it may add an aesthetic layer of meaning to an individual consumer's life. In fact, the way many Starbucks customers reflect on their Starbucks experiences in the stores' guestbooks demonstrates that they perceive them as aesthetic experiences. Through these experiences and through their reflection they demonstrate their own aesthetic sophistication, as for example in the elaborate descriptions of the product and atmosphere, with neat pictures or even poems dedicated to Starbucks coffee, as in the case of one customer by the name of Jasmine Cheng: "Sometimes clear like the spring stream, / Sometimes like turbulent waves in a winding river. / A nature so familiar, yet seemingly unfamiliar, / it is to be felt deep within."[135] This English language poem (which is one of two poems in a long profile of the author who is on the lookout for a language exchange partner) is a reflection of the aesthetic and cosmopolitan ambitions of its author. After all, in the text, she reflects on the sensation of newness and familiarity of Starbucks coffee. Moreover, the text and the aesthetic qualities of the drink serve to style herself as an aesthetic person.

Fourthly, in addition to the parallels in content and meaning, temporal parallels between the two trends are observable. After all, Cai's novel appeared on

134 See above, Gao, *Sociology of Fashion*, 195.

135 Jasmine Cheng, "Mini Profile", *Entry in Starbucks Guestbook at Nanjing Jinling Dian* (南京金陵店), May 30, 2009, collected in August 2009.

the Chinese market at a time when consumption at McDonald's was already firmly established as "an important way for Chinese yuppies [predecessors to the *xiaozi*] to define themselves as middle-class professionals."[136] Moreover, the book was published in the same year that Starbucks opened its first store in Beijing. With the rising acceptance of McDonald's and with its subsequent integration into the lifestyle of larger segments of the population,[137] the meaning it offered to its customers varied: while it still stood for a modern and international lifestyle, by then it had lost some of its exotic appeal. Starbucks, in turn, now provided its customers with something new and, therefore, more exotic, yet something that contained a number of characteristics that urban middle class consumers were already familiar with: predictability of service, taste, and cleanliness, as well as notions of a modern, global, transcultural and Americanized lifestyle. The parallels as well as the popularity of McDonald's, Starbucks, and bestselling fiction lead to their mutual reinforcement and convergence. The reaction of one of my sources (who at the time was a 21-year-old undergraduate student at Fudan University in Shanghai) to the novel and the new consumption outlet permits an understanding of this convergence: She stated that having read the novel, she became curious about the taste of cappuccino. Right at that time, the first local Starbucks branch opened and gave her the opportunity to taste the exotic drink: "I was curious about how it tasted, largely driven by the romantic imagination the novel generated!" Without the novel, we may surmise, she would not have bought one of these expensive drinks. And if, as may be assumed, other people are curious in a similar way, one may wonder whether without the novel Starbucks' entry onto the Chinese market would have been less successful. Which of the trends was there first, is to some extent an irresolvable chicken-and-egg question. It can be stated for sure, though, that the two converged and thus reinforced each other.

Conclusion: Transcultural desires in urban China

The convergence of the two trends, however, does not suffice to explain their success. Rather, the consumable objects associated with them—fast food, coffee, and popular literature—met what may be termed the 'transcultural desires' of the Chinese urban middle class. As noted earlier on, desire has been identified as one of the central elements explaining change in contemporary China as well as in other societies at times of rising consumerism. In the contemporary Chinese

136 Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space", 91.

137 Here, the emergence of children and their families as regular customers at McDonald's is especially noteworthy, see Watson, "China's Big Mac Attack", 70-79.

context, desire serves the population to redefine their position in the world and it serves the government to divert the population: as long as the populace is striving to fulfil their private desires (mostly through consumption and leisure activities), they are less likely to call for political reform. Moreover, as Lisa Rofel argues, the "production of desire lies at the heart of global processes."[138] This is especially true of this case study involving the desire for romance and for consumer products that have travelled around the globe. As a result, the trends, products and practices associated with them are firmly rooted in the reality of urban China, while at the same time carrying with them notions of the foreign, global, cosmopolitan, or international. Thus, these trends, products and practices unite within them the foreign and the familiar, and are rendered essentially transcultural. The transcultural nature of these products conveys notions that are at times precise and at times vague. Since this allows both clear-cut interpretations and a certain amount of flexibility on the part of the consumer, I argue that these transcultural items are particularly suited to meeting desires in contemporary urban China. The consumption of these items, in turn, enables Chinese consumers (like many consumers elsewhere on the globe) to consume modernity and to define themselves as transcultural.

One may, however, wonder in how far the processes analysed in this paper might not be adequately explained as processes of globalisation and localization. One may also wonder in how far a discussion of transcultural aspects promises new insights into the state of contemporary Chinese society and into these global processes. After all, research has rightly demonstrated that the success of global chains and franchises rests on their efforts at localization, thus making the foreign tolerable in its new, Chinese environment, a process in which customers often voluntarily participate.[139]

On the other hand, though, the elements that appear to be globally uniform are highly visible. Many chains have designed their (locally specific) logos such that they are easily recognizable. Chains impose uniform rules and rituals upon their customers, such as the process for ordering a cup of coffee at a Starbucks store. Customers in many cases willingly embrace these rules as they offer orientation in a world of consumption and they embrace these rules as opportunities to consume a modernity that is often linked to notions of an American and therefore progressive lifestyle.[140] For Chinese consumers,

138 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 1.

139 Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space", 93ff; Yan, "McDonald's in Beijing", and Lozada "Globalized Childhood?". For a description of a company's narrative of localization see Liu, *KFC in China*.

140 Interview with a female customer in her thirties at the Nanjing Fenghuang Shucheng Starbucks store 南京凤凰书成店, located inside Nanjing's most popular book store, August 21, 2009, Interview

consumption of Western food is a means to link up with the world.[141] Eating a serving of "crisp but not greasy" French Fries at a suburban Chinese McDonald's or drinking one's (caffè) latte (or: 拿铁) in downtown Nanjing, a customer can imagine they are doing the same as his or her counterpart in downtown Manhattan. This suggests that their lifestyle and attitude to life is closer to urban centers on the other side of the world than, for example, to a farming community in nearby rural Anhui.

Such practices may be described as both global and local. However, global practices imply the levelling down of differences. Localized versions thereof emphasize that the products and practices have undergone significant change, such that they are perceived as "Starbucks turned Chinese"—and global and local seem mutually exclusive. Yet, practices at Chinese McDonald's and Starbucks contain elements of both without causing inner conflicts for the respective customers. Firstly, customers demonstrate knowledge of the world and of modernity by consuming, and by following the rules of the respective enterprise. Chinese consumers do, however, demonstrate a certain amount of indifference when it comes to these rules, as may be seen from the leaflets that the Starbucks company distributes in its stores.[142] In these leaflets the company explains its particular language to its customers. While this may appear at first glance to be a service to the customers, it is also an indication of the fact that customers do not use the desired vocabulary and therefore impede the efficiency at the stores.[143] Secondly, the use of the English language and references to foreign things and places in the Starbucks' guestbooks underlines the consumers' cosmopolitanism. The poem by Jasmine Cheng quoted in the preceding section is one example of such cosmopolitanism. On the surface she is introducing herself and her language skills in search of a language exchange partner. At the same time, this—as well as other English language entries—indicates that a store like Starbucks is perceived as a cosmopolitan space where one may meet foreigners, or at least enjoy the cosmopolitan aura of their potential presence. Even though there is often not a single foreigner present, a Chinese customer may imagine being in such cosmopolitan company, much

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with a 33 year old male customer at *The Gate Store* 新中关店 in Beijing, August 17, 2009.

141 This holds true for fast food as well as for industrially packaged snacks that are perceived as Western, even though they may be produced locally. See Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space", 88; Gilette, "Children's Food and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in Xi'an," 117.

142 See, for example: Starbucks Coffee Company, *Find Your Starbucks* (寻找星巴) (no place, 2008). Starbucks Coffee Company, *How is the taste? Help yourself to your customized drink* (味道怎么样?来一杯属于您自己的饮品吧) (China, 2008).

143 I have developed this point elsewhere in greater detail. See: Henningsen, "Individualism for the Masses?"

as he (or she) may imagine drinking the same coffee in the same manner as a like-minded foreigner in, for example, downtown New York, creating yet another imagined "community of sentiment". In fact, the concrete experiences may vary considerably between a Starbucks store on Fifth Avenue and, say, Nanjing's Jinling store on Hanzhong Road (where Jasmine Cheng wrote her poems and where her readers could "consume" them). What matters, though, for many consumers is that they can imagine themselves participating in a way of life that is perceived as foreign.

Thirdly, foreign elements allow space for vagueness and re-interpretation, as fits one's personal situation (thus, Starbucks for many is deeply entwined with notions of romantic love, and a place to reflect on and define one's image of oneself). At the same time, however, the customers, their practices and their evaluations thereof are deeply rooted in their Chinese reality that has distinct meanings and implications. This is not least to be seen in their often casual integration of these products and practices into their everyday lives. Both foreign and familiar notions are important for the creation of meaning. So, these practices may best be grasped by a third category: transcultural. One single practice simultaneously contains the foreign, the familiar, and the fact that it is rooted in Chinese reality without creating tension or even conflict on the part of the consumer. This process is aided by the fact that consumers are not only provided with objects of consumption, but also with cultural products such as TV programmes, movies, or the novels analysed in this paper. These cultural products have distinct transcultural qualities regardless of their country and culture of origin. They form an integral part in the transmission of global consumer culture. Fictional texts seem particularly efficient in this context. They invite their readers to be read as guidebooks for an up-to-date lifestyle. Moreover, as books they are consumer objects in themselves to be bought, displayed and maybe even read. As such they may also be a means for their readers to display their desired (or imagined) lifestyle, their sense of aesthetics and their imagined affiliation with like-minded people at home and worldwide. Both reading and actual consumption are ways to perform one's imagined and aspired identities. The novels provide consumers with information as well as with possible interpretations and they help spur consumers' imagination. Moreover, they aid consumers in fulfilling their desires—desires for lives that are transcultural.

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