

# **Bourgeois Bohemians in China? Neo-Tribes and the Urban Imaginary<sup>1</sup>**

*China Quarterly*, No. 183, September, 2005.

Jing Wang MIT

## *Abstract*

This article treats an understudied subject in popular culture studies: the mutual feed between lifestyle cultures and marketing through an examination of the Bobo fever in urban China. How did an imaginary class "bourgeois bohemians" emerge in a country where the bourgeois base is statistically small and where the bohemian equation is non-existent? To shed light on this pop-culture-turned-marketing-fad syndrome, the article introduces the concept of the "neo-tribes" and maps the pathways that link style cultures to consumer segmentation. A couple of critical questions arise from this exercise. First, is the separability of taste from class symptomatic of a "Chinese leap of faith"? And secondly, is the hottest market segment today - the "neo-neo-tribes" -- preparing us to address the convergence of a global youth culture?

If American economist Thorstein Veblen lived in urban China today, he would be very gratified. Nowhere else would he find a larger population than the Chinese who are so eager to practice his theory of "pecuniary emulation."<sup>2</sup> Why did Louis Vuitton, Prada, BMW, and Fendi all regard China as the center of turbo-growth? That is because their near-term investment will be paid off "in secondary cities like Dalian, Shenyang, and Chengdu, where second-tier status as a city translates into *first-tier* desires by the residents."<sup>3</sup> You are what you consume. That is, consumption is built on a tiered logic: For those situated lower on the hierarchy, there is no faster way of acquiring social prestige than emulating the lifestyle of those higher up on the pecking order. In August 2002 when I finished my internship at Ogilvy,<sup>4</sup> "third-tier" cities (southern county towns) already entered the marketing lingo, conjuring up the scenario that average residents in affluent county townships will soon be catching up with second-tier desires.<sup>5</sup> A musical chair was set in motion, with lower tiers busy making an urban imaginary that is always already a tier higher. All this, I would propose, is the social logic of consumption Veblen

elucidates so well in The Theory of the Leisure Class.

This essay deals with an understudied topic in the field of popular cultural studies, i.e., the mutual imbrication between lifestyle cultures and marketing. Marketing is often the missing link in suties of the relationship between popular culture and consumer culture. By concentrating on the Chinese Bobo discourse, I wish to accomplish two goals. The first is to examine the logic of market segmentation that fuels the engine of emulative spending. More specifically, an analysis of the proliferating tribal discourses in China will map the pathways that link lifestyle cultures to consumer segmentation. The second is to treat the Bobo discourse both as a pop cultural *and* a marketing phenomenon. I look at the contemporary mutation of the anthropological concept “tribe” into a new marketing term *zu or zuqun* (“neo-tribe”) and the challenge this new term poses to the old notion of “subculture.” I hope to demonstrate that without delimiting and naming the target segment for a product, the engine of emulation could not get started. That is because emulation is made possible through the consumer’s identification with a given socio-cultural segment, or a given “tribe.” To flesh out this “tribal” logic of consumerism, this essay takes us into the social space of distinction at the higher end of the consumption ladder in urban China. This is an imaginary space criss-crossed by various funny acronyms evolving around the concept of the “neo-tribes.” We will meet the Chinese “Bobos” and *xin xin renlei* (the “neo-neo-tribe”) and examine the real and imaginary benchmarks for the membership for each tribe.

Indeed, if consumption is conceived as an upward spiral movement that progresses tier by tier, as I pointed out above, what do the upper echelons do? Sit on top of the ladder waiting for those below them to close up the ranks? That is hardly the case. An upscale marketer’s job is

largely defined by their tactics of hairsplitting those further up the social hierarchy into tiny market segments. Those niche segments serve to set themselves apart not only from mass consumers but also from *each other*. At first glance, the myriad “tribal” discourses now mushrooming in urban China seem nothing more than novel marketing strategies targeted at the newly affluent. However, whether marketers can create wants, as the 1960s mass culture critique would have us believe, is no simple question with a quick answer. Contemporary cultural producers themselves share no such faith in their power of controlling the mind of consumers as their counterparts in the early 1900s did.<sup>6</sup> As a society grows more affluent, successful marketing depends increasingly upon unearthing consumers’ own preference and desire and then selling it back to them. The tribal logic, for instance, would have no purchase if it had not tapped into the existing anxieties of the socially privileged. What are their anxieties? To be caught up by the emulative mass consumers. That is to suggest, those further up on the social ladder, i.e., neo-tribes like the Bobos, play the game of differentiation as fervently as those down under. In consumerism, differentiation and emulation are two sides of the same coin. China is no exception.

### **The Bobo Fever**

“These are highly educated folk who have one foot in the bohemian world of creativity and another foot in the bourgeois realm of ambition and worldly success. The members of the new information age elite are bourgeois bohemians. Or, to take the first two letters of each word, they are Bobos.”<sup>7</sup>

David Brooks’ Bobos in Paradise is a comic sociology about the rise of America’s new elite in the age of knowledge economy and its impact on American upscale culture. Who would have

guessed a facetious celebration of the wedding between the 1960s counterculture and the 1980s over-achievement craze would trigger a Bobo fetishism in China? In September 2002, the Chinese translation of the book arrived in major cities and became an instant best seller. *Xiaozi*, “petty bourgeoisie,” a term trendy only a year ago, became a passe overnight. “Everybody else is already a bobo, what are we waiting for?!” Blast a popular declaration. As 2002 drew to an end, the Bobo became a Chinese poster child without a hint of irony.

A Chinese word *bobo* was coined to sound almost exactly like the English word. But many others resort to an indigenized version of the original-- “*bubo*”—a combination of the first syllable of the two Chinese words, *buerqiaoqiya* (bourgeois) and *boximiya* (bohemia). The term advanced to the No. 3 slot on the list of top ten Internet words in China in 2002, trailing “keep pace with the times,” and No. 2, “the Three Representatives.”<sup>8</sup>

A small café near Southeast University in Nanjing named itself Bobo Café, a perfect example of a second-tier city teeming with first-tier desires. There was at least one website *Xici hutong* ([www.xici.net](http://www.xici.net)) that once posted a Bobo page and provided advice on how Bobos are supposed to act, on where to find them and how to become one. After answering some multiple choice questions (e.g., “Are you satisfied with your life?” and “what do you think of Italian fashion?”), web surfers could assess their own potential for being a Bobo.<sup>9</sup> In the capital, businessman Zhang Luzi opened the DIY@bobo Bar to provide a home for this new social group. There was also a short-lived Bobos Club in Beijing that sponsored lectures on *fengshui* and other topics related to “spirituality.” The list goes on and on. A bobo marketing craze appeared in first, second, and third tier cities and an entertaining debate unfolded in the press and on the internet.

First, a sampler of advertising copies that cashed in on the Bobo fever:

*Alcatel OT715*

**“Have you ever heard of ‘Bobos’ ? . . . a social group in search of freedom, challenges, and spiritual fulfillment. They are keen on creating the genuine meaning of life for themselves. A Bobo demands the best from life. They are seeking products of exquisite taste and quality, but more importantly, of products that display character and an essence of free spirit. Bobos have been looking everywhere for an ideal cell phone. Not until now did they spot the new Alcatel OT715. . . It combines the 1970s retro style of elegance and the cool attitude of the twenty-first century . . .”<sup>10</sup>**

*Legend Solei Notebook E100*

**“A well-cultivated person will not stoop to compete for the No. 1 place with average Joes and Janes. A Bobo is well-cultivated. His notebook displays a style of simplicity. Bobos love country folk, a weathered fisherman, a craftsman in the remote countryside, or a short and plump artist who dances simple folk dances and sings simple folk songs. For Bobos, those simple-minded country people look serene and peaceful. Although they are poor, they live a rich life . . . Corresponding to the fundamental spirit of the Bobos is the simple but smart looking E100. It is clothed in simple dark blue, but its key board and LCD screen shines in fashionable silver. A contradictory color scheme like this matched with a daring design delivers to the Bobos a jazzy sense of romance.”<sup>11</sup>**

*Bobo International, Changsha, Hunan Province*

**“In Bobo International, you get a perfect view of the mountains and hear the sound of the Xiang River gently stroking the banks. If you want to snack, turn on the electric burners. In a few minutes, you will be enjoying a drink with your beloved under the moonlight – over a few simple appetizers”<sup>12</sup>**

From category to category, from copy to copy, the word “Bobo” and its affinities delivered a single message: premium value. If you spot some tongue-in-cheek humor in the advertising copies above, be assured irony has no place in marketing plans in China. Chinese Boboism retained none of Brooks’s satirical edge. What reads like a parody to non-target segments (cultural theorists like myself) actually touched a chord in China’s fad enthusiasts who are searching for a lifestyle breakthrough. Many such Bobo campaigns (like the one cited below) went way over the top. You would have to wonder where the Bohemian part of the equation went.

***The Guangzhou Project: Searching Online for Bobo Prospects***

The corporation in question, let us call it S Real Estate, is located in Guangzhou. It singled out Bobos as their target clients. To pare down advertising expenditure, the company relied on the Internet for promotions. They devised an elaborate communications plan: to identify the target segment and attract their attention, several online activities were launched simultaneously: A search for bobos in Guangzhou; a contest for the ten coolest bobos in Guangzhou; a web editorial called “Bobos and their poetic lives”; an online serialized story penned by a fictional bobo living in the S apartment complex – “Love soars on the wings of poetry: the confessions of a bobo”; (5) A FLASH animation site advertising the “happy life style of bobos” and the brand essence of the S apartments (i.e., happy life =freedom + wealth+

mindfulness).

The maximum impact of this communications plan can be gauged from the questionnaires for the online bobo search:

1. Are you looking for something cool about a refrigerator rather than its cooling function when you are shopping for one?
2. Are you one of those who often wear hiking boots and ski goggles or some unconventional gears to work?
3. Will you be willing to give up your job at the drop of a hat and go to a far-off place for a month?
4. Do you feel that being single for the rest of your life is no big deal?
5. You are an atheist. But one day you fall in love and feel that it is God's will?
6. Isn't it unbearable if your living space does not give you a poetic sense of life?
7. Is it a torture to live in a place that looks just like any other place without a personality?

If you answer "yes" to *any* of the questions above, contact the S Corporation immediately. You are a prospective bobo qualified for some incentive awards comprised of a surprise gift and a complimentary day trip to the S apartment complex. And mind you, if you are interested in running for the "ten coolest bobo" championship in Guangzhou, all you have to do is to enter a prose writing contest by submitting the most "poetic" and "personality building" experience you have ever had. A selection panel will pass the verdict. The ten winners will be given the title of *Bubo jueshi* - Sir Bobos!<sup>13</sup>

### **The Debate: Bursting the Bubos**

Not every one, of course, was buying the trend and falling for overblown marketing ploys. After the initial fanfare waned a little, Beijing's most authoritative lifestyle magazine, Life Weekly, was quick to point out that there are very few Bobos in China. Others like Ye Ying, editor of "Lifestyle" at The Economic Observer, were reluctant to underestimate the appeal of the Bobo lifestyle to the urban youth.<sup>14</sup> It is most likely, she predicts, that the fever will linger, and I add, especially at places where there is a critical mass of the nouveau riche. This observation may not be far fetched especially in the changing social climate of the post-Jiang Zeming era. The original Bobo spirit – an affluent class opposed to soulless materialism – did touch a raw nerve in China's rising social elite.

*The social value of affluence in a socialist country is never stable.* In 2003 and 2004, being labeled "rich" brought mixed blessings. Closer social scrutiny was but one small inconvenience the rich had to endure. It was the guilt trip that took away the pleasure of being an upstart. A new generation of Party leaders was touting the politically correct slogan "social justice" (*shehui gongzheng*), holding back, at least in theory, the ethos of mindless materialism. Media attention was lavished on the "three *nong* problems (peasants [*nongmin*], villages [*nongcun*], and agriculture [*nongye*]). President Hu Jintao moved "poverty alleviation" and "social conscience" to the top of the national agenda. Premier Wen Jiabao made headlines in the early months of 2004 with a personal campaign of helping rural migrants collect overdue wages. The social impact of all this was a discursive backlash on the new rich and their unconscionable behavior. Paul Mooney's report in Newsweek quotes a Beijing writer saying, "People look down on the nouveau riche, and that's why [the] Chinese are keen to add the bohemian title."<sup>15</sup> There are numerous instances emphasizing the social costs of materialism gone berserk. In 2003,



a second-degree murder trial that involved a rich woman running over a peasant in her BMW stirred up a media furor. In 2004, the murder of four dorm mates at Yunnan University by poor peasant student Ma Jiajue triggered another round of social criticism. This time, the materialistic society at large was blamed for its indifference to a tortured student trapped in extreme poverty and driven to insanity. It is fair to say that although “wealth” will never become a stigma for the rich in the same way as “poverty” to the poor, the Chinese court of public opinion has sentenced the unconscionable rich “guilty,” signaling a profound shift of the collective emotional identification away from the nouveau riche to the old and new poor. The bobo phenomenon thus provided China’s new elite with the possibility that materialism can be reconciled with spirituality, elite status with egalitarian ideals.

The fever, interestingly, struck a chord in social critics as well. It rejuvenated a perennial question: Just how *large* is China’s “bourgeoisie”? China has never had bohemians, but should the bourgeois side of the equation for the bobos be taken for granted? Life Weekly debunked both the old and new myth: “Perhaps China does not have real Bobos because the Chinese ‘middle class’ has not been fully formed.”<sup>16</sup> The editors went on in a satirical vein, saying that *bu* (bourgeois) is what the Chinese are really after, and *bo* (bohemian) is but a sham and disposable. If we have to perform a social reading on the S Real Estate advertising discussed above, it certainly validates such an insight. Could it be that the Bobo discourse traveled well in China because it pinpointed the double lack? Rule No. 1 in the Great Book of Consumption: naming a lack is the fastest way to guarantee its quick rise in demand.

### **In Search of the “Middle Class”**

The bourgeoisie question predictably elevated the Bobo discourse to a level of discussion to which only serious sociological researchers could respond. But the transition of a lifestyle topic into a sociological one had not occurred. Nor was the challenge posed by Life Weekly answered by cultural critics. By spring 2004, not many follow-up discussions on the controversy reached the public arena. One reason could be that the public's attention was diverted from the question of the "middle class" to the new benchmark for social stratification, namely, *xiaokang* (the "comparatively well-to-do," a cut below the middle class). Clearly, although South China has bigger stakes in promoting the discourse of the "middle class," the north and the rest of the country are drawn to *xiaokang* as a policy concept that is deemed more relevant for its less affluent population.

The middle-class question, however, demands attention not least because it too often got lost in ideological clutter. More important, the major characteristic of Chinese Boboism resides in its promoters' belief in the separability of class from taste. For while David Brooks's American boboism is unmistakably a caste phenomenon and fundamentally a class formation, Chinese boboism as a thriving social imaginary did not correspond to the bobos as a real social class. Thus the statistics of the Chinese middle class provided much fuel to those critics who debunk the bobo phenomenon. They uphold that the future of boboism hinges on whether there is a bourgeois *base* to begin with. Seen in that perspective, the bourgeois equation is essential for boboism to take root in China and is worthy of critical attention.

A research report published in 2004 provides statistics on the Chinese middle class.<sup>17</sup> Four criteria are outlined in modern sociology to assess whether one belongs to the middle class: by professional status; by income; by patterns of lifestyle consumption; and by subjective

cognition. The data for the Chinese study were collected by a research team at the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences engaged in a study called “Structural Changes of Contemporary Chinese Society.” Between November and December 2001, the team collected data from people between 16 and 70 years old living in 12 provinces and special municipalities, and 73 districts and counties. At the end of the research period, they derived 6,193 valid samples.

First, 15.90% of those surveyed can be categorized as middle class by profession (*zhiye zhongchan*). Five professions, Party and political officials, business managerial class, private entrepreneurs, technical skilled labor, and office workers, are labeled “white collar” professions. Secondly, 24.6% are middle class by income. There is no standard mean for all the regions surveyed. Income gaps are huge between places. If *national* income index was used as the standard for social classification, then there would be some very odd results: those living in the metropolis whose economic condition is inferior would be categorized as “higher income earners,” and those who are relatively wealthy in underdeveloped regions might be grouped into “low income earners.” It is therefore necessary that the “mean” is calculated on regional rather than national basis. The survey areas were divided into six regions: developing cities, towns, and districts; the comparatively well developed towns, cities, and districts; underdeveloped cities, towns, and districts; developing villages and rural areas; well developed villages and rural areas; and underdeveloped rural areas. The research team derived the average figure of an individual’s monthly income region by region. Those whose income rose above the mean in each region were counted as the “middle class,” those below the mean were not.

Thirdly, 35% of those surveyed are the middle class by standards of consumption and lifestyle. Like the income index, a universal standard for the “middle class lifestyle” is hard to

define, let alone to achieve, in a country as culturally diverse as China. Li Chunling and her research team argue that with some exceptions seen among the middle-aged and young people in metropolises, “so-called middle class culture has not appeared in China.” Since a specific standard of “cultural” consumption was absent, the researchers developed an elaborate point system for measuring each household’s capacity for consuming medium-range and high end luxury goods. “Middle-class lifestyle goods” were divided into four categories, (1) necessity electric appliances (e.g., color TV, refrigerator, washing machine); (2) medium-level consumer goods (e.g., telephone, mobile phone, CD player, microwave, air-conditioner, etc.); (3) luxury goods (e.g., computer, camcorder, piano, motorcycle); (4) automobile. Each of the items listed in the first two categories is worth one point; in the third category, four points; while households that own a car get twelve points. The “consumer middle class” (*xiaofei zhongchan*) resulted from the calibration and comparison of the total scores earned by each household. The 35% figure, however, failed to acknowledge the wide gaps of consumption pattern between urban and rural China (50.2% and 25.1% respectively) and between generations (with the young people between 21-30 scored 41.8% and the older generation 24.1%).

The last category, “subjective cognition,” yields the largest percentage. As many as 46.8% of those surveyed considered themselves members of the “middle class.” Gender difference is minimal in this category. Schooling also matters little. Interestingly, 40.8% of those who had not gone beyond primary school education identified themselves with the middle class, compared to 72.9% of college graduates. Approximately 31.1% of those who never went to school considered themselves “middle class” as well.

Those are decent statistic figures. However, if the four criteria are combined to arrive at a

comprehensive index for the middle class, then the percentage of Chinese bourgeoisie dropped to a 4.1%- 6%. Even in big cities, the percentage is as low as 8.7% -12%. That is, the percentage of Chinese – who are white-collar workers, whose income falls into the medium range, whose consumption level reaches the median, and who at the same time identify themselves as middle class – is only a little above ground-level.

### **Class or Taste? A Leap of Faith**

Instead of asking “where are the Chinese bobos?” one may now ponder “where are the Chinese bourgeoisie?” It seems that the country has a long way to go before a real caste with an economic power equal to that of the American yuppies-turned-hippies (i.e., American bobos) will emerge. Meanwhile, the bobos as an urban imaginary and marketing in the name of Bobo seems to have paid off. That is a Chinese paradox. Nothing seemed to stop the Chinese from indulging themselves in a social imaginary that fans their dream of being part of the global, “cosmopolitan” culture.

Bobo fever was indicative of one symptom that I will call “a leap of faith in the separability of taste from `class’” (as in *jieji*).” Chinese cultural brokers sold boboism in China as a lifestyle fad rather than a product of a class culture. Does it really matter if China does not have bobos as long as upscale consumers wear the bobo lifestyle on their sleeves? Marketers couldn’t care less. But it is fascinating that China’s society commentators were oblivious to the real meat in Bobos in Paradise – the historical rise of the bobos in America as a distinct class of its own. Granted that David Brooks argues that bobos’ meritocratic culture thrives on blurring class distinctions and that he debunked Marx’s theory of “class conflict,” a close reading of his book

provides us none other than a detailed sociological profile of a new, dominant American establishment class, which, in his words, defines the “parameters of respectable opinion and taste.”<sup>18</sup>

There is much to speculate about the characteristic of the Chinese bobo fever as a discourse that decouples the bobo “class” from the bobo “taste.” That phenomenon was no fluke. The popularity of Bobos in Paradise and other similar books about lifestyle choices point to a cultural symptom prevalent in 2000s China. Urban China was overcrowded with social trends that usually emerge in *post*-affluent societies in the West. How can Chinese consumers appreciate one-downmanship when they have not had enough practice of one-upmanship? Questions like taste, the “freedom” of lifestyle choices, and one-downmanship came to plague a country where only some 4.1-6% are certified middle class. Before wealth accumulates and trickles down to the masses, anxieties of abundance have already hit taste fanatics and the would-be Bobos. Gaps between the post-affluent urban imaginary and the social real continued to widen as the fights between society commentators and social critics stormed on. This is probably quite a fascinating spectacle for Western trend spotters. But for the majority of Chinese for whom social classes conflict rather than blur, the urban imaginary closing in upon them seems to be spinning out of control. But then one might say, when is China *not* in crisis? And the bobo fever was surely a passing trend already overtaken by other flashier neo-tribes.

### **Bobos as a Market Segment**

In many regards, urban China is an endless fashion race trying to beat the escalating turnovers. The protagonists came and went. But the marketers stayed. From probing the bobo fever as a

popular cultural syndrome, this section moves on to examine it as a marketing phenomenon. In fact, some of the shrewdest observations about the bobo fever were made by marketers. In April 2003, a group of eighteen of them gathered at Beijing's Postmodern Tower for a brainstorming session sponsored by Successful Marketing, a trade magazine. The agenda was: What kind of "marketing opportunities" (*shangji*) will the bobo fever offer to Chinese marketers?

### ***The Bobo Symposium***

There can be no better venue in Beijing than the Postmodern Tower for a marketing symposium on the bobos. Inside the Tower, everything is pared down to the Rule No. 4 of the Bobo Code of Financial Correctness (i.e., "You can never have too much texture").<sup>19</sup> Craggy brick walls without decorations, bare unfinished wooden floor pieced together with irregularly shaped planks. The Tower exudes the Bobo's spirit of calculated casualness.

Several questions were put on the table: How many bobos are there really in China? Can a minority group like that support a product line? The crowd was divided. But regardless of the size issue, they were in strong agreement about the necessity of cashing in on the trend. You don't have to believe in the leap of faith to take advantage of it. The following is a sample of quotes from the symposium participants:

"Bobos have dreams. So they are easy targets. They can be easily moved by 'concepts' and 'storytelling'."

"Sell them the bobo spirit."

"Chinese society will witness an increasingly large affluent class. Although we will probably never be sure whether X or Y is a bobo, but we will surely see them display some Bobo characteristics such as a preoccupation with creativity and spiritual values."

“Our marketing opportunities will rest on whether we can provide products with added values that transcend materialism. For instance, sell ambience and service at entertainment venues such as bars and restaurants.”

“You can detect a new social tendency now. Business behavior must be wedded to cultural concepts. Only when competition takes place at a certain cultural height and at a spiritual level can you make your products stand out.”

“Bobos value personal experiences. They like to be adventurers. But they are not iconoclasts. Nor are they opposed to being trendy. Their main value coincides with the core value of society. That’s the fundamental reason why they are so successful. . . We should not associate boboism with a fad or with an act of rebellion. We should not look upon them as mere upstarts either. They don’t ever rebel.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***DINKs and the Neo-Tribe Co.***

The last quote is especially insightful in its no-nonsense assessment of the Bobo unconscious, in China at least. But understanding who the Bobos are is one thing, motivating them to spend is another. “First give me a reason why I should buy?”, a hypothetical question raised by Chinese Bobos. What are their desires like and how should they be captured? The answer to those million dollar questions is simple, the marketers at the symposium argued. Give them “id” labels. Sell them distinct personalities. The symposium named such a desire “self-validation” and a burning need of China’s young generation to broadcast to the world, “who I am!”<sup>21</sup>

This is an explanatory moment that brings to the foreground the phenomenon of proliferating “neo-tribes” in China. Barely had one tribe entered the spotlight did another emerge to upstage it, all occurring at stunningly short intervals. Other societies are plagued by neo-tribes



as well (after all we live in consumer societies). But the frenzy in China, as I noted above, tops them all, leading to headlines like “The IFs<sup>22</sup> have come. Don’t you ever mention bobos any more!” Meanwhile, the International Freeman are fighting for the limelight with another tribe dubbed DINKs – Double Income, No Kids. The tiny stage is getting very crowded.

Hairsplitting stratification has indeed come in vogue since the early 2000s. Chinese marketers claim that they are merely following the social desire for stratification. And in the case of the bobo fever, they could hardly catch up. On the other hand, some symposium attendees were honest about the necessity of meticulous segmentation. Marketing follows the 2/8 principle. 80% of a society’s purchasing power is concentrated on the top 20% consumer elites. Ironically, high income earners have grown increasingly indifferent to consumption. Old demographic indexes like “age” and “income” are not strong identity markers any more. Premium consumers need catchy cultural identities to distinguish themselves from the other *fellow* elites. Thus the marketing craze for fastidious positioning churns out one tribal epithet after another.

### **Michel Maffesoli and the Tribal Paradigm**

I waited thus far to venture into the theoretical backbone of the tribal discourse because I believe in the explanatory power of what walks on the streets rather than what is produced in the study (on matters of consumerism at least). The previous sections should have made it fairly obvious that the situation facing China is the extreme facility with which the “neo-tribes” cast off their old identity labels and put on new ones. The Chinese have gone to an extreme, but the fever for ‘neo-tribes’ was a “foreign” phenomenon transported from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan. Perhaps what is happening in China is only a hyperbole of consumer society in general. What is the connection between consumerism and the tribal discourse?

French sociologist Michel Maffesoli made a breakthrough in theorizing contemporary consumer society. We live in “the time of the tribes,” he says, which witnesses the explosion of lifestyle cultures. Tribes are organized around brand names and role-playing fantasies. Old categories such as the core identity, subjectivity, autonomy, and even subculture have fallen short of accounting for new forms of “sociality.” He distinguishes the “social,” defined in terms of the “rational association of individuals having a precise identity” from “sociality,” the highly unstable space where a multiplicity of contingent tribal circles intersect and make meaning situationally. “The dramatic authenticity of the social is answered by the tragic superficiality of sociality.”<sup>23</sup>

Maffesoli is both fascinated and repulsed in turn by the chameleon instinct of the performing self that drives today’s consumer culture. Sometimes he complains about the “conformism” of youth culture and reveals a nostalgia for a stable subject position captured in the old concept of the ‘individual’ - “what we are witnessing is the loss of the idea of the individual in favor of a much *less distinct* mass.”<sup>24</sup> But despite a small handful of occasional epistemological slippages, Maffesoli maintains consistently, true to the Weberian spirit, that “identity is never, from the sociological point of view, anything but a simply floating and relative condition.”<sup>25</sup> He describes the cultural moment of neo-tribalism as a multitude of fluid networks “confirmed on a daily basis.”<sup>26</sup>

There is a flip side to this phenomenon, as Maffesoli insinuates: the guarantee of group *solidarity* of the neo-tribes became as fragile as their occasional gatherings (and dispersals). He thus tempts us to raise new questions about solidarity: What happens to human fellowship in the new age of media convergence? Specifically, how is “solidarity” registered, felt, and articulated

when conversations are accessed on different media *simultaneously*? When karma is only a click away, what does “bonding” mean? The Time of the Tribes is littered with metaphorical moments that tease out the technological link of the tribal paradigm which, as I will show later, lies at the heart of the emerging tribe of the day, i.e., *xin xin renlei*.

However Maffesoli does not provide a real-life specimen of his object of analysis, merely a theoretical skeleton. That is one of the reasons why this article consists of the social mosaic of neo-tribes *in motion*. The instantaneous rise of the Bobos & Co. in China is highly instructive for the evolving critical inquiries into the tribal question at large.

### ***A “post-subcultural” era?***

A discussion of Maffesoli would sound incomplete without a mention of the impact of his theories on Dick Hebdige’s “subculture” couched in the tradition of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Or, conversely, one could say that the tribal paradigm can only make sense if we were to set it off against the earlier paradigm of subculture. Does the theory of “subculture,” which predicated the simple dichotomy between a monolithic mainstream culture and politically conscious resistant subcultures, stand valid in the new economy where the old boundaries between ‘culture’ and ‘economy,’ ‘activism’ and ‘consumerism’ can no longer be as clearly drawn as in Hebdige’s time?

Perhaps the most concentrated effort of re-conceptualizing Hebdige’s old paradigm was seen in the Vienna symposium called “Post-Subcultural Studies” held in May 2001. A new field was said to be born, with a large contingent of European researchers of youth culture who share with each other an overriding interest in examining dance and music style cultures. Most participants of that symposium agreed on the demise of “subcultural heroism” of the 1970s and

1980s.<sup>27</sup> However, the allure of alternative models such as Maffesoli's is seen to have a caveat – it theorizes 'politics' away too readily. If the "optimum strategy" of the neo-tribes is "to tap into a number of lifestyles, adopting whichever one best fits the situation to hand," their irreverent energy appears to be utterly purposeless.<sup>28</sup> How to rescue or redefine 'activism' from the increasingly instantaneous tribal formations constitutes one of the central missions underlying the new critical literature that touts the arrival of the 'post-subcultural' era.

One can clearly see the watershed of such a paradigmatic shift in urban China as well. Anybody familiar with the clubbing and music scene in the Chinese metropolises would be struck by the frantic tribalization of new taste cultures. Cui Jian's days are gone. So is Chinese subculture with an *angst*. Jay **Chow**, Fei Wong, and Pu Shu, each a spokesperson for at least one major commodity product, are now the hottest pop icons. Rebellious postures are chic. It has little to do with iconoclasm. China's young generations are courting the *safe cool*, a party-going esprit unattended by the kind of soul-searching sought by the proponents of the new European post-subcultural movement bent on repoliticizing youth cultures with a carnivalesque twist. One should, of course, not preclude any examination of what is emerging in China by taking a European model as a starting point of analysis. The temptation to make such a comparison is, however, difficult to resist precisely because cool marketing and global branding has given new impetuses to the formation of the target segment called "global youth" – international urban youths aged from late teens to the early twenties. It is a transnational marketer's ultimate dream: enabled by digital technology and international marketing, a global youth culture is converging from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Is it happening? It would seem there is not such an easy equation between the West and the rest as maintained by earnest advocates of cultural

globalization. “Cool’ music and “alternative” youths in China hardly signal the same thing as their counterparts in Euro-America.<sup>29</sup> The concept of “convergence,” however, has real value when applied to the East Asian equation. There is no denying that East Asian youth cultures are now converging on a new tribal sensation, *xin xin renlei*.

### ***Xin xin renlei: The East Asian Connection***

A litmus test of Maffesoli’s theory can be conducted in East Asia where market segmentation in tribal terms has taken on a life of its own. Maffesoli’s *tribus* has splintered into tiny subdivisions, each half a generation apart, in places like China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan. Not surprisingly, neo-tribes in China such as the bobos, DINKs, and IFs are now considered rather conservative in their taste because as the established social elites, they are not as cool as their followers, the ‘neo-neo-tribe’ – Asia’s hottest market segment. This emerging tribe is in their late teen and early twenties and who crosses gender divisions. They have a symbiotic existence with high-tech communication gadgets. Their threshold for irreverence is immeasurable. And with a shallower pocket than the bobos’, they are no easy prey for mainstream consumerism.

Maffesoli should be given credit for mentioning that “the feeling of tribal belonging can be reinforced by technological developments.”<sup>30</sup> But when he penned his theory of neo-tribalism in 1988, he hardly foresaw that technology itself could create a tribe of its own complete with a system of distinction that sounds alien even to the neo-tribes. In China, the neo-neo-tribe is the first generation that grew up in the internet chat rooms. Their counterparts in Japan are participants in a vibrant cell phone youth culture which has just begun to sweep urban China.

It is not a coincidence that the Chinese term *xin xin renlei* is a transliteration of the Japanese term *shin shin jinrei* introduced to the mainland via Hong Kong and Taiwan. This word

is used almost synonymously with ‘Generation X and Y’ in Taiwan. In Japan, it refers to the post-second baby boomers generation who are in their late teens and early twenties. A discussion about the cross-border journey of a marketing concept is perhaps long over due for we cannot talk about the urban imaginary in one East Asian country without crossing national boundaries. Indeed, the tribal logic in consumer culture is as much an inter-Asian phenomenon as it is Chinese. The challenge is to work out how to trace its traffic when sources are mostly hearsay and of electronic origins. It is not within the scope of this essay to address the comparative question about the East Asian neo neo-tribes at length. To raise this subject, however, serves an immediate purpose: it is a reminder of the important link of marketing to our study of East Asian youth culture and consumer culture.

### ***Chinese xin xin renlei***

What is a Chinese neo neo-tribe like? A quick profile should confirm its parasitic existence with their counterparts in other Asian societies.

“*Xin xin renlei* don their hair in all kinds of colors. Their cool faces give an exaggerated cold blank stare. They are dressed in plastic and metal looking clothes. . . They just want to look different. They are trend pursuers. They are a superficial and restless tribe . . . There is another way of portraying them: if you look human, then you do not belong to the neo-neo-tribe yet.”<sup>31</sup>

“*Xin xin renlei* is inexplicable. So far we have not yet figured out their lingo, behavioral code, and life philosophy. The so-called neo-neo-tribe should not be seen as a mere signpost for a certain historical period. More important, it points to an uncertain ideology. In China, this tribe’s ties with traditionalism are disappearing. Their thoughts and views on life are rapidly

aligned with the international norm. Born in the late 1970s, they are distanced from “tradition.” Their knowledge about the past was channeled indirectly through movies, novels, and TV drama. Their literary sensibility is nurtured in Japanese manga. This is a generation fed by ‘fast food culture’ while they are growing up. Compared to the previous generation, they are much more independent, wilful, and self-centered. Their way of absorbing things is DIY (Do It Yourself). Indoctrination and preaching find no place in their lives.”<sup>32</sup>

“Having fun is the most important thing in life. . . Acting ‘cool’ is the art and wisdom of a rebellion against a mediocre life.”<sup>33</sup>

Pinning them down to a consistent profile is difficult. Real-life *xin xin renlei* can be seen at China News online, exemplified by Xiaolong (Little Dragon) and Nina.<sup>34</sup> This is a generation known to care about nothing but “fashion,” “hair styles,” “computers gadgets,” and “relationships.”<sup>35</sup> But “fashion” here takes on a different meaning than what it means to the neo-tribes. It points to an attitude rather than glittering material objects.

We can debate to no end as to whether *xin xin renlei*’s rebellious attitude is reminiscent of Hebdige’s subculture paradigm or of Maffesoli’s tribal logic. But I think the question of rebellion is a red herring. “Having fun” and “doing whatever I want to do” is the key to unlocking the enigma of the neo-neo-tribe. Another point of entry is technology. A “classic visual image of the neo-neo-tribe” is “a lone figure arching over a computer like a big shrimp.”<sup>36</sup>

### ***The Sammy Point of View, Hong Kong Style***

This final section provides a case study of an advertising campaign for Philippine’s leading brew San Miguel Light sold in Hong Kong. It is a campaign about “attitude,” and its target, Hong

Kong's neo neo-tribe.

How to position a light beer that is a line extension of an aging flagship brand posed a challenge to the Ogilvy Hong Kong team. The breakthrough came when researchers inserted San Mig Light right into the social space of young drinkers.<sup>37</sup>

The research question was: What is going on in their fickle minds? Through a five-pronged approach, a mosaic of stories and dialogues among those youngsters and about them were sampled. Together, they reveal a pattern of consistent "attitude" as follows:

"Their conversation is disorganized, there is no subject or theme, [they] live in a blue sky conversational world . . . as the conversation goes. . . , they start to shift other things"; "The most difficult problem is 'what to eat' . . . Simply thinking about what to eat will spend us a day";

"Who will be calling me? Who will have nothing to do now? After calling him, I'll call someone else who has nothing to do";

"I'm seduced by sensory stimulus."<sup>38</sup>

This is obviously a tribal group seeking instant gratification listlessly, but a deeply bonded crowd. Thinking that home is the "most boring place of all," they are driven out into the metropolis of urban Hong Kong. They are crazy for visual and sensory stimuli, "anything that hints of mischief making, that is visually fun . . . But everything is instantly disposable."<sup>39</sup> They move quickly on to the next "hit."

This profile is similar to that of China's neo-neo-tribe, and crazier and wilder than the Japanese *shin shinjinrui*, but they all share the same C-culture – cartoons, computers, comic books, and nintendo games. They all speak and consume the same visual language. Based on



those field observations, the brand personality for San Mig Light took shape quickly. He is a little guy who follows his own instinct, who does not give a damn for public opinion, a trickster guided by impulses rather than by the mind. A new mascot was born: Sammy.

When I first greeted that naughty little devil in a series of print ads for San Mig Light, I saw him as an obnoxious male prankster and a highly gendered invention. However, that cartoon figure, juvenile and delinquent, appeals to the target consumers regardless of their gender. He is the “ultimate spontaneous animal” that lurks in the minds and hearts of the Hong Kong neo-neo-tribe, an unstoppable phenomenon. He is everywhere. Private Sammy moments are posted in public. The Sammy “virus” was unleashed openly on television, billboards, and print ads.<sup>40</sup> He popped up in stores, public lavatories, bars, and restaurants, on the streets, at MTR, as tattoos and stickers, any medium you name, braving the public, “I dare, do you?” He pees whenever he can’t hold it; he turns off the light switch when passing by a lady’s room; he moons at you and dares you to spank him; he farts purposefully in a crowded elevator; he releases himself in the washing machine when Mom is not home; he targets the urinal from a far distance; he shows love to a young girl by pushing her off a cliff. Scatological humor is his trade mark. The tag lines feature Sammy-style outbursts: “Come on, man!” “Hey man, that’s fun.” “Maybe we don’t need to take things that seriously.” He is in our face, asking, “will you be Sammy enough when you are allowed to? ”

If you feel timid answering those challenges, you are simply not a Hong Kong neo-neo-tribe, but you may still qualify for its Chinese or Japanese incarnations. We can find Sammy’s golden mean, namely, “[my] only rule is to bend the rules, disruptively but not destructively,” performed by his counterparts in China, Japan, and perhaps in other parts of Asia. This is, in

short, the rise of a hot East Asian youth cultural phenomenon.

This article begins with the bobos, an imaginary class, ends with the neo-neo-tribe, a real-life social segment. I have yet to spot a TV commercial that captures the dual traits of the Chinese Bobos, namely, they have to practice both one-upmanship and an imaginary one-downmanship at the same time. Such real-life specimens are rare, to say the least. In contrast, the visual representation of *xin xin renlei* flooded the media precisely because it is a tribe rooted in the real. The arrival and popularity of both discourses, however, is a sure sign of the tribalization of the Chinese market. The theorem of the tribal discourse aside, however, two other important questions were raised in this article. While no quick answers can be found, the taste versus class question and the theoretical possibility of an emerging global youth culture point to the heart of my critical concern: the importance of taking “marketing” into serious account in any study of regional and transnational popular cultural trends. As shown above, marketers only need to take a tiny step to turn a popular discourse about a tribe into a new marketing phenomenon. And one can certainly argue the opposite. Indeed, it is difficult to tell which comes first -- a real-life tribe or its incarnation as a market segment. Either way, when marketing meets culture, can a new pop culture movement be far away?

#### End Notes

---

1. This article is an excerpt from my book manuscript Brand New China: Advertising, Consumerism, and the Production of Commercial Culture. The original book chapter was first presented at the “Urban Imaginaries” international conference at Lingnan University, Hong

---

Kong, in May 2004.

2. Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions (New York: Dover Press, 1994).

3. First-tier cities are Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Stan Stalnaker's Hub Culture: The Next Wave of Urban Consumers (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte.Ltd., 2002, p. 175) is extremely useful for my attempt to theorize the tiered logic of consumption.

4. I worked at Ogilvy in Beijing for two summers in 2002 and 2004 in the Department of Strategic Planning.

5. Second-tier cities are Nanjing, Chengdu, Wuhan, Hangzhou, Shenyang, Tianjin, and large provincial centers. Third-tier cities are sizable **Southern** county towns (*zhongxin cheng*) like Changzhou.

6. A typical viewpoint of the marketers can be seen in Richard Ohmann's "Knowing/Creating Wants," in Richard Ohmann ed., Making and Selling Culture (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University press, 1996), 224-238.

7. David Brooks, Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There (New York & London: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 10-11.

8. Paul Mooney, "Bobos in Shangri-La," Newsweek (Atlantic Edition), 3 March 2003, <http://www.pjmooney.com/Bobosnwk.shtml>. Accessed in April, 2004.

- 
9. "Zhongguo 'Bubozu': dangdai bei faxian de dushi buluo" (Chinese Bobos: An Urban Tribe Waiting to Be Discovered), [www.sina.com.cn](http://www.sina.com.cn), December 12, 2002. Accessed in 2004.
10. "Bubozu' de xin chonger: Aerkate OT715" (The New Pet Toy for Bobos: Alcatel OT715), <http://topdigital.vip.sina.com/.../products/200208>, 2002. Accessed in 2004.
11. "Yidong Bobo zu, Liangxiang zhaoyang E100 xuanchu xin jingying linian" (Mobilizing the Bobo Tribe: Legend's Zhaoyang Notebook E100 Promoted the Concept of the New Elite), [www.sina.com.cn](http://www.sina.com.cn), November 19, 2003. Accessed in 2004.
12. "Bobo guoji: chengshi jingying de lixiang jiyuan" (Bobo International: The Ideal Abode for City Elite), <http://jrn.rednet.com.cn>, 19 November 2003. Accessed in 2004.
13. Lin Jingxi, "Xiaohu xing bailing gongyu wangluo xingxiao tuiguang fangan" (The Marketing Case of a Small-sized White Collar Apartment Complex), <http://house.focus.cn/newshtml/51716.html>, 23 September 2003. Accessed in 2004.
14. Ye Ying, "Logo de liliang" (The Power of Logo). Sanlian shenghuo zhouban (Life Weekly), No. 233 ( March 23, 2003), <http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2003-05-06/000015155.html>. Accessed in April, 2004.
15. Mooney, "Bobos in Shangri-La."
16. Miao Wei, Lu Xiaoxun et al., "Bobozu yu `xin wenhua yundong'" (The Bobos and the "New Culture Movement"), Sanlian Shenghuo zhouban (Life Weekly), No. 47 (25 November 2002),

---

<http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2003-04-08/000013313.html>. Accessed in April, 2004.

17.Li Chunlin, “Zhongchan jiecheng Zhongguo shehui zhide guanzhu de renqun” (The Middle Class: A Chinese Social Group Worthy of Our Attention) in Ru Xin, Lu Xueyi, and Li Peilin (eds.), 2004: Zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce (2004: Analysis and Forecast on China’s Social Development) (Beijing: Sheke wenxian chuban she, 2004), pp. 51-63.

18.Brooks, Bobos in Paradise, pp. 41-46, italics mine.

19.Brooks, *ibid.*, p. 92.

20.“Bubo zu shangji da gonglue zhi luntan yu dianping (Commentaries on the Symposium of “A Marketing Offence Targeting Bobos”), <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20030416>. April 16, 2003. Accessed in 2004.

21.Liu Wei, Wang Weiqun et al, “Bubo zu shangji da gonglue” (A Marketing Offence Targeting Bobos), Chenggong yingxiao (Successful Marketing). No. 4 (2003), <http://www.cmarketing.com.cn>. Accessed in 2004.

22.IFs are International Free(wo)men who are bi-lingual or multi-lingual, who have developed bi-cultural tastes, and who travel constantly between different locales.

23.Michel Maffesoli, The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage, 1996), p. 76.

24.Maffesoli, *ibid.*, p. 64, italics mine.

---

25.Maffesoli, *ibid.*, p. 65.

26.Maffesoli, *ibid.*, p. 97.

27.Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton, “What is ‘Post-subcultural Studies’ Anyway?” in David Muggleton & Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), The Post-Subcultures Reader (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 6-9.

28.David B. Clarke, Marcus A. Doel et al., The Consumption Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 137.

<sup>29</sup> Jing Wang, “‘Youth Culture, Music, and Cell Phone Branding in China,” Global Media and Communication, vol. 1, no. 2, 2005.

30.Maffesoli, The Time of the Tribes, p. 139.

31.Longyuan huquan, “Zouchu liuxing xianxiang de xin xinrenlei” (The neo neo-tribe that transcends fads). <http://www.54youth.com.cn/gb/paper107/zt/xyzt/hz7.htm>. Accessed in April, 2004.

32.Guoke, “Xin xin renlei ji duo xin” (How trendy is the neo neo-tribe”), <http://campus.etang.com/html/life/heter/daily/life-heter-daily-0192.htm>. Accessed in April, 2004.

33.“Xin xin ren lei de ‘ku’ shenghuo” (The ‘cool’ life of a neo-neo-tribe), <http://www.xiayidai.com.cn/qczx/ssx/xxrl>. Accessed in April, 2004.

34.Yu Ruidong, “Liuxing jujiao: wo xing wo ku, xin xin renlei” (Trend Focus: I do what is cool, neo neo-tribe), China News Service, 2002, [Http://www.chinanews.com.cn/2002-04-25/90/6.html](http://www.chinanews.com.cn/2002-04-25/90/6.html). Accessed in April, 2004.

---

35. Yu Ruidong, *ibid.*

36. Longyuan huquan, “The Neo Neo-tribe That Transcends Fads.”

37. “The Launch of San Mig Light,” power-point presentation, Ogilvy-in-Beijing.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Mark Blair, Richard Armstrong, et al., The 360 Degree Brand in Asia (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd., 2003), pp. 75-76.

<sup>40</sup> See Ogilvy Interactive Asia for the Sammy ad campaign: [http://our-work.com/version1\\_2/files/web\\_sites/sammy\\_site/sammy\\_explan.htm](http://our-work.com/version1_2/files/web_sites/sammy_site/sammy_explan.htm). Accessed in June 2005.