

# **Middle class consumer behaviour in urban China.**

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## **Abstract**

This is one of a series of publications dedicated to the study of the middle classes in China. It presents the latest Chinese sociological research on middle class consumer behaviour.

## **I. Definition of the middle class**

The new middle class designates the section of the population that relies on knowledge, acquired skills and intelligence to achieve a stable standard of living as opposed to other sections of the population that rely either on physical strength, capital or assets to earn a living. They are educated to degree level and either already own a home and car or are in a position to be able to do so. Monthly household income for this group is in excess of five thousand RMB, and personal income exceeds three thousand RMB.

## **II. Current state of middle-class consumer activity**

1. Theories pertaining to middle class consumption: Simmel's fashion theory, Veblen's conspicuous consumption, Riesman's "other directedness", Baudrillard's consumer society and theory of sign, Bourdieu's distinction and taste.

2. Characteristics and behaviour of the urban middle class consumer: the transformation of survival consumption to non-essential consumption, and its continuous progression, the rationalisation of leisure consumption: limited choice and simplicity, development consumption is increasingly diversified and also growing constantly. The share of investment is also rising. Leisure consumption: limited by time and energy, individualism and the appearance of class-based consumer patterns, innovative and rational consumer concepts. Middle class consumption reflects the specificities of the present era and society, and follows similar consumption development trajectories as elsewhere over the past twenty years. It will reflect future development trends.

## **III. Consumer pattern differentiation: creation of a new lifestyle**

The consumer revolution that began in the 1980's could be seen as a revolution taking place at the heart of pre-existing mass consumer structure with strong homogeneous tendencies. This revolution is still going on and is likely to continue for some time. A step towards differentiation: female consumer behaviour in middle class households: 1. Child orientated consumption: the future middle class; 2. Investment in education: transmission and acquisition of cultural assets; 3. Consumption pay-off: the power of the consumer revolution; 4. Building taste, the "birth of a new middle class".

#### **IV. Answers to middle class consumer theories**

1) Snapshot of middle class consumption:

1. Consumers with pleasure-seeking life style and consumer ideology. 2. Consumers seeking status: those who live by the principle of class distinction. 3. Style moguls and followers. 4. Players in the consumer society.

2) Vanguard perspective of the polarisation of middle class consumption in China.

Thriftiness and overindulgence, rationalism and impulsiveness, passiveness and initiative, freedom and constraint, refinement and vulgarity, individuality and class culture. It is by analysing these extremes that middle class consumer behaviour, logic and will really be understood. Observing these two facets of Chinese middle class consumers is vital to the understanding of consumerism and the future of the middle classes.

#### **V. Current state and future of the urban middle class**

The emergence of middle classes is one of the results of economic development in China. Similarly, the fate of middle classes is intimately tied to that of economic development. Their future is not bright: it is built on a bed of shifting variables and unforeseeable circumstances. What is certain however is that these classes have a decisive influence on today's society.

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