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Liu, C, Valentine, G, Vanderbeck, RM orcid.org/0000-0003-0274-3505 et al. (2 more authors) (2019) Placing 'sustainability' in context: narratives of sustainable consumption in Nanjing, China. Social and Cultural Geography, 20 (9). pp. 1307-1324. ISSN 1464-9365

https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2018.1454978

Placing 'sustainability' in context: narratives of sustainable consumption in Nanjing, China

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This article examines how ordinary people practice the notion of 'sustainable consumption' in relation to their everyday lives and experiences of the wider environment and, further, how these understandings relate to public discourses of sustainability in contemporary China. The paper is based on an empirical analysis of 129 narrative interviews with local residents in urban Nanjing, collected as part of an interdisciplinary and international comparative research project. It argues that in popular narratives, a combination of 'being green' – living a healthy lifestyle which has less impact on the environment – and being rational through *qinjian jieyue* – by reducing both consumption and waste –is regarded as key to sustainability. Such attitudes align with recent Government campaigns to create an environmental-friendly and resource-conserving society. However, the analysis demonstrates how this sustainable way of consumption is restricted by Chinese *mianzi* and *guanxi* cultures, the anxieties caused by scares related to food safety, a social welfare system that does not promote a sense of security, and a widespread distrust of products made in China which has diffused across society. We argue that, studies on discourses and practices of sustainable consumption must strive to take more account of diverse local contexts and socio-cultural frameworks.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; consumer culture; green lifestyle; emotion; Nanjing; China

Introduction

Over the past three decades, unsustainable forms of consumption have contributed to global environmental degradation and climate change. In seeking to address this problem, the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 released a key policy document, Agenda 21, which states that national governments should maintain 'sustainable livelihoods for the south' and 'sustainable production and consumption for the north' (Hobson, 2002, p. 98). Since then, the notion of

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'sustainable consumption' has been widely circulated as a discourse that 'seeks to present a solution to the ecological problems associated with industrial economic production' (Dolan, 2002, p. 170) while providing an improved balance between quality of life and economic growth both in present for the future (Hobson, 2004). Recently in 2015, ensuring sustainable production and consumption was included by the United Nations within Goal 12 of its widely discussed Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. According to Goal 12, sustainable production and consumption are

> *about promoting resource and energy efficiency, sustainable infrastructure, and providing access to basic services, green and decent jobs and a better quality of life for all. Its implementation helps to achieve overall development plans, reduce future economic, environmental and social costs, strengthen economic competitiveness and reduce poverty*[1].

However, as Shove (2010) points out, sustainable consumption policies in western countries rely too much on individual/rational consumers' behavioural choices and personal responsibilities to be entirely effective. These policies deem that consumers have to learn about how toxic materials and waste emissions feature in the life cycles of the things they consume and, as a consequence, transform their behaviours to be more sustainable (Hobson, 2002). In practice, sustainable consumption is more than a personal behaviour or choice simply motivated by an individual's attitudes towards sustainability. As Dolan (2002, p. 180) indicates, an analysis of the meaning of 'sustainable consumption' must take the power relations between social groupings (capital and labour, the state and sectional interests and alliances, business and consumers) and between cultural value systems (environmentalism and consumer sovereignty, capitalism and socialism, collectivism and individualism) into consideration. Recently, the 'practice turn' in consumer culture studies has indicated that consumption is inherently intertwined with social practices, and it is through social practices that consumption is realised. This 'practice approach' to understanding consumption 'stresses the routine, ordinary, collective, conventional nature' of consumption and views practices to be 'internally differentiated such that persons in different situations do the same activity differently' (Warde, 2005, p.146). The 'practice approach' asserts that sustainable habits are normalised through the deployment of objects, the symbolic aspects of their design, acquisition and use, and people's aspiration of new things, which are in relation to wider social situations, institutional contexts, cultural norms and social relations with people's influences (Shove, 2003; 2010). Thus, the prospects for sustainable consumption must be connected to not only routinized daily performances with things, but also wider social and cultural frameworks of consumption (Dolan, 2002). Within this 'practice turn', sustainable consumption refers to a routinized change towards a more balanced approach which recognises both individual agencies and systematic structures, both bottom-up and top-down dynamics of change and both influences by human actors and objects and technological infrastructures (Spaargaren & Oosterveer, 2010; Spaargaren, 2011).

Therefore, 'sustainable consumption' draws attention to the achievement of economic, social and environmental sustainability through consumer practices

which are intertwined with wider consumer culture, infrastructure, contexts and social changes. However this definition is overwhelmingly based on a Westernised understanding of modern consumption and sustainability and is consequently predicated on the experience of its dominant neo-liberal contexts. Contemporary consumer culture is not solely evident in western societies, but rather, it is produced throughout the world (Jackson, 2004). Different socio-economic contexts in diverse geographical locations have strong influences on sustainable approaches of consumption (Young et al., 2010). Therefore, multiple definitions and practices of sustainable consumption need to be investigated in local contexts/constructions of consumption (Dolan, 2002; Spaargaren & Oosterveer, 2010; Sahakian & White, 2014). The current body of literature on sustainable consumption in non-Western contexts indicates that contextual, local knowledges of sustainability and the environment have important impacts on people's sustainable behaviours (Spaargaren & Mol, 2008; Spaarganren & Oosterveer, 2010; Spaargaren, 2011). Nevertheless, few studies investigate non-Western sustainable practices based on a local definition of sustainability and consumption, which results in unitary rather than plural forms of knowledge about sustainability and thereby disempowers populations from the non-Western world (Banerjee, 2003).

This Study

Adopting the 'practice turn', this article aims to understand how ordinary people relate to the notion of 'sustainable consumption' in the context of their everyday lives and how their understandings are allied to public discourse of sustainability in urban Nanjing, the second largest city in eastern China. It provides a nuance argument for a social practice of sustainable consumption in daily life from a Chinese perspective. The key contribution of this paper, then, lies in both its creation of a non-Western model of sustainable consumption on the basis of Chinese endogenous cultural norms and contemporary social conditions and its inscription of a socio-cultural and emotional geography into the analysis of sustainable consumption practices. In this sense, we suggest that, the socio-spatial perspective of and the emotions embedded within local consumer cultures are important in the exploration of the practices of sustainable consumption.

This article is based on an analysis of 129 in-depth interviews with local residents in Nanjing. The data are drawn from a much wider research programme called Intergenerational Justice, Consumption and Sustainability in Comparative Perspective (INTERSECTION), which included fieldwork in China, Uganda, and the United Kingdom. The respondents (who were diverse in terms of gender, socio-economic status, and other variables, see details in Table 1) were recruited from various neighbourhoods via snowball sampling or through key gatekeepers (e.g. directors of community centres or interest clubs, university teachers, and managers in industrial clusters) in Nanjing between February and October in 2016. All of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and recorded by the first author. In order to provide comfortable atmospheres for the participants, these interviews were conducted in participants' offices, homes, cafes or small restaurants near where they live or on their campuses. As the aim

of this research is to understand how ordinary people understand and perform the idea of 'sustainability' (*ke chixu* in Chinese) in daily consumption practices, the term 'consumption' (*xiaofei* in Chinese) used in interviews is only related to how people spend money to purchase/use goods, services and information, which is conventional for Chinese residents. After transcription and translation, these interviews were coded and analysed with the computer aided qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. To protect the personal information of the interviewees, all of the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Before providing the empirical analysis, we first construct an overview of Chinese consumer culture and its connection to sustainability, in order to provide a base for the understanding of everyday narrations of 'sustainable consumption' in urban Nanjing.

Table 1 Demographic summary

Gender	Male	61	Age[1]	≦20	9
	Female	68		21-30	47
Occupation	Senior managerial or leadership role	2		31-40	22
	Skilled professional (e.g. teacher, nurse) with leadership responsibilities	16		41-50	23
	Skilled professional	39		51-60	13
	Skilled manual or service (e.g. crafts, trades, supervisor)	16		61-70	6
	Routine manual or service (e.g. labourer, sales)	13		71-80	8
	Casual employment	4		＞80	1
	Homemaker	2	Education level	Higher education postgraduate or equivalent	22
	Retired	12		Higher education degree or equivalent	64
	Student	20		Secondary school degree	36
	Farmer	5		Primary school degree	7
Living location[2]	Gulou	34		Jianye	14
	Qinhuai	29		Jiangning	7
	Xuanwu	17		Pukou	6
	Qixia	15		Yuhuatai	4
	Liuhe	3			

Notes: 1. the youngest interviewee was 16 (the project doesn't explore children's view on sustainable consumption), and the oldest one was 84; 2. Nanjing has 9 administrative urban district.

Consumer cultures and sustainable consumption in contemporary China

As discussed above, the explanation of sustainable consumption should be analysed on the basis of the framework of local consumer cultures. We are attentive to construct our analysis of Chinese sustainable consumption based on its wider consumer cultures. Consumption patterns in urban China have dramatically changed following the pace of economic development since the launch of the 'open and reform policy' (the Reform) in 1978. According to Yu (2014), urban consumer culture in China has changed from a monotonous and state-planned model in the 1980s and 1990s into a globalised and marketised formation in recent years.

This consumerist transition is associated with the individualisation in Chinese society. According to Yan (2009; 2010), after the Reform, individualisation became a social trend in relation to policies of privatization and the development of a market economy. Because of the open market and the rise of non-state enterprises, the retreat of the party-state from its previous control over social life and the replacement of the dominance of socialist ideologies by neoliberalism in the economic arena, individuals were encouraged to build their live based on their knowledge, skills, and hard work. Under this social trend, Chinese consumers place their personal desire and aspirations at the centre of their social lives. In the recent years, the Chinese consumers tend to purchase more discretionary, luxury items, global brands, and trendy or fashionable products to forge their social identities and desired lifestyles (Yu, 2014). Due to the proliferation of mass tourism in China, shopping tourism which enables mainland Chinese consumers to buy perceived high-quality and stylish products from overseas markets is burgeoning. Moreover, these Chinese consumers are keen on purchasing foreign branded products through purchasing agents (*daigou* in Chinese) who are living or traveling abroad and reselling foreign products through online platforms, such as *Sina Weibo* and *Taobao.com* (Zhang, 2015).

However, as a consequence of this rapid economic development over the last three decades, environmental problems such as air pollution, water pollution and deforestation have become key threats to China's further economic development and the promotion of living standards. China's resource consumption has likewise increased dramatically over the last decades, driven mainly by China's rapid industrial growth (Schroeder, 2014). The degradation of the environment and resource extraction caused by industrial pollution are estimated to have incurred an economic cost of 1.5 trillion CNY in 2010[2]. In this context, the construction of a development model that promotes economic growth compatible with environmental protection has become the focus of national strategies and policies (Liu, 2010; Guo et al., 2013). Thus, encouraging a sustainable consumption pattern that boosts China's domestic economic growth while reducing its impacts on the environment has become an urgent task for Chinese policymakers.

The sustainable consumption model, or what is more commonly referred to as a 'green purchasing model' (*lüse goumai moshi* in Chinese) in Chinese discourse, is embraced in daily practices by Chinese consumers (e.g., Zhang, 2007; Klein, 2009; 2013; Liu et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2014). According to the recent empirical studies (Liu et al., 2012; Zhang, 2007; Zhao et al., 2014), Chinese people are increasingly aware of and concerned of the products' environmental performance they consume. In addition, these works have pointed out that wider social norms about environmental protection and providing sufficient and accurate information about green products with labels (such as China Environmental Labelling and China Energy Certification) can motivate people's participation in green consumption. Based on these analyses, scholars call for an improvement of public policies in environmental education and sustainable consumption, more efficient environmental information diffusion through media and changes towards environmental-friendly habits guided by the Government and NGOs. However, with higher incomes and the individualisation trend, nowadays, it has been argued that Chinese consumers now desire better material comforts and are not willing to sacrifice personal interests for collective or environmental benefits (Zhao et al., 2014).

This point notwithstanding, scholars from different disciplines have also discussed the Chinese characteristics of the implementation of sustainable consumption in daily life, however, the structural context factors and the system of provision have not received much attention (Liu et al., 2016). Following the practice approach, those few studies that see sustainable consumption as a social practice insist that political regulations, infrastructures, wider social changes and individual agents are all critical to shaping sustainable consumption in China (Liu et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2016). This paper addresses these lacunas by employing the 'practice approach' to conduct a social and cultural geography embedded in Chinese consumer culture which is attentive to portray the spatiotemporal and emotive practice of a Chinese understanding of sustainability in everyday consumption. To elaborate, the empirical sections analyse daily practices of sustainable consumption and how these are shaped by the social and cultural frameworks in urban Nanjing through the following three overlapped aspects.

Qinjian jieyue as a rationality

This section illustrates the first feature of sustainable consumption in Nanjing's context – *qinjian jieyue*. For Nanjing consumers, the most significant component of sustainable consumption is acting rationally through *qinjian jieyue,* which can be translated as being diligent and thrifty/frugal. Being *qinjian jieyue* involves spending money according to one's income and basic needs and avoiding overconsumption/overspending and impulsive purchase. The ideology of *qinjian jieyue* is strongly combined with Chinese traditions. For example, the Confucius saying of 'without desires, one will become resolute' (*wuyu ze gang* in Chinese) from *The Analects* highlights that a proper person must supress his or her individual desires for external things (Slingerland, 2003). Additionally, the Maoist ideologies content that consumerism leads to a false way to happiness. Therefore, a proper citizen in a Socialist country must control their desires to

materialism and achieve a real happiness through doing meaningful works for the country (Sun et al., 2014). As suggested by Shove and Spurling (2003), the practice of sustainable consumption must be characterised by past patterns of practice (Shove & Spurling, 2013). Such historically and culturally intrinsic self-control of personal desires, for Nanjing interviewees, is important to forge a rational and sustainable way of life. In everyday discourse, *qinjian jieyue* is aligned with the practice of saving – a virtue or one of the moral foundations of the Chinese tradition. These Chinese interviewees think the rational way of consumption should be only consuming to fulfil one's needs, rather than buy whatever one like or want impulsively. As an interviewee indicates,

> *I think Chinese people generally live a thrifty life, which is a traditional virtue in China …… [and which] have some positive influences for sure. During the European debt crisis for example, many Europeans have no financial saving awareness, and I think Chinese people are doing better in this respect (Yang, female, aged 25).*

Although the routinized practice of saving is believed to be an ethical way to sustain both individuals and the wider society, the central task of being *qinjian jieyue* is not for some broader social benefit but rather to save for self and/or family. Most of the interviewees portray their sustainable practices as contributing the sustenance of their own families and personal lives:

> *Sustainable consumption? Anyway, I don't think you should spend too much money on food. I see many people go out to eat, which I don't agree with. It is bad, firstly because the food is dirty, using gutter oil … secondly, eating will make you gain weight. I spend little on food. Basically I eat at home, rarely going out to dine (Chi, female, aged 22).*

> *Apart from our incomes, we also make some investments. We have plans for the next few years. In a year's time, or in a few years' time, we may make a major purchase. You can't just buy things as you wish, just buy some furniture or blithely get new curtains, that's not how things should work. If things are still in good condition, if they're not broken, we would keep using them. So … I normally make notes of where I spend my money in a yearly calendar…… I have plans all the time and I compare my expenditure with previous years. Apart from improving the quality of my life, where else should I spend my money? So I rarely spend my money on useless things (Qin, female, aged 43).*

Like consumers elsewhere (for example, UK consumers analysed by Hobson, 2004), Nanjing consumers are price-conscious. Therefore, saving money through an avoidance of purchasing things that beyond one's basic need and a choice of things with better cost-effectiveness is considered to be the most rational way of consumption.

Moreover, the concept of *qinjian jieyue* which centres on the practice of saving refers to the reduction of both consumption and waste (*langfei* in Chinese). The frequently mentioned saying of 'it is shameful to waste' (*langfei kechi* in Chinese) is always combined in people's response to the idea of saving money or natural resources. As producing waste is conventionally considered to be an improper behaviour, how to avoid and reduce personal/household wastes were often discussed by Nanjing interviewees.

The link between *qinjian jieyue* and reducing waste is evident in the public context of sustainable consumption in China. In 2001, the Chinese Communist Party's Sixth Plenary Session of the Fifteenth Central Committee announced a promotion of the construction of a resource-conserving society in China. In such a resource-conserving society, moderation in consumption is encouraged: at the national level, a transformation in the economic structure from resource intensive economic development into a circular economic model which reduces wastes is urged; at individual level, rational consumption predicated on saving energy, food and resources and reducing household waste is encouraged[3]. Nanjing consumers are encouraged to act in accordance with the national strategy of resource conservation. This is evident, for example, in relation to Nanjing consumers' narratives of food waste, which is the most frequently mentioned issue in this regard. Many interviewees described how they reduce food waste when eating out through ordering smaller amount of dishes and taking back the leftovers which they consider to be a sustainable lifestyle. They related their practices to a national movement promoted by both the Government and national NGOs which is called the 'clear your plate campaign (*guang pan xingdong* in Chinese)'[4] created as part of the drive to produce the resource-conserving society.

Hence, the engagement of *qinjian jieyue* into daily consumption is a social practice that challenges the idea of consumption as individual choice – with their emphasis on collective explanations of routine, know-how, shared understanding, as well as on the coevolution of the materials, technologies, competencies and meanings that converge in a performance of a practice (Shove et al., 2012). That is, an individual's pattern of consumption – of expenditures, possessions, their portfolio of cultural activities – is constituted by the whole volume of his or her practices (Warde, 2005). Nanjing consumers' practices of *qinjian jieyue* are not their personal choice to follow the traditional virtue passed down generation by generation, but rather a social way to combine their understandings of sustainability and the traditional virtue of *qinjian jieyue* and their response to national campaigns in their performance of in daily use and purchase of things.

However, *qinjian jieyue* often competes with, and is often undermined, by other norms within a wider consumer culture framework of consumption. Again, taking food waste as an example,

> *if you order a lot of food when you dine out or go out with friends. And you can't finish it, but you want to save face, so you won't wrap it up and take it away… I think people generally overconsume a lot. Since I have money, I don't really care (Junyi, male, aged 26).*

In this case, it is difficult to reduce food waste when eating out due to the social hospitality norm which centres 'face (*mianzi* in Chinese)' and *guanxi* cultures in China. The former term refers to a sense of favourable self-esteem, wealth and prestige, while the latter term denotes the importance of interpersonal connections that requires the maintenance of a long-term relationship, mutual commitment and obligation (Sun et al., 2014). *Mianzi* and *guanxi* are considered to be embedded within daily consumption which always occur at the same time. As showed in Sun et al.'s (2014) research, *mianzi* and

guanxi can positively motivate consumption, since people could gain social meaning, prestige and status through material possessions. These two traditions permeate the Chinese way of hospitality in both personal and business occasions, which result in a great amount of food wastes. Nowadays in Nanjing, the wasteful way of hospitality is forced to change in some organisations, with the purpose to support the national appeal for achieving a resource-conserving society. As a middle-age interviewee mentioned in his description of the reduction of waste in his company,

> *There was an official document issued [by my company] in this summer, on which the standard of business receptions is strictly stipulated ……. It's stipulated that a group of guests of less than 10 people should not be accompanied by more than 3 staff (for a business meal). For a group of more than 10 people, the accompanying staff should not exceed one third of the number of the guests. That is to say, a group of 12 guests can be accompanied by 4 staff at the most …… Based on the number of the guests, we now have a clear regulation on how much we are allowed to pay for a business reception. It's stipulated that 150 Yuan per person for lunch and 30 to 40 Yuan for breakfast. 150 Yuan per person is the maximum (Hu, male, aged 52).*

Although this regulation seems effective in reducing food wastes in business meals, it is useless in personal occasions. This interviewee continues,

> *For private meals, frankly, regarding the habit of consumption as you just mentioned, we don't really care about how much we are able to consume. Generally speaking, we go to either the luxury restaurants or the ones with lower prices, that is, those with prices higher than the average (Hu, male, aged 52).*

As modern consumption is deeply profoundly entangled with symbolic meanings and promoted and manipulated by media, emotions associated with these social and cultural meanings are widespread in the banal. Nanjing respondents admitted that they have nonetheless impulsively overconsumed – a public trend of consuming more is advertised in the Chinese market by the mass and social media. As an interviewee indicates,

> *I think it is a little hard for people to do this [sustainable consumption], myself included, because a lot of advertisements are tempting us to spend. They need people to buy things for making more money. The producers keep persuading people to buy, if not tricking them …… I've seen some really persuasive advertisements. For example, I want to drink cola and buy one each time I see a cola advisement. And the chicken hamburger looks so appetizing that even I- a person who does not like eating it- wants to have one when I see it (Xiaomei, female, aged 35).*

Influenced by this public discourse in China which promotes a materialist lifestyle that privileges possessing and consuming a wider range of things, *qinjian jieyue* is often undermined.

Moreover, emotions are central to what and how people consume. Emotions are an essential mechanism explaining how consumer needs and desires connect to the system of production of wants and always concern the self and the

relationship of the self to others and its environment (Illouz, 2009). When talking about daily consumption practices, most of interviewees expressed the emotions involved in their daily routines. Although Nanjing interviewees think the rational way of consumption should be *qinjian jieyue*, rather than buy whatever one like or want impulsively, in effect, they admitted that they have nonetheless impulsively overconsumed. As an interviewee states,

> *Sometimes I am impulsive ... Also my friends buy some sports equipment. When they buy this stuff, their intentions are good. They want to lose weight. But after they have bought them, they don't have time to continue exercising … they store them at home. Maybe some equipment is not used for a whole year (Changzheng, male, aged 37).*

Emotions are situated and structured in social practices of consumption which are shaped by wider social and cultural contexts (Illouz, 2009; Spaargaren, 2011). The collective fear of counterfeit and inferior products and unsafe food has been diffused among Chinese consumers in the past few decades, which not only brings about social anxieties, but also creates an overconsumption trend in Chinese society. The trust panic in Chinese society has triggered an unsustainable tendency to shop overseas. China is a major producer of counterfeit branded products and it has been characterised as the counterfeit capital of the world (Bian & Veloutsou , 2007). Although the Chinese government has tightened legislation around production (e.g. the establishment of the national anti-counterfeiting group of in 2000), the counterfeit business is still prosperous in China. As aforementioned, quality and the genuineness of products are Chinese consumers' key concerns, Chinese people tend to avoid counterfeit goods and low-quality products through different tactics, such as avoiding online shopping (many people believe that these immoral products are mainly sold online), buying foreign products (there exists a general belief that foreign products have better qualities) and going to big or chain supermarkets rather than small shops (many people think that big or chain supermarkets have strict quality inspections while the small shops do not have).

The collective trust panic and superstitions of foreign products have led to an overconsumption trend in urban China. This phenomenon is not only based on or driven by people's fear of local products, but also motivated by people's vanity and their aspiration for an ideal materialistic lifestyle. Examples such as going abroad or employing online purchasing agents for buying luxuries and beauty products and the popularity of buying new models of iPhone are often mentioned by the interviewees when they were asked to describe the characteristics of unsustainable consumption, because international travels and online shopping not only causes irrational overspending but also brings about environmental pollution through over package and the carbon emission created by travel and delivery.

Longing for a feeling of safety and security is interwoven in people's daily consumption, as well. Saving money, buying commercial insurances and investing in properties or financial products (such as stocks and gold) are frequently understood to be a form of sustainable consumption by Nanjing interviewees, because having enough money can make people feel secure. Most of the Nanjing interviewees do not think that their national medical insurance is

enough to cover their medical expenses. For the older interviewees, they don't believe their pensions are enough to maintain the quality of their retired lives. That is, their feelings of insecurity and uncertainty with the current social welfare system drive them into a lifestyle that depends on personal savings and investments. The anxiety of unsafe food is another factor that makes people to spend more money. For Nanjing consumers, ensuring food safety in daily consumption is not only for caring one's physical health, but also for making people feel safe. Because of the rapid rise in food safety incidents as circulated by mass media – such as the melamine-tainted baby milk powder scandal in 2008, the 'gutter oil' problem (cooking oil recycled from kitchen waste in the gutter), food adulteration and dangerous levels of pesticide residues in vegetables, as well as by food production-related viruses such as SARS and avian flu– the food context in China has come to be seen as increasingly 'unsafe' in recent years, which have created an anxious atmosphere among Chinese urban consumers. Responding to this context, Chinese green consumers are said to engage their own understandings of safe food and create an alternative food network to minimise everyday food-related risks. These anxious Chinese people tend to spend more money in imported food rather than the food produced in mainland China (Gong & Jackson, 2012; Hanser & Li, 2015). This popular trend is characterised as a 'gated consumption' by Hanser and Li (2015), which refers to a 'reversal of the more public-minded practices of containing a threat to public health and safety through isolation of the danger' via a reliance on personal networks (p. 114) – people tend to get information of foreign products and employ purchasing agents based on their social networks. That is, different from the importance of national institutions for promoting the trust in food across Europe (Wales et al., 2006; Kjærnes et al., 2010), the state-sanctioned Chinese food industry does not make Chinese consumers trust in Chinese food – it is the social distrust of the Chinese food market and institutional inspection bring about the anxieties of food in China. Buying foreign foods, especially baby foods, through online shops and purchase agents are prevalent among Nanjing consumers, in order to guarantee food safety in everyday life. However, this way of food purchasing is wasteful because of two main reasons: the overseas delivery can generate more carbon emissions; and people tend to buy more foods than they need in one time in order to reduce international shipping fees.

Emotions are not only involved in people's care for self, but also in relation to their care for others. Shopping is always constructed in a familial context which enacts a labour of love and devotion to family members (Miller, 1998a; 1998b). In everyday life, love and devotion is centred in people's practices of shopping. According to the interviews, people buy things for other persons not because these persons or pets need such things, but because they want to express their empathy towards them through things. These persons can be either the nearest family members and friends or distant others who needs to be cared. Due to the one-child policy and the increasing living standards in recent decades, Chinese parents and grandparents tend to spoil their children through satisfying their material requests which result in an excessive consumption. For instance,

> *For my family, let say my mum, she herself will probably be reluctant to do it, but for the next generation, for my daughter, eh … the moment she saw an item of*

clothes she wants to buy it, and the moment she saw another item of clothes she wants to buy it too; but actually, can the kid wear so many clothes? She is growing. Possibly, after one year, next year, they won't fit her anymore. But she still wants to buy. It is over-spending too, but … it reveals our Chinese family love, surely (Lixin, male, aged 34).

In his discussion of the distinction between thrift and frugality, Evans (2011) clarifies that thrift is 'the art of doing more (consumption) with less (money) and so thrifty practices are practices of savvy consumption, characterised by the thrill and skill of "the bargain"' (p. 551), while frugality is 'to be moderate or sparing in the use of money, goods and resources with a particular emphasis on careful consumption and the avoidance of waste' (p. 552). Drawing on Miller's (1998a) distinction between ethics and morals (morals are expressions of love and devotion towards close others while ethics foregrounds care for distant strangers) and his assertion of thrift as the prevailing expectations and practices of contemporary consumer culture, Evans (2011) indicates that sustainable or ethical consumption are liable to preclude the possibility of acting morally towards self and the nearest others. Different from the convention of thrift in the West, the Chinese discourse of *qinjian jieyue* can be seen as a combination of thrift and frugality, as it not only focuses on saving money through a bargain tactic, but also embeds the idea of consuming less and wasting less for both the self and the environment.

In sum, we see *qinjian jieyue* to be not simply a public/political promotion, but also an actual social practice in everyday which is routinized, collective and emotionally conducted (Warde, 2005; 2014). The norm of the traditional virtue of *qinjian jieyue* that underscores the conservation of resources and the reduction of consumption and waste in daily life is central to Chinese constructions of sustainability. Although the ambition of such popular concerns is sustenance of personal or family lives, it can also to some extent motivate people's voluntary actions towards the environment. However, the rooted *mianzi* and *guanxi* cultures, the public promotion of consumer values and the widespread anxiety of the Chinese market and social welfare system in Chinese society also sometimes serves to undermine this more sustainable approach to consumption.

Environmental citizenship and a green lifestyle

In this section, how the Chinese sustainable consumption is shaped by Chinese environmental citizenship and their green lifestyles in alliance with the national campaign of building an environmental-friendly society is analysed. States often seek to create environmental citizens who internalise forms of knowledge and awareness of environmental problems (environment, in this context, refers to the total environment of lived spaces), and who voluntarily feel a duty to express their environmental concerns through changed consumption practices and community actions (Hobson, 2002; 2006). The Chinese central government initiated a movement to construct an environmental-friendly society in 2006[5] and called for a green programme that purportedly aims to create harmony between human society and nature by 2015.

Nanjing is one of the greenest cities in China. An awareness of the value of this relatively green environment permeates Nanjing civil society. The recent environmental movements, such as the protest against cutting down sycamore trees for the construction of metro line 3 and line 10 in 2011[6] and the voluntary movement for cowfish preservation in 2015[7], reflect the growing environmental sentiment in the city.

Most respondents expressed an awareness of the environmental impacts of their daily consumption. They regard environmental awareness as the key to motivating environmental protection practices and believe that ordinary people's environmental awareness has a strong impact on their consumption practices. For many interviewees, the prevalence of mass and social media, the Government's promotion, economic development and the improvement of public education have provided knowledge and information about the living environment and consequently contributed to raising people's environmental awareness. Local residents tend to reduce their damages to the environment through environmental-friendly choices in daily consumption. Within the narratives of respondents, discourses of environmentally friendly living manifested in two particular ways:

First, Keeping the environment clean, which is strongly connected to keeping hygiene and sanitary, is represented by respondents as a green lifestyle. For example, an older respondent explained her idea of taking care of the environment to be keeping her home and public areas clean:

> *My daughter likes being clean, it's just my grandson who doesn't. My daughter likes being clean, just like her dad. We've always lived in a clean home …… for the natural environment, such as grass and flowers …… these things, I would never do any damage to them …… I think the environment is getting much better. Some years ago in this area, the road was muddy, when you walked on the street, your shoes were covered with mud. But now, the roads and streets are not muddy anymore. All of them are nice and clean (Wennai, female, aged 62).*

Therefore, reducing wastes by applying an effective waste classification system is suggested to be an ideal way to maintain the cleanliness of the living environment. Some respondents argue that waste recycling should be endorsed by the government through public regulations, because informal ways to recycle toxic wastes might cause new environmental and social problems. This attitude results in part from the public promotion of recycling through the allocation of 'recycling boxes'[8] for different recyclable wastes in some neighbourhoods. People tend to recycle items that have lost their value, especially used batteries and clothes they no longer need, through these boxes:

> *Batteries are harmful to the environment if they are not disposed of properly. So in order to protect the environment, people will try to use them less or not use them…… there are recycling boxes for used batteries in every neighbourhood. We can put them into these boxes (Jing, female, aged 48).*

The second key discourse of green living related to the adoption of public transport and active travel methods (cycling and walking) in daily commuting. Many respondents tend to choose these two ways of traveling instead of driving

to protect the environment. Additionally, several interviewees noted the public bicycles which are convenient for people to share in Nanjing. For them, these green and shared forms of transport are sustainable, not only because they protect the environment but also save time (according to the interviewees, the peak-time congestion and finding parking places always waste time) and keep people healthier through the riding exercises during commuting.

As becomes evident in the discourse of respondents, the strongest driver of people's voluntary environment-oriented practices is their aspirations for a healthy lifestyle. As one respondent highlights, although everyone knows the importance of environmental protection, few translate this awareness into action:

> *Everyone knows of the importance of protecting our environment, but few put that knowledge into actions…… People usually realize that they don't want to live in a poor environment even though they can enjoy abundant material wealth…… My job has nothing to do with environmental protection, but I can find a lot of information about that (Xiaoyue, male, aged 30).*

Such resistance to sustainable actions is a consequence of wider social and cultural frameworks in China and a widespread trend of self-motivated practices of consumption. Environmental sustainability, for example, is often not considered seriously when people go shopping. Although most of the interviewees stated that they are concerned of the environment, only a minority of them relate the 'sustainability' in sustainable consumption to a green way of purchase which is benefiting the environment. The green lifestyle, for other interviewees, did not primarily connote protecting the environment, but rather keeping a healthy way of life. In China, 'health' (*jiankang* in Chinese) is the key motivation for consumption (Klein, 2009). The meaning of 'health' is connected to stability, good fortune and a pleasant personality in contemporary China, which is inherited from the traditional arts of self-cultivation (*yangsheng* in Chinese) and the virtue of compassion that centres physical health and spiritual civilisation in morality, promoted by both the government and food industries and acknowledged by consumers (Farquhar & Zhang, 2005; Klein, 2009; 2013). Moreover, taking responsibility for health relied on personal consumption is a tactic of Chinese people to reduce their anxieties of wider unsafe food climate, worsen environment, expensive health insurance and increasing costs of medical care (Klein, 2013; Hanser & Li, 2015). This emphasis on health can sometimes exist in tension with people's concerns on *qinjian jieyue* discussed in the previous section, as well. As an interviewee states,

> *Those things that give you enough energy to complete your works, a good condition of health, live healthily. For example, for food, we should buy fresh, healthy foods which are ecological. These things we should spend more on, we don't mind the prices of these good things (Hui, female, aged 47).*

For this interviewee, buying and using natural (or the so-called 'ecological', *shengtai* in Chinese) foods are expensive, but the health benefits are perceived to justify the additional expense. Green consumption in China, as Klein (2013) indicates, is to some extent a moral form of consumption that prioritizes the health benefits gained from ecological products.

Moreover, people tend to pursue a more convenient and comfortable lifestyle and as a consequence consume more and in environmental-unfriendly ways. The expectations of comfort and convenience are routinized in and governed by people's interpretation of normality (Shove, 2003), which sometimes preclude the practice of environmental sustainability. For instance, although many people consider driving is bad for the environment because it brings about carbon emissions and congestion, they still want to keep it since this form of travel is convenient. Another example is people's dependence on technology. Some interviewees pointed out that they couldn't live without technologies such as air conditioning, washing machine and mobile phones, since these things are important in their daily routines. Once they give up these things, they could feel uncomfortable. That is, instead of caring about the living environment, convenience and comfort always comes first when people consume.

To sum up, as discussed elsewhere, 'green' connotes 'health' in Chinese popular discourse. This argument indicates that the only reason of Chinese consumers' green purchase is to protect themselves from the unhealthy food climate rather than caring for the products' environmental performance (e.g. Klein, 2009; 2013). However, this research suggests that, despite a strong consideration of health in shopping practices, the definition of a green lifestyle which refers to an environmental-friendly lifestyle is widely embraced by Nanjing consumers in the context of a more environment concerned society in China. That is, Nanjing consumers' desire for green products are in relation to wider social situations, contexts, social and cultural norms and their social relations with others (Shove, 2010) which are embedded in their practices of consumption. Nevertheless, such a green lifestyle often gives its way to people's aspiration of a convenient and comfortable life.

Conclusion

This article has explored popular concerns and practices of sustainable consumption in urban Nanjing. It constructs an everyday geography of sustainable consumption, drawing on an analysis of narrative interviews with local residents. It argues that a combination of being green – a healthy lifestyle which has less impact on the environment – and being rational through *qinjian jieyue* – a reduction of both consumption and waste – is key to approaching a sustainable way of consumption, responding to the socio-political campaign to an environmental-friendly and resource-conserving society launched by the Government. In addition, this article insists that the sustainable ways of consumption through *qinjian jieyue* and living greenly are not simply a personal choice to be sustainable based on individual attitudes and understanding of sustainability, but rather a social practice which is sociotemporal and emotional intertwined in wider social and cultural frameworks, infrastructures and political campaigns. Although this type of consumption is ambivalently positioned between concerns for sustaining the environment and sustaining personal or family lives, there are two notable ways in which these concerns intersect in the Chinese context:

The first way to link these concerns can involve the promotion of *qinjian jieyue* and the tradition of self-control. Although *qinjian jieyue* focuses on the importance of the personal morality of saving money and resources through consuming and wasting less, it has wider environmental implications. In practice, *qinjian jieyue* and self-control are strongly involved in Chinese people's daily consumption and are considered to be the key means of sustainable consumption by ordinary people. Second, it is widely acknowledged that choosing a green and sustainable lifestyle is beneficial to personal lives. Chinese people, at least the local residents in urban Nanjing, hold a strong awareness of the importance of environmental preservation and are willing to reduce their consumption and to change their ways of consuming in order to protect their living environment and maintain a healthy lifestyle. In this sense, combining personal interests, such as saving money and sustaining the family, and people's responsibility to wider society and the environment on the basis of historically and culturally intrinsic norms are effective to promote the public/political discourse and campaign of sustainable consumption.

However, these approaches which combine personal and socio-environmental sustainability are hampered by Chinese *mianzi* and *guanxi* cultures and the fears of unsafe food and the distrust of products made in China diffused across the Chinese society. That is, the transition towards a sustainable way of consumption called by public/political campaigns cannot be achieved without taking both people's attitude towards sustainability and the emotional and socio-cultural and historical values of consumption into accounts.

Thus, as asserted by Tim Jackson (2005), there exists a 'double dividend' inherent in sustainable consumption: it is possible to improve individual or collective well-being through consuming less and the reduction of consumption's impacts on the living environment. However, these approaches which combine personal and socio-environmental sustainability are hampered by Chinese *mianzi* and *guanxi* cultures, the trust panic in Chinese market and the more self-centred and materialist consumer class that has emerged since the Reform, and the fears of unsafe food and the distrust of products made in China that has diffused across the Chinese society. That is, the transition towards a sustainable way of consumption must take the emotional and contextual dimensions of consumption into account.

Furthermore, although the westernised or neo-liberalised consumerist lifestyle which privileges individual ownerships of things have become dominant in Chinese consumers' everyday lives, the Chinese philosophy and Maoist socialist legacies of self-control and *qinjian jieyue* remain deeply inscribed in popular concerns about sustainable consumption. The contemporary Chinese consumer culture is not only shaped by its transition towards economic reform and open up to the world and the socio-political strategy of achieving an environmental-friendly and resource-conserving society, but also cultivated by the traditional and endogenous ethical rules. Different from the neoliberal individualization in the West which assumes that individuals can master the whole of their lives and can derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves, and therefore implies the disappearance of mutual obligation between citizens and the state (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), the Chinese individualization is formed by both the neo-liberalised market and authoritarian

governance. The individualised Chinese consumer culture can be seen as individuals' subversion of the state controlled market and their seeking of a more liberal and globalized market. The Chinese transitional social context – a transition from a socialist society towards a globalised society which blend neo-liberal market, socialist and traditional Chinese legacies and autocratic governance – contributes to its ambivalent understanding and practices of sustainable consumption. On the one hand, the national campaign towards environmental sustainability is supported and carried out by individual consumers (e.g. the use of recycling boxes); but on the other hand, individuals reluctance to consume less relates in part to their distrust of the state-sanctioned market. The understandings and practices of sustainability is not unitary and static, but rather multiply and dynamically constructed and shaped by local social and cultural structures. Therefore, we must examine multiple meanings and practices of sustainable consumption in diverse local contexts, which are both reflecting and supplementing the globally accepted concept of sustainability.

More broadly, this geographical research has not only emphasised the importance of local contexts in the analysis of sustainable consumption, but also mapped people's emotions in daily practices of sustainable consumption through an analysis of people's cares for both the self or the nearest and dearest others and wider society/environment. As Warde (2014) mentioned in his discussion of the problems and limits of theories of practice in consumption studies, although bodily processes, the senses and emotions are all clearly strongly connected to routinized habits and their actual performance, they remain under-represented in practice-theoretical accounts of consumption. Moreover, as Dolan (2002) claimed in his explanation of the connotations of sustainable consumption, the ethic of sustainable consumption needs to be understood in relation to other ethics that also possess emotional and actionable force. Addressing this limit, we concern the people's emotive practices of sustainable consumption. Throughout this research, it is obvious that, complex emotions (such as anxiety, fear and desire) which are inherent in consumption, are crucial in the explanation of the practices of sustainability. Thus, further works on the actual and everyday sustainable practices should take emotions into account.

Notes

1. http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/, accessed on 7 March 2017
2. http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-environmental-crisis/p12608, accessed on 13 March 2017
3. http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49154/49156/4020453.html, accessed 7 March 2017
4. http://sn.ifeng.com/shanxizhuanti/guangpanxingdong/, accessed 20 March 2017
5. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2005-10/11/content_3606215.htm, accessed 18 May, 2017
6. http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sd/2011-03-25/135222180901.shtml, accessed 10 March 2017
7. http://news.sohu.com/20150909/n420757265.shtml, accessed 10 March 2017

8. According to the 2014 Implementation of Household Waste Collection in Nanjing, the city council in Nanjing has distributed 'recycling boxes' in various communities. Local residents are encouraged to dispose different types of recyclable wastes in these boxes. (see details: http://www.nanjing.gov.cn/xxgk/szf/201512/t20151230_3726161.html, accessed 20 March 2017)

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the Arts & Humanities Research Council for funding this award under the Care for the Future programme [grant number: AH/K006215/1]. The authors would like to thank Dr. David Evans for his suggestions on the early drafts of this article, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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