Dependent or Independent: Exploring the Culture of Local Coffee Shops in China

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Abstract

Despite the short history of coffee in China, the Chinese coffee market has been expanding and gradually becoming an important overseas market for coffee transnational corporations such as Nestlé and Starbucks since the 1980s. Meanwhile, the number of independent coffee shops owned by individuals in China is inflating in response to the increasing demand of high-quality coffee. The popularity of independent coffee shops reflects a struggle between local and global cultures. Although previous studies about independent coffee shops in other Asian countries and areas, such as Japan and Taiwan, are abundant, no study has yet addressed independent coffee shops in China. This study helps to fill the gap in the existing literature by exploring the Chinese domestic coffee market from the perspective of owners/managers of independent coffee shops in Beijing, China. In-depth interviews and observations are used to collect data. Findings reveal the dilemmas faced by the owners and how their values are reflected through managing their coffee shops.

Keywords

Coffee shop; culture; globalization; China, qualitative research

Introduction

Coffee, the bitter black drink that originated in Ethiopia, is gaining momentum in the homeland of tea—China. Despite its long-established and deep-rooted tea drinking culture, many young Chinese have incorporated a "cup of joe" into their everyday lives. The process of globalization, together with a soaring Chinese economy, has not only boosted Chinese consumers' buying power, but also transformed the Chinese cultural landscape; coffee as an exotic drink introduced from the West is deemed more desirable and modern when compared to the more common inexpensive brewed tea drinks. This can be partially attributed to the establishment of transnational coffee corporations, such as Nestlé and Starbucks, and their business achievements in China. The great success of Nestlé instant coffee in China made it the "generic name for coffee" in the 1980s and 1990s (Bantiwalu and Demisse n.d.). However, in 1999, when Starbucks entered China and opened its first café outlet in Beijing, Chinese people finally had the opportunity to enjoy freshly made coffee and to spend leisurely time in a coffeehouse without traveling abroad. As of 2021, Starbucks had opened 5,000 stores

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in mainland China ("Starbucks in China - Starbucks China | Starbucks China" n.d.). The astonishing success of Starbucks in China has made the country the company's second biggest global market. More importantly, the popularity of Starbucks has started a national trend for consuming coffee.

Today, although annual consumption of coffee in China is only five to six cups per capita, the rate by which that consumption is growing is impressive, having steadily increased by approximately 16% in the last several five-year periods ("Coffee In China and the Analysis of Coffee According to Traditional Chinese Medicine" n.d.). Walking through the streets of cosmopolitan Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai, one can easily find a chain coffee shop owned by transnational corporations such as Starbucks, Pacific Coffee Co., and Costa on every corner. Taking advantage of the trend started by such corporations, independent coffee shops are also prospering in the Chinese domestic market. By the end of 2016, the total number of coffee shops in China had reached approximately 91,000 ("China: Number of Coffee Shops 2016" n.d.). Chinese people's growing passion for coffee not only suggests potential economic opportunities but also indicates changes in their values and consumption habits, which implies a fundamental transformation of the nation at socioeconomic and cultural levels. This study investigates the coffee phenomenon and its far-reaching implications in China from the perspective of independent coffee shop owners. Since the coffee house has a major presence and high penetration rate in urban areas, the study focuses on independent coffee shops in the capital city of China: Beijing. In this study, we use coffeehouse and coffee shop interchangeably by referring to an establishment that sells coffee and food.

Compared to modern, standardized chain shops, independent coffee shops in China are products of the struggle between local and global cultures. Coffee, an imported global commodity, is interpreted in localized ways by independent shops, as seen in their menus, ambiances, and services. The local-global dichotomy reflected by coffeehouses in China shows the complex effects of globalization on local markets. The oligopolistic impact of Starbucks in China, which is well studied by previous scholars (Maguire and Hu 2013; Venkatraman and Nelson 2008; Zhang 2012), illustrates the homogenizing influence of globalization, while the upsurge of independent coffee shops demonstrates that heterogeneous outcomes are also produced by the globalizing process. Thus, independent coffee shops provide an interesting area in which to examine the negotiation of local cultures under globalization. In order to understand the phenomenal success and popularity of coffee drinking at a wider societal level beyond the realm of the corporation, this study is informed by and adopts du Gay et al.'s (2013) "circuit of culture" model as an analytical tool to interpret how consumption behavior is set up in a sustainable and culturally meaningful way. Many scholars have observed that the success of coffee in a country where tea-drinking is dominant was directly connected to the business success of transnational corporations such as Starbucks (Henningsen 2011, 2012; Venkatraman and Nelson 2008; Zhang

2012), yet to the authors' best knowledge, no study has yet addressed the rise of independent coffee shops in China. Hence, this study helps to fill a research gap in the existing literature on the Chinese domestic coffee market, while providing a lens to apprehend modern Chinese leisure culture and its relationship with this newly established consumption behavior. Specifically, this study explores whether a unique coffeehouse culture exists in the context of contemporary China and how independent coffee shop owners perceive and interpret this coffeehouse culture. As the development of coffee shop/house is at its preliminary stage, many businesses are still testing the waters with different business models. There is no clear boundary between coffee shop and coffeehouse in this specific context. Therefore, the two terms are used interchangeably in this article.

Literature review

Theoretical Framework: Circuit of Culture

A key element in understanding the remarkable success of coffee in the homeland of tea, its greatest competitor, is to grasp what are the symbolic notions consumed behind the drink. In order to maintain a sustainable consumption behavior, an artifact or a practice needs to fulfill consumers' needs at both an objective functioning level and a subjective symbolic level. In this study, we are interested in the constitution of coffee drinking as a cultural behavior. In other words, the symbolic meanings as well as the related signifiers of cultural identity associated with coffee drinking, especially in independent coffee shops. As a result of globalization, drinking specialty coffee and independent coffee shop visiting constitutes a common behavior of a newly emerged global urban middle class (Ardekani and Rath 2020). Acknowledging the correlation of this new class with the rapid boom of independent coffee shops, Ardekani and Rath (2020) in their study conducted in Tehran, Glasgow, and Amsterdam identified five characteristics of the customers of specialty coffee bars: highly educated and connected to the creative sectors, open towards divergent cultural experience, imbued with a sense of connoisseurship, being aware of the maintenance of physical and mental health, and valuing social connections. While Ardekani and Rath's study provides a valuable perspective by examining the attributes of independent coffee shops' customers, more detailed analysis is needed to further enrich our understanding of this phenomenon in order to interpret the consumption behavior from the perspective of independent coffee shop owners. Owners are different cultural actors, and in China operate in a different cultural context where appreciation of the beverage has no tradition. The circuit of culture theory is employed in this study, as it captures the important moments in the process of the formation of meaning, therefore providing an illustration of how consumption behavior and practice culturally intertwine with identity.

Originating in modern cultural studies, the circuit of culture model was proposed by du Gay et al. (2013) in a case study of the Sony Walkman as the prototype for mobile music devices. In that study, culture was not interpreted as a comprehensive and broad concept referring to a distinct "way of life," but simply as referring to "shared meanings" of an artifact or practice. The circuit of culture is comprised of five key moments: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (see Figure 1). du Gay et al. (2013) suggested that the five seemingly disparate moments "continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways" (4) and that all complete analyses of cultural productions should take account of this circuit. The process in which distinctive moments overlap and interact is called "articulation," and through this process a unified meaning is produced by the connection of two or more different moments (du Gay et al. 2013). The key moment of the cultural circuit that is particularly important for examining Chinese coffeehouse culture is representation.
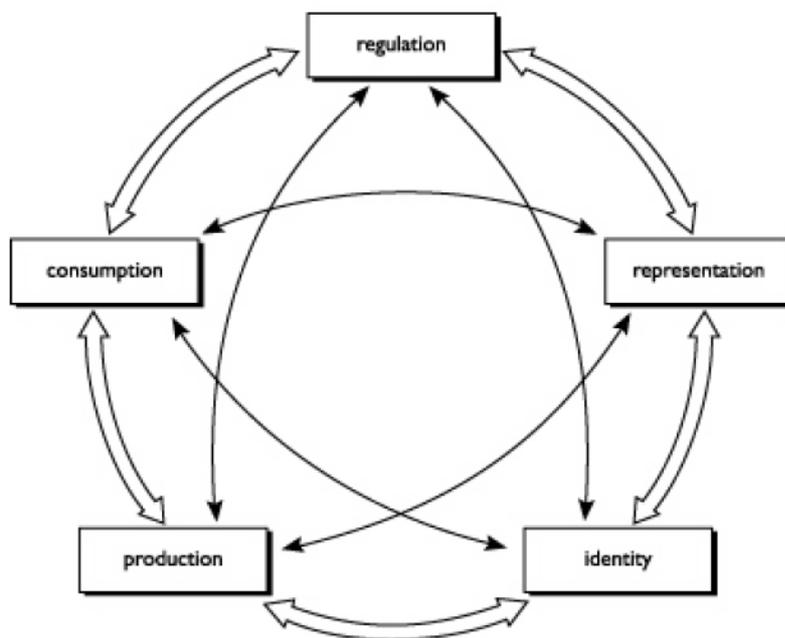

Figure 1 The Circuit of Culture

Representation stands for the discursive process through which cultural meaning is established: "We give things meaning by how we represent them" (Hall 1997, 3). Though language is the primary means of representation, the concept refers not only to words but to "any system of representation—photography, painting, speech, writing, imaging through technology" (du Gay et al. 2013, 13). For instance, the discourse of certain commodities' cultural meanings or practices is often related to media representation or advertising. Thus, coffee in China and coffeehouse culture is represented by the advertisements for, and appearance of, coffee shops and consequently results in part from their owners' ideologies regarding coffee and

lifestyle. This highlights the power differences between the participants involved in a cultural circuit:

> We should perhaps learn to think of meaning less in terms of "accuracy" and "truth" and more in terms of effective exchange—a process of translation, which facilitates cultural communication while always recognizing the persistence of difference and power between different "speakers" within the same cultural circuit (Hall 1997, 11).

The accentuation of the process of "effective exchange" directs attention away from the literal interpretation of meanings carried by goods and toward the interaction of different "speakers" and how they are related and different in terms of power. In light of the circuit of culture theory, the current study investigates the representation of coffee/coffee house culture from the perspective of coffee shop owners.

Coffeehouse Culture

Coffeehouses were not introduced to China until the 1930s, when foreign entrepreneurs first went to Shanghai to pursue new business opportunities (Dharmananda 2003). Coffee drinking spread more widely in China with the economic reforms and market liberalization of the 1980s (Fujita and Hu 2001), and coffee shops rapidly gained popularity among the rising Chinese middle class, as it fulfilled a need to express individualism (Henningsen 2012). As mentioned previously, the number of coffee shops in China had reached 91,000 by the end of 2016 ("China: Number of Coffee Shops 2016" n.d.).

Despite the explosion in the number and type of coffeehouses most studies on coffee and coffeehouses in China have emphasized major brands such as Starbucks (Maguire and Hu 2013; Zhang 2012; Venkatraman and Nelson 2008). No unified domestic local consumptionscape of coffeehouses has been clearly articulated by previous studies, perhaps because of the lack of a long tradition of coffee drinking and the relatively short history of coffeehouses in China.

In studying the effects of globalization, Thompson and Arsel (2004) staked out a position between the homogeneous and heterogeneous impact of globalization, while asserting that a hegemonic brandscape might be forged by dominant corporations. These researchers focused on "the hegemonic influences that global experiential brands exert on their local competitors and the meanings consumers derive from their experiences of these glocal servicescapes" (632), acknowledging the inescapable influence of the largest brands while pointing out the wide variety of local reactions to this influence. On this point, Kjeldgaard and Ostberg (2007) noted that the impact of Starbucks on the Scandinavian coffee consumptionscape was "less obvious yet more complicated," as Starbucks had not yet entered the Scandinavian market by the time their study was conducted, yet Starbucks still exerted a complicated hegemonic influence by stereotyping the image and meaning of a coffeehouse (Kjeldgaard and Ostberg 2007).

Unlike in the Scandinavian or other European coffee markets, Chinese domestic independent coffee shops only arose after the successful debut of Starbucks. Thompson and Arsel (2004) argued that competing brands (independent coffee shops) emerged in response to the ubiquitous presence of a hegemonic brand (in this case, Starbucks) produced through the homogenizing process of globalization. For these reasons, it is very possible that newly born domestic independent coffeehouses lie under the shadow of the hegemonic image and meanings of "coffeehouse" created by Starbucks in China, as a hegemonic brandscape has a far-flung structuring influence on both the domestic economic market and on consumer lifestyles and identities by functioning as a cultural model that consumers act, think, and feel through (Kjeldgaard and Ostberg 2007). Recently, Ferreira and Ferreira (2018) conducted a study on Chinese coffee culture and found that the international chains still dominate the Chinese coffee shop market, and the coffee shop culture in China is still in relatively early stages of development compared to mature coffee markets in western and other eastern countries. However, they predicted that the coffee market and coffee culture in China will change soon given the competition from different types of coffee shop spaces and business models emerging to occupy different segments and niches of the market. In this dynamic process, independent coffee shop owners will play an important role in leading the cultural changes.

Coffee Shop Owners as Cultural Intermediaries

It is important to emphasize that Chinese people's familiarity with both coffee and coffeehouses is not the same as their Western counterparts. Most people in China, even some loyal patrons of Starbucks and other coffee shop "campers," (Waxman 2006) do not have knowledge of coffee and coffeehouses equal to that of their Western counterparts. Starbucks consumers perceive Starbucks coffee to be authentic high-quality coffee (Zhang 2012), while in fact the drinks offered by Starbucks in China have been modified or localized to cater to Chinese tastes to a large degree. For example, the popular coffee lattes offered in China by Starbucks have been derided anecdotally by some as "coffee flavored milk." Chinese consumers' misperception of the authenticity of Starbucks coffee, produced by the pervasive influence of the hegemonic brand, calls attention to the roles of coffee shop owners as cultural intermediaries.

"Cultural intermediaries" is a term first proposed by Bourdieu (1984) to describe the members of a new middle class who "engage in the promotion and transmission of popular culture in order to legitimate relatively new leisure fields" (Blackshaw and Crawford 2009, 50). Maguire and Matthews (2012, 1) argued that the concept of cultural intermediaries was "a productive device for examining the producers of symbolic value in various industries, commodity chains, and urban spaces." Studies of cultural intermediaries have largely emphasized two different functions: their involvement in the process of the "mediation of production and consumption," and their market role in "the qualification of goods, mediating between economy and

culture" (Smith Maguire and Matthews 2012, 1). Cultural intermediaries play an essential role in constructing value, as they have the resources and capacity to influence how various actors in the market engage with goods (Maguire and Matthews 2012). In the current study, independent coffee shop owners are examined as cultural intermediaries involved in both constructing the emerging market and in shaping the expectations of customers by challenging the hegemonic image of coffee and coffeehouses. The examination of owners in the Chinese domestic coffeehouse market offers an opportunity to better understand the negotiation between coffee and identity among professionals in the industry as well as shedding light on the domestic coffeehouse consumptionscape in China. Based on the previous literature, two overarching research questions are proposed:

RQ 1: How do independent coffee shop owners interpret coffee and coffeehouse culture?

RQ 2: Does a unique coffeehouse culture exist in China?

Methodology

Ethnography was employed as the primary research method in collecting data. Ethnography as a fieldwork method has been widely used by scholars of social science since the early 19th century. It enables investigators to gain "valid and reliable qualitative data through developing of close and continuing contact" with the subjects being studied (Gold 1997, 1). The useful tools provided by ethnography enable this current study to generate meaningful and insightful results through the examination of independent coffee shop owners as a culture-sharing group.

In order to address the aforementioned research questions, in-depth interviews and participant observations were used as means of data collection. The interviews were conducted with selected independent coffee shop owners in Beijing. The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit informants. The initial informants were asked to recommend other coffee shop owners who also operate similar business. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner in Chinese at the informants' own shops. A series of designed open-ended questions were used to guide conversations. For instance, the respondents were required to describe and compare their own perception of coffee culture in general, and the coffee culture in China; to give an account of the motives for running or working with an independent coffee shop; to profile the characteristics of their customers; to elaborate the features and focus of their shop; and to detail their ideal vision of a coffee shop, and so forth. In addition, cards sorting was employed as a supplementary data collection method.

Specifically, in-depth interviews with the owners or managers of 20 independent coffee shops were conducted. The selection of coffee shops was based on the geographic distributions in four different types of locations with varying customer demographics in Beijing: touristic, business, residential, and educational. Observations

were conducted in six selected coffee shops distributed in all four different location categories. The basic information regarding respondents and their coffee shops is listed below in Table 1. In terms of the selected coffee shops' geographic locations, the independent coffee shops in Beijing are primarily concentrated in central old town areas, art districts, and central business districts. To facilitate the interview, a card sorting session was incorporated into each interview. Respondents were asked to sort out the cards for three questions: 1) to describe their coffee shops; 2) to describe their understanding of coffee; and 3) to describe the reasons for owning a coffee shop or working in a coffee shop. The key words for the first question include popular, stylish, avant-garde, traditional, modern, quiet, a good place for conversation, artistic, intellectual, professional, unique, typical, competitive, economically stressed, profitable; the key words for the second question include popular, stylish, avant-garde, traditional, modern, artistic, intellectual, professional, unique, superficial, fast pace, slow pace, middle-class, xiaozi – the Chinese term for 'petite bourgeoisie', American, European, Italian, French; and, the key words for the third question include the economic concern, business interest, love of coffee, personal interest, want a place of your own follow the trend (see figure 2 for a picture of the cards). Respondents sorted cards for each question from the most relevant to the least relevant. The card sorting method provides the participants references to better answer the questions as well as to facilitate their elaborations on each topic.

Table 1. Summary of the interview respondents and their coffee shops

Respondent's Identifier	Respondent's Gender and Age	Location Area Type	Age of the Shop
R1	Male/ 20s	Touristic	2 years
R2	Male/ 20s	Business	2 years
R3	Male/ 20s	Residential (Old town)	7 months
R4	Male/ 20s	Touristic	2 years
R5	Female/ 20s	Business	2 years
R6	Male/ 30s	Educational/Residential	3 years
R7	Female/ 40s	Business	1 year
R8	Male/ 30s	Residential (Old town)	1.5 years
R9	Female/ 20s	Touristic	1 year
R10	Female/ 30s	Residential (Old town)	3 years
R11	Female/ 20s	Touristic	13 years
R12	Male/ 30s	Residential (Old town)	1 year
R13	Male /30s	Touristic	6 years
R14	Male/ 40s	Touristic	2 years
R15	Male/ 20s	Residential (Old town)	2 years
R16	Female/ 20s	Touristic	5 years
R17	Female/ 40s	Business	2 years
R18	Male/ 30s	Business	1.5 years
R19	Male/ 40s	Residential (Old town)	3.5 years
R20	Male/ 50s	Residential (Old town)	3 years

Figure 2

Along with in-depth interviews, participant observations of selected coffee shops were conducted. The participant observations were conducted in each selected independent coffee shop. In order to include more consumer activities into the observations, the observations were conducted from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. during weekdays and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. during weekends. The exact time periods for conducting observations altered based on circumstances and the results of the interviews (the owners know best about their shops). The observations concentrated on two aspects: the coffee shop itself and its customers. The subjects of the observations include the decoration and style of the coffee shops, the features of the shops, the overall environment of the shops, the menus, the choices of music, the number of customers during the visit, and the customers' activities. The observations relied on both written transcriptions and visual records such as photographs. The photographs were used to illustrate the decorations and styles of the shops as well as the menus and selection of products behind counters. In order to best saturate categories of independent shops to maximumly include all types of shops in all four locations, touristic, business, residential, and educational, the observations of a coffee shop sometimes occurred without interviewing the owner. Field notes were taken for data analysis.

The combination of in-depth interviews and observations (Thompson and Arsel 2004) allow the study to tackle the research questions from a triangulation of data collection methods. As this study aims to discover the landscape of Chinese coffee culture from the core practitioners of the field, the mixed method gives the edge in terms of exploring both practitioners' subjective perceptions as well as the objective status quo of the realm. In addition, this approach also offers the researchers the advantage of balancing the emic and etic views (Creswell and Poth 2018) to generate meaningful insights. A hermeneutic approach (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997) was adopted for data analysis. During the process, both inductive analysis and

deductive analysis were used in which initial understandings are formed, challenged, revised, and further developed through an iterative procedure between individual transcripts and the emerging understanding of the entire set of textual data (Creswell and Poth 2018).

Findings

In relation to the respondents' interpretation of coffee and coffee culture, four common themes are generated from the interviews: lifestyle, professional, personality, and communication. The four themes reflect independent shop owners' experience of operating a coffee shop and more importantly their values and identities.

Lifestyle

The first theme, lifestyle, refers to how the shop owners regard coffee shop operation with respect to their personal life. The daily life activities of the majority of respondents are intermingled with their business. Most respondents (18 respondents out of 20) are both baristas and owners of their coffee shops and take the primary responsibility for preparing coffee. Some respondents do not have employees or only have a few employees. For instance, in R8's shop, the owner and his wife cover all the daily operations and maintenance of the shop on their own. In the card sorting session, three respondents (R8, R15, R19) indicate that living a particular "lifestyle" is the most predominant purpose for owning a coffee shop. For those respondents, operation of a coffee shop is not only a way to make a living, but also a way to live a meaningful and satisfying life. In the interview, R7 expresses how the coffee shop reflects her outlook on life:

> When I decided to open this coffee shop, I told myself that it's not necessarily going to make any profit. I would be satisfied as long as this shop can make both ends meet. Because I can make a living while get to enjoy the "xiaozi" sentiment of the shop. Every day, I watch people come and go. Some of them are acquaintances, and some of them are strangers. I enjoy and never get tired of life like this. (R7)

One aspect of R7's comment is that owning and living in a coffee shop offers her psychological satisfaction beyond financial gain. The satisfaction derives from both the "xiaozi" environment of the coffee shop and the daily encounter with different patrons.

Besides using the coffee shop to pursue a certain lifestyle, the daily operation of the coffee shop is also closely intertwined with some owners' personal lives as a cornerstone. Three respondents' (R8, R12, R15) shops are owned and operated by their spouse. According to R1, he and his coworker both met their respective partners at the coffee shop. The coffee shop is a means of supporting the respondents' family and the hub around which they build social connections. Therefore, coffee and the coffee shop

contain special meanings for the respondents. When asked for understanding of coffee culture, R12 expresses how coffee relates to and affects his life in every aspect:

> Coffee is a belief for me. I had never had any other job. I became a barista directly after graduating from college…The job of making coffee is very simple and repetitive…Over time, I developed a special style of thinking and doing which represents me. It affects the way I do other things. For example, my walking pace and a standard of measuring to what extent things could be called done…After so many years working this job, the job becomes my friend. I devote a lot of energy into it. So maybe this is a simple and not significant work for other people, but for me, it's all my life. (R12)

R12's comment reflects that working with coffee shaped his way of thinking and living - a process which also influenced how his values and identity developed.

Communication

The communication theme is characterized by the need and intention to communicate with patrons as well as the effort to facilitate the communication between patrons. "Interpersonal communication," "making friends," "niche" and "living room" are some of the most commonly mentioned keywords by the respondents regarding the traits of the independent coffee shop. It shows that they consider high quality communication one of the key factors keeping their shops competitive. Several respondents claim that the satisfaction of interacting with their customers is one of the most crucial motivators to keep their business running. The respondents give high priority to facilitating effective communication between their customers. For instance, R12 specifically designed his shop's physical layout to suit the need for communication for his customers:

> I think for a physical store, to prepare good coffee is definitely important, but at the same time it has to make sure to share our coffee in an appropriate way. It requires a proper designed layout – first of all and most importantly, a well-designed bar to facilitate communication. Our bar is relatively open and big. Yet there is not very much stuff on it except for primary equipment. Because redundant stuff interferes with the interaction between barista and customers. (R12)

Besides introducing coffee related information to their customers, the communication between operators and patrons can be deep and very personal:

> We trained and encouraged our baristas to communicate with customers. In this way, we can attract a group of customers…Because many customers, especially the ones sitting at the bar, want to share and talk about their feelings and life status with other people…I personally become friends and keep close contact with many customers...there is a couple who often come to our café, so we exchanged WeChat contact. The wife saw me post pictures of my hometown in Fujian province and

thought it's a perfect travel destination for their vacation. So, they had already planned to go visit my family in my hometown this coming spring festival. (R5)

R5's statement highlights that being able to communicate and build up an interpersonal connection with the owners and baristas of the coffee shop is the advantage of independent cafés. This depth of communication is relatively hard to obtain from corporate coffee chain stores. R1 expresses his intention of creating an open and conversational environment for his customers:

> Strangers have big chance to become friends with each other. In many cases, people meet each other and find out they share the same hobby, and eventually become friends…The relationship between the independent coffee shop and its customers is hard to achieve by chain stores. I believe that a coffee shop can be a place where you actually live. Many of our patrons consider our shop their second living room or a place they will frequently go visit. They consider the owner their close friend. (R1)

R1 believes the conversation provoking environment and the close interpersonal relationship are distinguishing and valuable assets of his coffee shop as it provides both his customers and him a social venue to connect with people. In order to achieve the same goal of facilitating communication, R4 meticulously employs a special design for his bar:

> Our environment is for communication. It's really rare that you can see people working on their computers here. Because first of all, people here have the right mood and schedule to relax. And more importantly, we have a circular bar…We want to see the interaction between people. Not only our customers and us, but also the communication between different customers…People sit in a circle talking about music, weather, and of course coffee. We break up the old sitting pattern to make sure no one will be left in the corner doing their own thing. (R4)

R4's coffee shop is located in the middle of a famous touristic art district. He is aware that the purpose of most of his customers visiting his shop is to be entertained, rather than to study or to work. So, he designed his bar to encourage people gathering around to have conversations with each other.

Professional

Two general ideas are expressed by the respondents in the professional theme. First, the independent coffee shop owners take a professional approach in equipping themselves with coffee related knowledge. Second, most respondents maintain a professional perspective as to the role of coffee in their personal life.

Coffee roasting and preparation are considered to be technical professional skills. In the respondents' coffee shops, state of the art roasting machines, espresso machines, specialty coffee equipment, and the most recently published books about coffee in different languages are commonly seen. Respondents spend a tremendous amount of

time and devote a remarkable amount of energy to acquiring professional skills. Several respondents claim to be certified baristas and have had professional experience for over a decade. For example, R13 asserts that he has 13 years' experience in the coffee industry and a couple of successful award-winning baristas are his own students. Similarly, R12 claims that he has been in the industry for more than 9 years and has never had any other jobs outside the industry. In the interviews, the respondents who are professionals demonstrate a rich stock of knowledge and a strong professional interest in coffee. In the card sorting session, when asked to select the relevant words to describe coffee in general, R16 asserts that coffee is first of all "scientific and technical" without looking at the provided words on the cards. In the interview with her, she expresses her fascination for coffee related professional knowledge.

> It was around November or December of 2012; I had been a barista at another coffee shop for three months. At the time I felt coffee preparing is very easy, you know, just machine operating. So, I was very satisfied with myself professionally. Then one night, a barista of the coffee shop I worked for took me to this coffee shop. I met a professional barista and roaster, who became my master later. I remembered that night I was not able to understand anything they talked about coffee. Their conversation totally changed my view on coffee. Later on, I decided to come here every night after work talking and learning about the professional skills of coffee preparation. About a half month later, I quitted my old job and started working here. (R16)

R16's reminiscence of her career path reflects that she considers that coffee preparation is a profound subject requiring time and systematic learning to master. This scientific and technical perspective concerning coffee corresponds with her choice of word in describing coffee in the card-sorting session. In his understanding that many independent coffee shop owners take a technical perspective when it comes to coffee preparation and roasting, R15 offers his reflection of this phenomenon:

> There is a conflict in western countries: many people drink coffee only because they have to or used to have a cup every day. Those people rarely go a step further to look for the possibilities of the taste of coffee or to trace the beans to their origins. But in Asian areas such like Japan, Taiwan, and China, there was no traditional coffee drinking culture. So, people are more likely to study and figure out how to prepare a proper cup. And they learn it in a scientific approach. As a result, the average professional level is a bit higher in those areas, and furthermore there is no cultural conflict towards coffee. (R15)

As an American living in Beijing, R15 looks at and compares coffee from the perspective of both western and eastern culture. He points out that the lack of coffee drinking tradition in Asian areas including China on the one hand reduces cultural conflict, and on the other hand also leads to a common scientific and technical perspective held by practitioners.

Furthermore, many respondents take a professional stance in relation to coffee in their daily life. Several respondents claim that they only drink coffee in their own shops for the sake of work. Rather than enjoying coffee as a beverage, they more frequently drink coffee for controlling and testing the quality and consistency of their products.

> My first morning cup starts with testing the coffee grinder every day. I have to know if the products of today are different from yesterday. Plus, when we have new types of beans, I have to test it. I don't drink coffee to enjoy the slow-paced life. Instead, I drink it as a part of quality control. (R12)

One aspect of R12's statement is that coffee in his life is considered as the product of his business more than a functional or leisurely drink. In connection with this idea, R15 expresses his change of perspective after he becomes a practitioner:

> Before I opened this shop, I drank coffee when I felt like it. It was a pleasure. Yet, in order to operate this shop, I have to learn and explore the professional field, even though I'm not super interested in this knowledge. Now I find that the more I learned about coffee, the more I'm not able to just enjoy a cup of coffee like before. The pleasure is being lost. (R15)

The loss of "pleasure" shows that R15 starts to take a professional perspective on coffee after he becomes a coffee shop owner. Coffee drinking becomes profession related rather than a leisure activity.

Personalization

The personalization theme refers to the independent coffee shop owners' need for distinguishing and expressing themselves in the form of their coffee shops. Different from the corporation owned chain coffee stores, the independent coffee shop allows the owners to project their own interests and values on the shops. "Sharing personal values" is pointed at by six respondents (R3, R5, R6, R7, R8, R15, R16) in the card sorting session as one of the major purposes of owning a coffee shop. Eight respondents (R1, R2, R5, R7, R11, R12, R15, R17) claim that "having a place of one's own" is another important consideration. This need for being able to express individual values through a personalized space is embodied by the owners' attempt to integrate personal hobbies into their coffee shops.

The integration is best demonstrated by the "themed cafés." As its literal meaning implies, themed café refers to the coffee shop revolving around a certain theme. This unified theme is often closely related to the owner's personal interests, and incarnated by the decorations, products, and services of the café. Themed cafés are pervasive in Beijing, although in this current study only one respondent (R4) claims his coffee shop, which features vinyl records, as a themed café. From the researcher's observations, the popular themes of themed cafés in Beijing include cat-themed, movie-themed, time-themed, and hobby-themed. For instance, in one cat-themed café, the owner feeds over

20 cats and allows them to freely engage with customers; at one café themed on the well-known sitcom TV series "Friends", the shop is decorated to match the living room – the main scene of the sitcom, and the products are named after the famous lines from the sitcom. However, the majority of respondents personalize their coffee shops according to their own tastes or interests, rather than adopting themes. For instance, R6 and R20 incorporate their passion for travel into the decoration of their shops; R6 collects antique furniture from the countries he has travelled in and displays them in his café; R20 decorates his café with his photographs taken while travelling.

Discussion

The current study examines Chinese independent coffee shops owners' perception and interpretation on coffee and coffeehouse culture (RQ1) as well as uncovering whether a unique coffeehouse culture exists in China (RQ2). In addressing the first research question, it is useful to pay attention to the results from the card-sorting process and the four common themes (lifestyle, communication, professional, and personalization). "Lifestyle" and "professional" are the most salient descriptions chosen by the owners when it comes to their perception of coffee culture in general, while "professional," "artistic," and "unique" are the most frequently chosen words to describe their own coffee shop. "Professional" is a notable feature indicated by the owners to distinguish both coffee culture and their coffee shops. As mentioned by Quintão and Brito (2016), the origin and development of connoisseurship consumption in the specialty coffee context is related to the development of coffee connoisseurship and skills amongst both coffee consumers and involved professionals, the growth of barista professionalism, the increasing number of high-end independent coffee shops in the marketplace, the launch of cutting-edge equipment, the development of high technology, and the growth of social media. The independent owners' professionalism plays an important role in cultivating and nurturing the connoisseurship consumption of specialty coffee in China. This professionalism is related to the lack of coffee drinking tradition in China. It was not until China's economic reform and "opening up" in the 1980s, that coffee was introduced and consumed by Chinese people. Although Starbucks and their coffee stores have developed and prospered over 20 years in Beijing, most independent coffee shop owners observe and claim that it is only in very recent few years that independent coffee shops and high-quality specialty coffee have become popular. In response to the demand for high-quality coffee and related knowledge, the owners naturally take on the role of resource and information disseminator, which is suggested by Bourdieu (1984) as a function of a cultural intermediary.

The owners as cultural intermediaries promote coffee (especially high-quality specialty coffee) as a commodity to the general consumers, and at the same time they legitimate the relatively new coffee and coffeehouse culture to be accepted by the mainstream pop culture. Some owners have a clear understanding of their role in

transmitting information about coffee culture and promoting this new leisure field. To achieve this goal, some owners take a comparative approach in order to introduce traditional concepts as a reference: they use tea as the analogue of coffee. However, a more usual approach employed by the owners, is to present coffee and coffee culture from a professional perspective. By taking this professional standpoint, the owners add a sense of ceremony to the process of specialty coffee preparation. Techniques such as the pour-over (a coffee brewing technique involving pouring hot water through coffee grounds in a filter) and the use of specialized brewing equipment are used in the performative process of preparation to enrich the customers' visiting experience. The consumption of relatively expensive specialty coffee contains rich social, cultural, sensual, embodied, and symbolic meanings, and is linked to identities and lifestyles of the new urban middle classes (Ardekani and Rath 2020). In other words, the consumption of specialty coffee in the independent coffee shop provides people with a way to practice their social position and differentiate themselves from other cultural groups (Ardekani and Rath 2020). This professional perspective also applies to the shop owners' perception of coffee. One owner proposed "technical" to describe coffee and coffee culture in the card-sorting session, and this is agreed on and identified by other shop owners interviewed later. Again, this unique perception is related to the lack of a coffee drinking tradition in China. Thus, the coffee shop owners educate themselves about coffee from a scientific standpoint. The newly developed market provides opportunities for the owners to experiment with various techniques and equipment rather than to follow an existing set of conventions.

The second research question asked if a unique Chinese coffee culture exits. Regarding this question, independent coffee shop owners have different opinions. Some owners believe that as the coffeehouse market is still at an initial stage (Ferreira and Ferreira 2018), it is too early to form a general conclusion regarding culture. Others claim that the coffee shop is gradually becoming a venue for most casual leisure activities. It is where people spend their leisure time. The coffee shop not only offers food and beverage service, but also provides a physical space for many intellectual activities to take place. The music and art forms in the independent coffee shop often represent the artistic taste of the city. When describing their own coffee shops, the second most often identified description is "artistic". Regardless of the style of the coffee shop, the integration of a variety of art forms is frequently seen. For instance, a vinyl records collection and culture of music appreciation in R4's café, theater art in R9's café, baking and pastry art in R10's café, culinary art in R17's café, architectural art in R19's café, photographic art in R20's café, and so forth. In addition, coffee shops in Beijing are particularly concentrated in the middle of old town areas and artistic areas where the traditional architectures and lifestyles are well preserved. These locations offer slow-paced environments, which are distinguishable from other hectic areas in the metropolis, allowing various leisure activities to take place. As Ardekani and Rath (2020) point out, a particular space with a specific interior design fostering a leisurely ambiance within a particular neighbourhood contributes to the rich cultural

meanings of the consumption of the relatively expensive specialty coffee. Independent coffee shops are places for the owner to practice and express their own personalities and interests. Unique niches or communities are also formed around each shop, based on the personality of the shop as well as other leisure elements which may be integrated. All in all, while coffee culture in Beijing has yet to approach a mature stage the diversity of the independent coffee shops reflects the artistic and cultural taste of the city – they are the miniatures of leisure culture in the city.

According to the circuit of culture theory (du Gay et al. 2013), culture is the shared meanings of an artifact or practice, and the representation is the process where meanings are socially constructed. The current study reveals how the shared meanings surrounding coffee and the coffeehouse is formed and negotiated from the perspective of independent coffee shop owners in contemporary China. Findings suggest that while the perceived coffee culture is deemed as a way of living which is technical and scientifically oriented, the perceived coffeehouse culture is considered both professional and artistic which integrates independent coffee shop owners' idiosyncratic personalities and interests as well as the collective cultural values of the locality.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study includes only 20 coffee shops by interviewing the owners/managers. As a result, the findings are one-sided and indicate the perspectives of the practitioners. In the future, interviews or surveys could be conducted among customers of independent coffee shops. The perspective of customers, especially frequent customers – the ones whom Waxman (2006) called coffee shop campers – is worth investigating as they may offer insights about the important qualities of independent coffee shops which distinguish them from the global influential chain coffeeshops. With respect to future research, it would be interesting to include other large cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. Comparing different cities will provide a more comprehensive picture of the independent coffeeshop market in China, and at the same time identify what traits may be shared and what traits may be unique to each city.

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