

# Introducing Anthropology of Consumption

## Understanding daily life in China



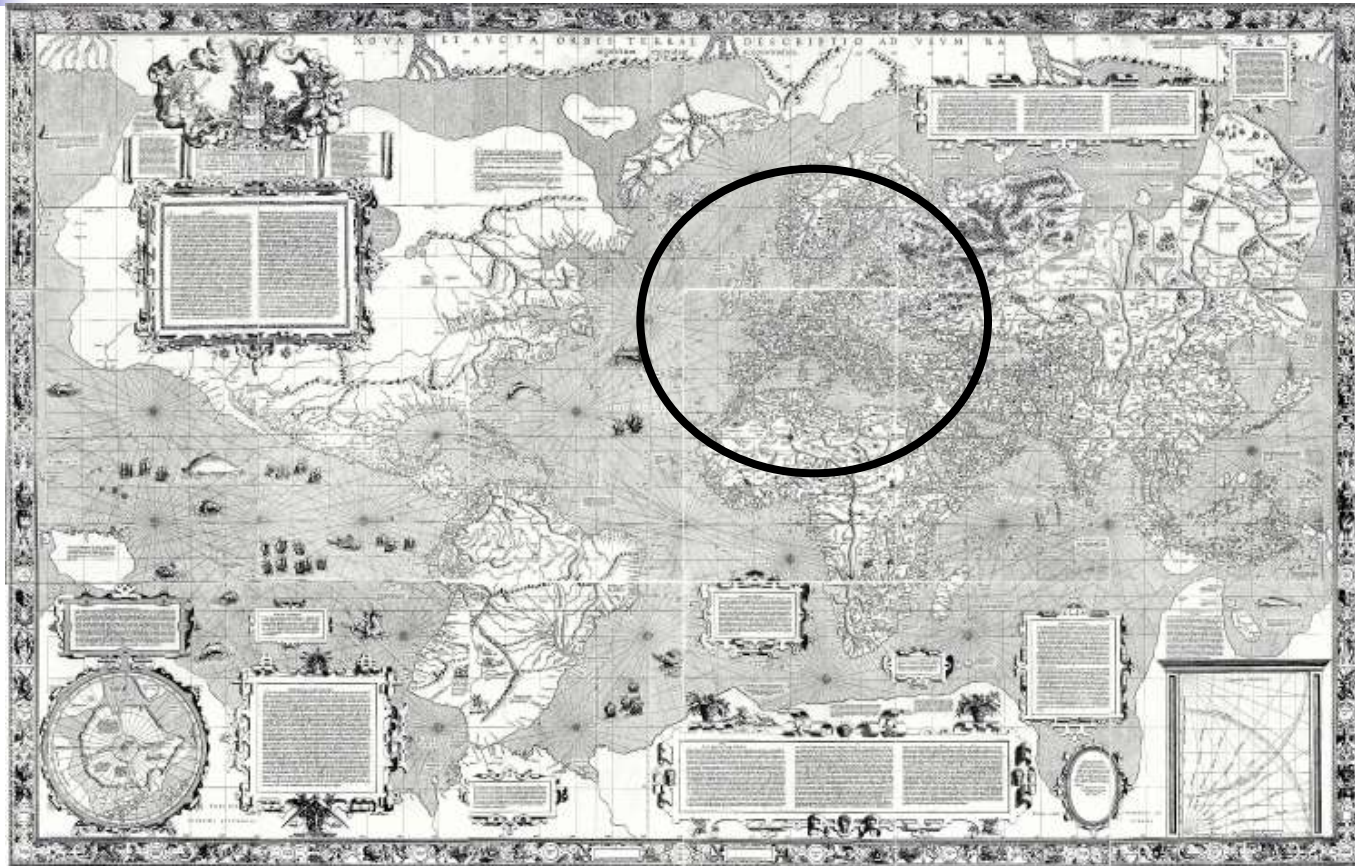
Dominique Desjeux, anthropologist  
Professor at the Sorbonne (University of Paris-Descartes)  
Visiting professor at the University of Foreign Languages,  
Guangzhou (China), UFRJ (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), USF  
(Tampa, FL, USA)

[www.argonautes.fr](http://www.argonautes.fr)

D. Desjeux, 2006, *La consommation*, PUF, Ques sais-je?  
D. Desjeux, 2044, *Le sciences sociales*, PUF, Ques sais-je?  
S. Alami, D. Desjeux, I. Garabueau-Moussaoui, *Les  
méthodes qualitatives*, PUF, Ques sais-je?

2011 09, 30, FU JEN University, Taipei Taiwan

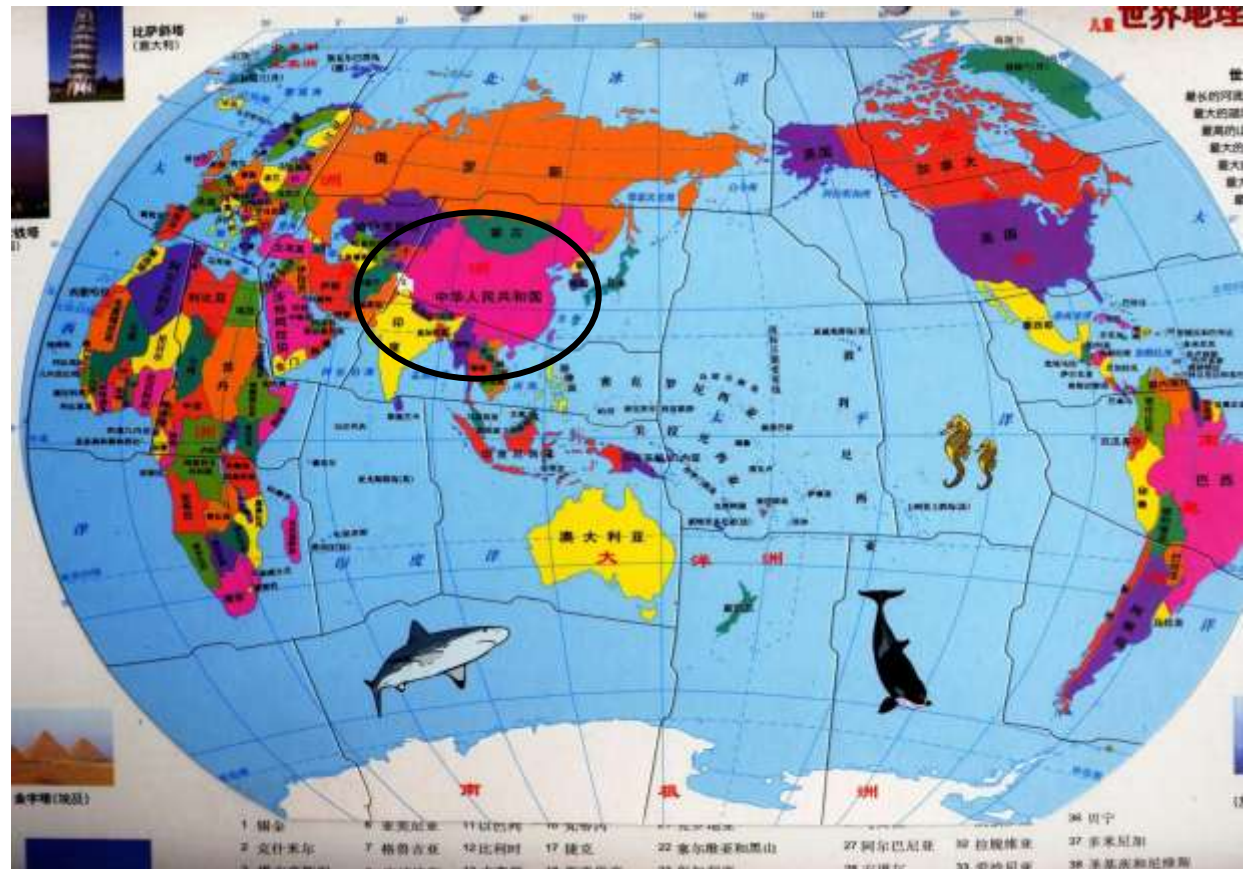
# A traditional European point of view: Europe seen as the middle of the world Asia as far East



# An American point of view: Europe is no more the center of the world and Asia is very closed



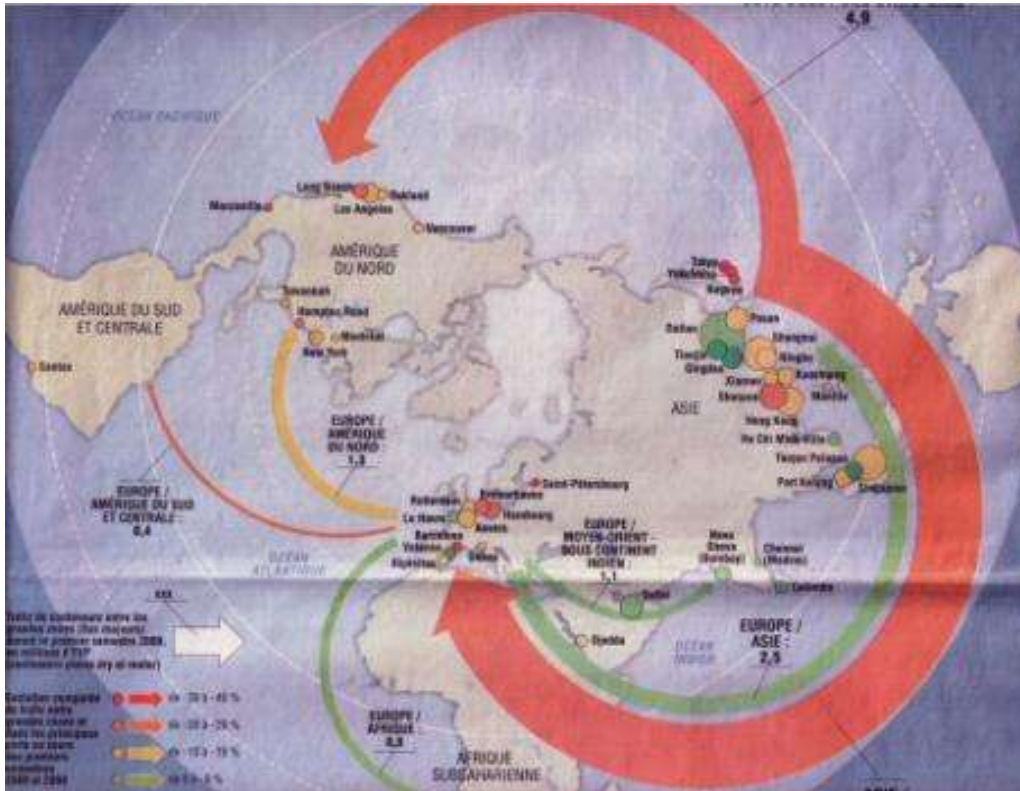
# A chinese point of view: China as *zhong guo*



A Chinese puzzle for children

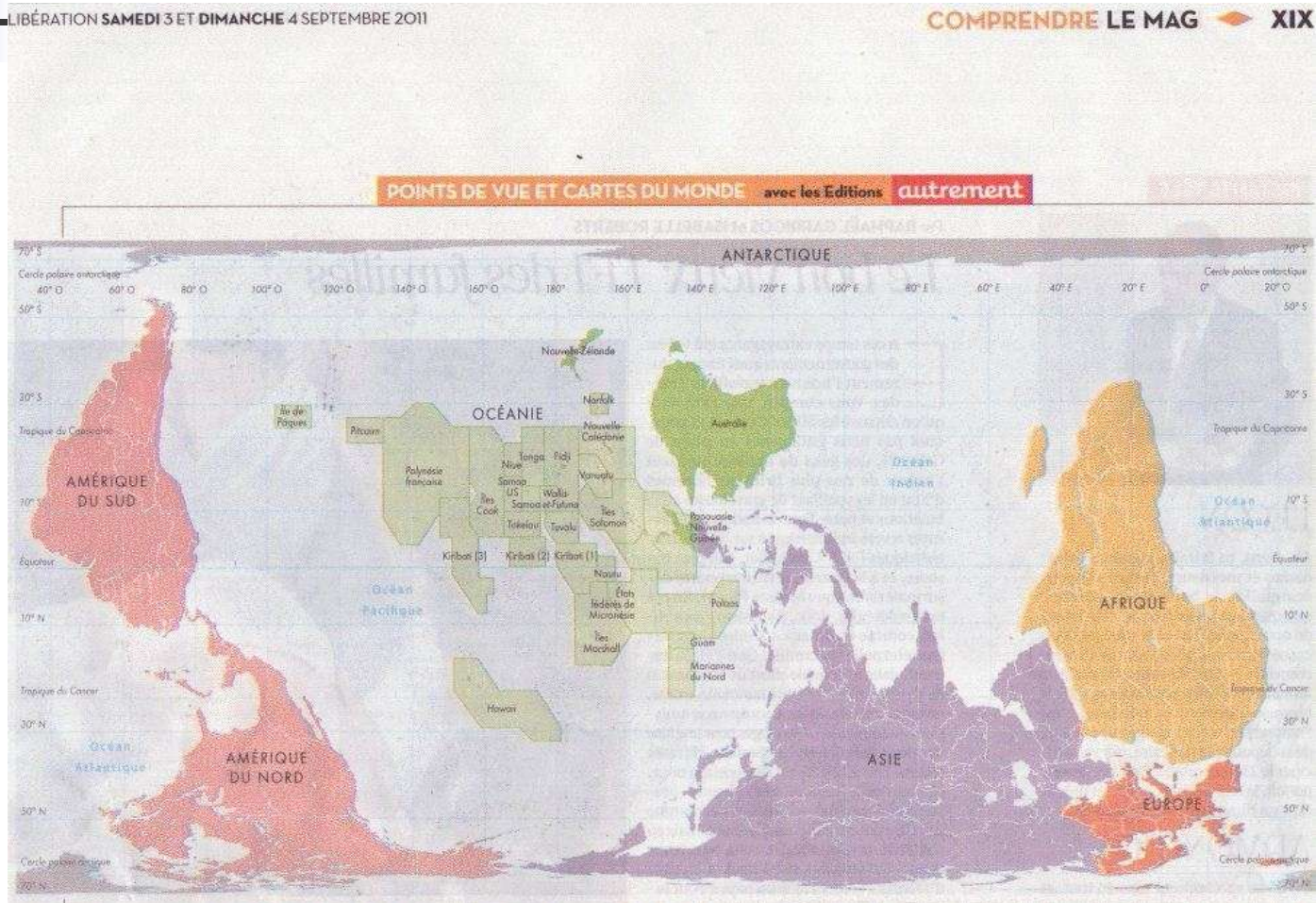
# Nowadays where is the center

?



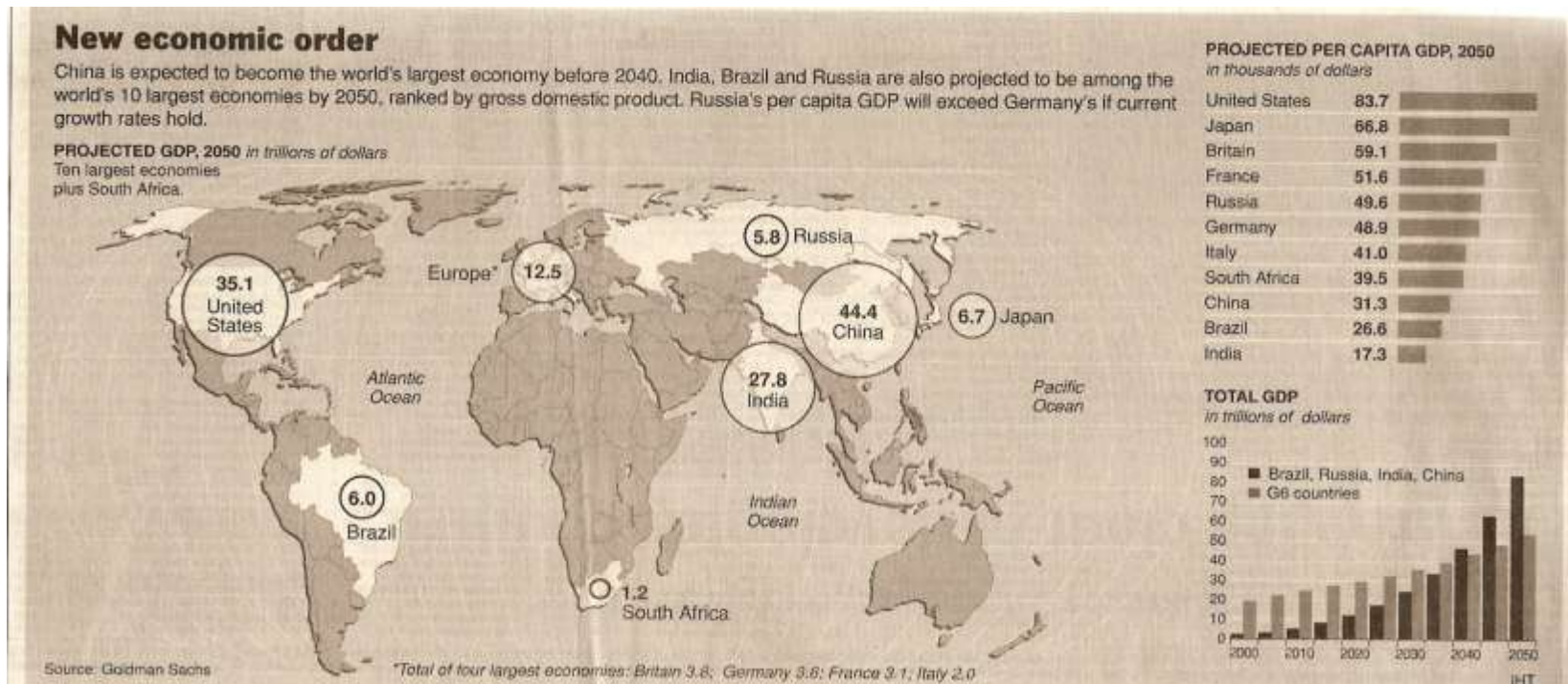
Les Echos  
2009, December 1  
Containers flows

# The world seen from the South Pole



# Nowadays there are several « middles of the world »

Les PIB en Trillions de \$ 2050



(IHT, JULY 10, 2004)



Carrying out intercultural field  
study means to move off center

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There is no culture in the center  
of the world





# I - The basic principles

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## Three main methodological principles to carry out a qualitative field study on consumer behavior

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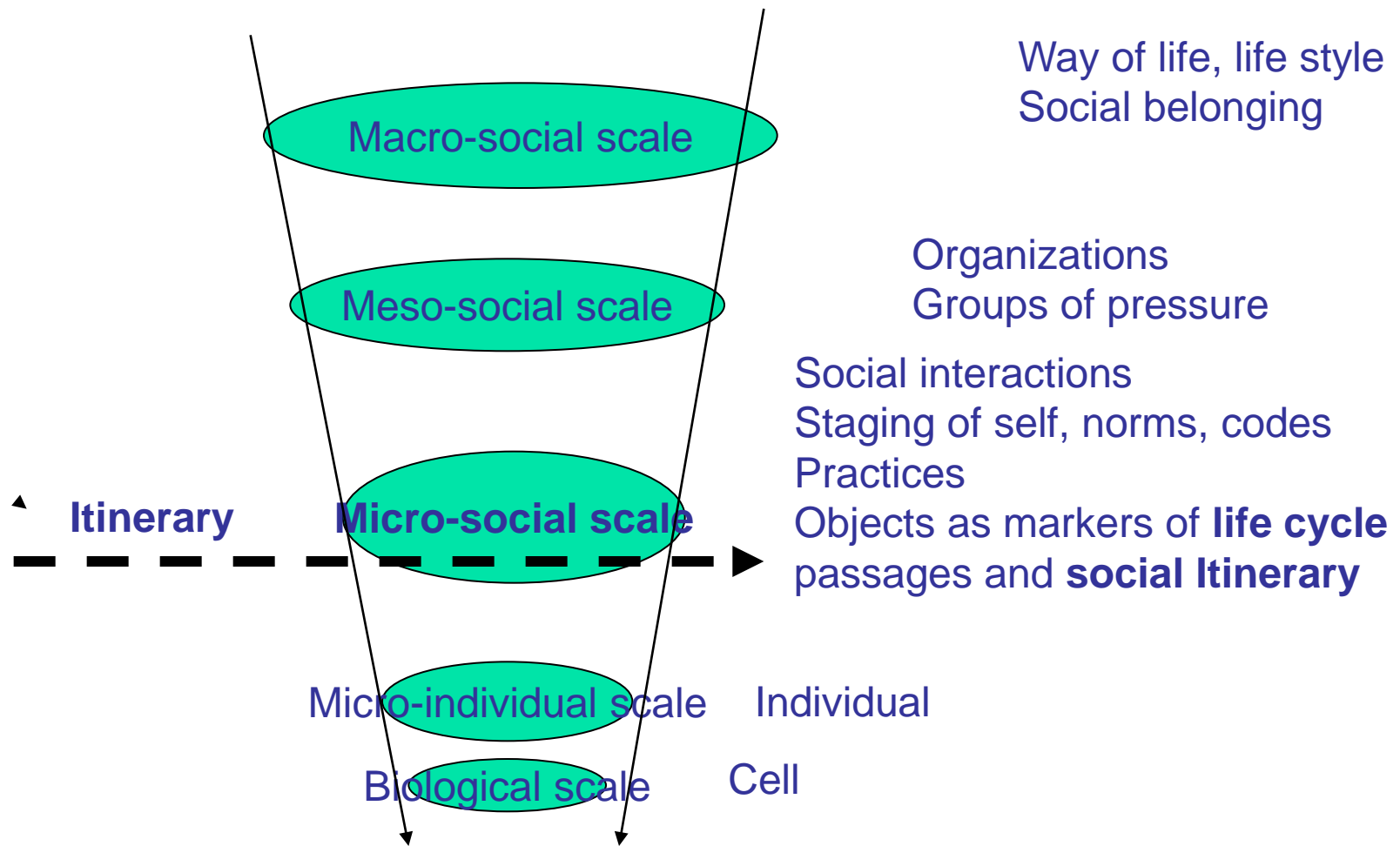
- Discovering the relevant scale of observation
- Following an itinerary of decision making process in the home space
- Distinguishing practices from representations



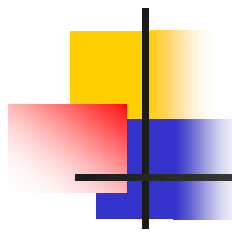
## II - The scales of observation

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# Five main scales of Observation



# Illustration of scales of observation in regard to consumption



1997, Photos by D. Desjeux

Macro-social scale



Meso-social scale



Micro-social scale



Micro-individual scale

Depending on the scale, one phenomenon which could be visible at one scale becomes invisible to another scale of observation



# Chinese Life style at a macro-social scale of observation

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Based on a work done by Laurence Varga  
Free lance anthropologist  
MA at the Sorbonne (University of Paris-  
Descartes)  
Pragmaty, Paris, 2004

# Attitude across age groups



The children of the Liberation (above 50 y.o.)



The children of the cultural revolution (between 35-50 y.o.)



The children of the economic growth (below 35 y.o.)

(2002, Photos by Laurence Varga)

# Children of the liberation - Life style

Worked all life in  
state company

Low income

Traditional activities  
and leisure  
(mahjong)

Often financially dependant  
on children



One model : the state

Conservative values

Observe the changes,  
but don't feel part of it

Survival economy

Not reactive  
to advertising



# Children of the cultural revolution – Life style

Double income :  
sometimes state  
and private

Saving for buying  
an apartment or at least  
moving

Big purchasers of  
household appliances,  
motivation to have equipped

Less interested in  
'leisure' consumption

Do not see much  
difference  
between brands and ads



In between 2 system  
of values

Focused on family  
and child

In process of  
Adapting to the market,  
led by their child

Willing to try new products  
but not daring

# Children of the economic growth – Life style

High salary

Dynamic

Live with parents /  
buy an apartment

Longest exposure  
to marketing

Self gratifying  
purchase

Sensitive to  
advertising

Seeking education  
opportunities

Have faith in  
their future

Leisure consumers



# The emerging new generation: the king children (in cities)

- One child
- Two parents
- Four grandparents
- An aging population
- A big change in the ways of spending money
- It is one of the cause which explain the consumption burst
- One part of Chinese History could be explain by consumption



2006, Guangzhou



## III - The micro-social scale of observation

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Material, social and cultural constraints



## Understanding the three levels of constraints which weights on goods shopping and uses

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- **Material:** size of the household space, income of the family, system of material objects
- **Social:** conflicts, cooperation and social transactions, strategies and social norms
- **Culture:** Imaginary, religion, values, social status, meaning of objects

# 1 – Material constraints: little space for storage

- A student bedroom in 1997 at Guangzhou University:
- How to cope with limited space for seven students
- There is no room for more goods





## 2 – Social constraints: Entering a structured household space

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- Goods become integrated into 3 domestic spaces:
  - public
  - private
  - intimate
- Uses and the ways of storing goods within these 3 spaces depends on three social norms.
- what is:
  - Prescribed
  - Permitted
  - Forbidden
- Goods are organized depending on 3 ways
  - Displayed
  - left visible
  - hidden

An example of what is allowed to be displayed, left visible or hidden depending on the culture

## In public

- displayed



2000, USA, displaying the American flag

- left visible

2004, Israel, weapons visible when shopping



- hidden



2003, Algeria, hiding hair



3 - But cultural norms could be reinterpreted from its first cultural use when going into another culture because its meaning is changing



American and French bathrooms:  
toilet paper stored in an intimate space



China storing of sanitary paper  
in the living room, a public space



## IV - The itinerary method

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Some examples of historical changes in consumption behaviors from 1997 to 2007 in Guangzhou, China

The itinerary method

# The boom of consumption in Guangzhou : between 1997 and 2006



Friendship department store,  
a former public state store  
in 1997 in Guangzhou



A new mall in Guangzhou  
in 2006

## The signs of the middle class rising income in China



A modern middle class flat in 1997



the same middle class  
in a new flat in 2006

Flat entrance in 1997: wires are visible, 2006 material are more expensive, wires are invisible. The signs of modernity

2005

1997



1997, Living with neon, 2006, without neon and new material (wood vs. cloth)



# The dining area: from wood to plastic

1997



2006



# 1997, the kitchen: no fridge, no oven



saucepan



Vegetable colander



wok



Knives  
Pair of scissors

Cooking block



# 2005, oven, fridge and cooking hood entering the kitchen



# Bathroom 1997-2005

1997



2005



**Nowadays western toilettes are could be seen as signs of social distinction**

# 1997 the bathroom



Minimum equipment



Only a few products

# 2006: well equipped



But tradition is still there: lift  
without 4, 14, 24 (3A, 13A, 23A)

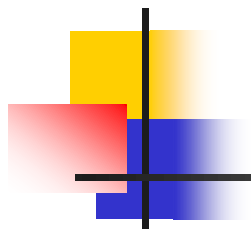


# Chinese calendar



Meet friends  
Dig earth  
Build the roof

Don't get married  
Don't go to the  
hair dresser



# 19

1428 شوال SYAWAL 28

甲辰歲九月運程1964年生人，百尺幹頭，更進一步。  
甲子鼠九月運程1984年生人，瓶危帶水，後已誤人。

 訂婚 納采 入學 會友 生車 丁未己丑	 每日相落 歲煞 西 47 本月費人時 辛亥	<b>FRIDAY</b> <b>星期五</b> <b>三十日</b> 九月大 丁亥年 小字 亥 亥 壬 癸	丁未水成日十四小堂 吉神西北 黃神東北 吉門東北 每日胎神 意房內東 廳廁 本日 生相 年冲	 理髮 整甲 星日命擇 午能互緣 丁丑 辛丑 己丑

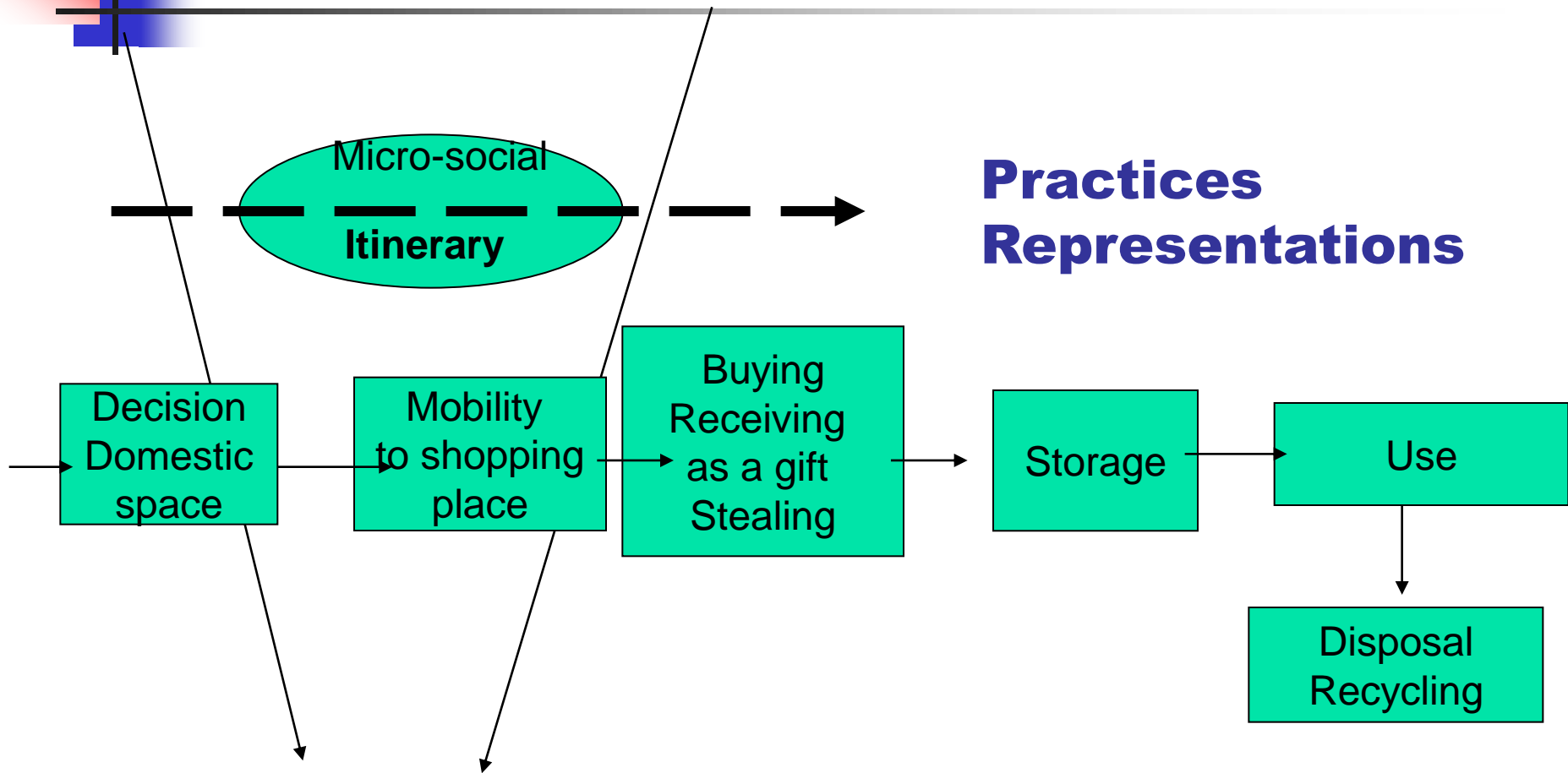
香港正版通勝日曆

# Buddhist practices in Guangzhou





# The itinerary method applied to Guangzhou





# Method

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- Photography and on-site interviews
  - Photos of the neighborhood context
  - Photos of building entrance, stairway, doorway, electric wires, objects
  - Photos of all the rooms
- In depth interviews
- Observation
- Focus groups

# Shopping and eating Itinerary: starting shopping



Bringing a limited amount of money



A shopping bag

It is an every day shopping process based on limited means in 1997

# Mobility



Shopping by foot



The old Guangzhou

# Shopping



Unwrapped meat



Choosing living shrimps



Protecting her money  
In the pocket

# Living animals as sign of quality



Choosing living chicken



Ready to be eaten

# Going back home



# Cooking as a long process in a small space

Frying



No oven

It is a good example of the importance of looking at uses from a western point of view



# An optimized use of space

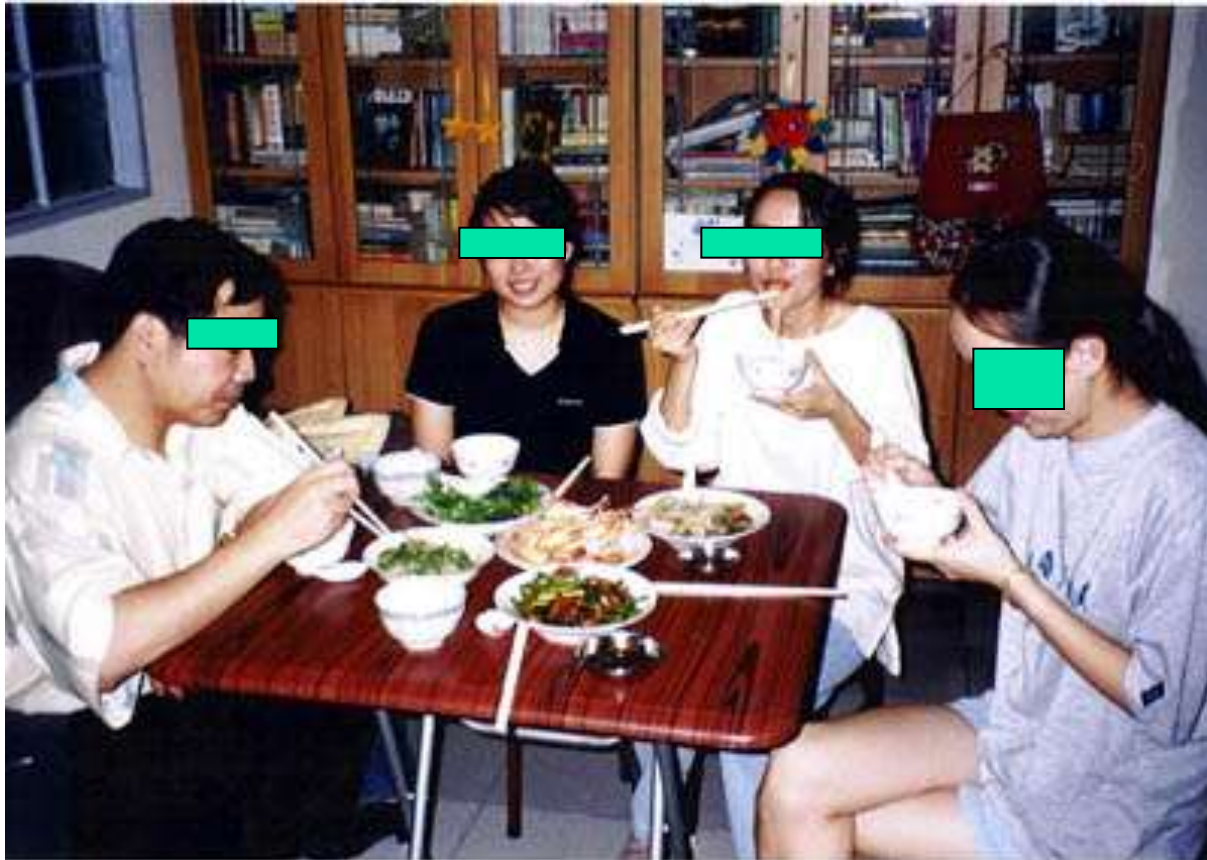


# A collective meal



Chopstick tips  
are displayed  
outside the  
table as  
hygienic  
practice

# Picking in the same bowl



# Eating



**Having more rice**



**No napkin  
Left over  
on the table**

# Washing up





# Conclusion: Shopping as the result of a domestic use

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- Instead of focusing on motivation, pleasure and individual what is a relevant angle of observation
- Anthropology focuses on what organized the behavior of consumers beyond the intention of individuals
- Conformity (and transgression) of social norms are observed
- Buying an object is conditioned by use in the home which is conditioned by social norms.
  - Thank you for your attention