

THE ITINERARY METHOD: COMPARING INTERCULTURAL DAILY LIFE

THE CASE OF GUANGZHOU, CHINA

Dominique Desjeux,¹ Zheng Lihua²

Walking to our next interview in a neighborhood near the West Station in Guangzhou,³ we came into a dark, narrow passage between high-rise buildings that looked like public housing, where we could see four old people playing mahjongg. The apartments were linked by an apparent tangle of electric wires. The windows were all protected by wrought iron bars. Most of the balconies were decorated with flowers. Clothes were drying on long sticks outside the windows. Nothing very conspicuous at first glance. No exotic vision of China. Only the ordinary course of daily life could be seen.

And nevertheless, step by step, starting from a field study on ordinary life, we enter into the everyday life of the Chinese. The concentrated buildings they live in are nevertheless much more spacious than the housing of 20 or 30 years ago, or so we were told by those over 40. Back then, they lived in collective dormitories where a married couple's bedroom was isolated only by a blanket. The husband might have worked hundreds of miles from his home and family. Children might have been scattered throughout the country. Our observations and informants' memories indicated that a new level of comfort was becoming accessible, at least in cities and among the upper-middle classes.

Nowadays old people are seen outside the house, often doing different sorts of *qigong* or gymnastics. They are still present in family life: very often they look after and go for walks with the child of the family. They help clean house, wash clothes, and cook meals.

Electric wires are significant in the development of electricity and electrical objects of daily life. The upper-middle class in urban South China today now has access to neon lighting, air conditioning, refrigerators, washing machines, microwaves, electric rice cookers, stove exhaust fans, sterilizers for dishes and chopsticks, electric kettles to boil drinking water, and also computers, televisions, mobile phones, and pagers (*bibiji*). In

1 Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Paris V-Sorbonne, head of the department of consumption studies at CERLIS/CNRS-Sorbonne, series director of "Sciences Sociales et Société" at PUF, scientific director of Argonautes, Visiting Professor in Tampa (USA), Guangzhou (China), Odense (Denmark).

2 Professor at the University of Foreign Languages of Guangdong, Guangzhou, China.

3 This work was made possible thanks to the collaboration of the French department and the Center for Intercultural Research under the direction of Professor Zheng Lihua, with the participation of Yang Xiaomin, Assistant Professor and Ph.D. student at Paris-V Sorbonne, and the assistance of Mrs Xie XXX, Associate Professor, and the Chinese students of the French department at the University of Foreign Languages of Guangdong. Our qualitative study of 10 families was carried out between October 1997 and January 1998 on the basis of in-depth interviews, observations, and systematic photo studies of all rooms and objects, with a documentation of approximately one thousand photos.

terms of material culture, China resembles Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, as it entered the process of mass consumption⁴ just after the Second World War, only with the addition of mobile phones and color televisions.

Bars on the windows, reinforced doors, and entry phones symbolize the need to protect these consumer goods, the increase in the amount of private space, and probably the emergence of a greater social differentiation.

Our hypothesis is that consumption, seen in the objects of everyday life, is an analyzer of social relationships and of their evolution in most societies today. It is a methodological and an anthropological hypothesis that in no way sanctions or condemns market economy or consumption. It merely maintains that consumption is a social phenomenon inherent to all societies: without consumption, that is, without exchange, there are no social links, nor is there creation of value without production.⁵

The itinerary method is a way of observing the practices and the representations of consumption, focusing not on motivations or buying tradeoffs, but rather on the ways that objects and services are used in the domestic and family spheres. This circulation of objects depends largely on the world of shopping, as brilliantly shown by Daniel Miller in *A Theory of Shopping* (1998), on goods that are bought in a street market, a mall, or a corner shop. Other objects are outside the commercial sphere, as in the case of gifts and second-hand objects that are transmitted from one generation to another.⁶

1. THE ITINERARY METHOD

The principles of the itinerary method are quite simple. This method consists of starting from the uses of objects and considering the acquisition of an object, through purchase or as a gift, as a series of social interactions between family, friends, and colleagues as well as a process over time. It includes several stages that can be reconstructed and redefined to correspond to the culture in which the field study is carried out.

The itinerary method is a micro-social approach to observing reality.⁷ It does not take into account either institutions and the effects of social domination, which are mainly

4 Cf. on the same period in France, Kristin Ross, 1995, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and Reordering of French Culture*, MIT Press.

5 Cf. on consumption from historical, economical and anthropological points of view, D. Desjeux, 1998, "Scales of Observation of Consumption", in Cabin Philippe, Dominique Desjeux, Didier Nourisson, Robert Rochefort, 1998, "Comprendre le consommateur (Understanding the Consumer)," Auxerre, *Sciences Humaines*, (www.argonautes.fr).

6 Cf. on the circulation of objects, Arjun Appadurai (Ed.), 1986, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in a Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Dominique Desjeux, Anne Monjaret, Sophie Taponier, 1998, *Quand les français déménagent. Circulation des objets domestiques et rituels de mobilité dans la vie quotidienne en France (Moving in France: Rituals of Mobility and the Mobility of Objects)*, Paris, PUF; www.argonautes.fr

7 Cf. on scales of observation, Dominique Desjeux, 1996, "Scales of Observation: a Micro-sociological Epistemology of Social Science Practice," *Visual Sociology*, vol. 11, n°2, pp. 45-55

observable at a macro-social scale of observation, or motivations and psychological tradeoffs involving purchases, which depend on the micro-individual scale of observation.

In terms of intellectual divisions, the parts of reality on which the field study focuses are located on one specific scale, my empirical experience showing that it is impossible to observe the whole of reality on every scale, with all dimensions at once. The itinerary method is more focused on practices, strategies, and the imaginary than on the meaning that actors attribute to their own actions.

By applying this method systematically to studies of the middle class, the upper-middle class, and academics in various countries such as Algeria, Benin, China, Denmark, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, and the United States,⁸ it is possible to gain a better understanding of cultural differences by observing uses. It is also possible to put them into context in order to focus more on observing differences in practices and representations than on seeking the “essence,” the “soul,” or the “purity” of a culture, which cannot be found. It is not a spectacular approach, but it is a powerful one that makes it possible to observe the “invisible evidence” of everyday life.

It postulates that cultures are dynamic and that social interactions are explainable by a strategic approach, based on power relationships and on cooperation.⁹ It also approaches structurally the social codes involving the uses and the location of objects in the domestic space. At any given moment in the history of a country and in the evolution of its social dynamics, domestic space can be divided into three subspaces: intimate, private, and public.

Our comparative approach shows that there is a sharp distinction between intimate and private space in France, between the bedroom or the bathroom (intimate) and the kitchen (private). This distribution is different in America, where the kitchen is a semi-private, semi-public space. In China, the main distinction seems to be between public space — the living room — and private space — the other rooms. (Toilets are found to be more public than private in some places outside the home.) Public, intimate, and private are three structural categories that are very helpful in describing the reality of space, but their importance and their distribution change across cultures, social classes, genders, and generations.

8 Since 1996, we have been carrying out an international project of studies of daily life, domestic spaces, and food behaviors within the research framework of Argonautes, CERLIS/CNRS, and the summer program of the Magistère of Social Sciences Applied to Intercultural Relations (organization, consumption, environment) at Paris V-Sorbonne. This project has been made possible through the collaboration of Nicoletta Diasio (Rome, Italy); Tine Vinje François and Dominique Bouchet (Odense, Denmark); Mohamed Mebtoul (Oran, Algeria); Sophie Taponier and Isabelle Garabuau-Moussaoui (Paris, France); Marc Neumann and Christine Probes (Tampa, USA); Ken Erickson (Kansas City, USA); Elise Palomares (Cotonou, Benin); Katharine Witte (Nijmegen, Netherlands); Zheng Lihua and Yang Xiaomin (Guangzhou, China). Two books on objects in daily life and on food behaviors are scheduled for publication at l'Harmattan editions (Paris).

9 Cf. Dominique Desjeux (with the collaboration of Sophie Taponier), 1991, *Le sens de l'autre: Stratégies, réseaux et cultures en situation interculturelle (The Meaning of Others. Strategies, Social Networks and Cultures in Intercultural Situations)*, Paris, UNESCO (3rd edition, 2000, l'Harmattan).

Similarly, there is a structural organization of how objects are used and where they are stored, even if this may change, following three social codes: what is prescribed, what is permitted, and what is forbidden. The manner in which these elements are combined forms a specific structure, which may evolve as a result of cultural or historical factors.

A good example is toilet paper, the storage of which in France can be either prescribed or permitted in the toilet, the bathroom, or a specific cupboard. Its storage place is linked to intimate or private space. Toilet paper must be hidden from the public, and it is “forbidden” — in the meaning of an implicit code, an unconscious taboo — to put it on display in the living room. On the contrary, in Guangzhou, toilet paper has no forbidden codes: it can be displayed conspicuously on the most beautiful furniture of the living room below the television or the telephone, which shows that it has another value and other uses than in France. It can be used as toilet paper, as a handkerchief, or as paper, towels, whereas in France there are three different paper products.

However, this mixed use can be found in France among young people who may use toilet paper as a handkerchief or as something with which to clean the table. This confirms the relativity of culture in comparison with the effects of generation, gender, or social class, at least in everyday life. This example also shows that the meaning of an object changes when it crosses from one culture to another, proving the existence of cultural differences.

The itinerary approach can be applied to study many daily social processes such as moving, as well as to describe an innovation process in professional life. The number of stages and their components can change. One of the easiest itineraries to observe is the food shopping process, which is found in most contemporary urban cultures. Here, we observed seven stages in our first field studies.

The first stage is the discussion at home, involving the way in which the purchase of different items is decided: with whom it is discussed, what kind of transactions take place between the couple or with the other generations, whether or not a list is made, and so on.¹⁰

In Guangzhou, most shopping is done without a list, except when specific items are needed or when a large number of articles are bought at once in a shopping center. The social valorization of memory, as well as the frequency of shopping — every day for only few goods — explains in part the reduced use of a shopping list.¹¹

The second stage is the shopping expedition. In America, shoppers go to the supermarket by car. The trunk makes it possible to do a large amount of shopping at once.

10 Cf. a description of such a process in French families, Desjeux Dominique (with the participation of Sophie Taponier and Laurence Sicot), “The influence of children on their parents' behavior in buying food products,” (www.argonautes.fr), (first published in French in 1990).

11 Cf. the research carried out under the direction of Dominique Desjeux, Sophie Taponier and Zheng Lihua (1998) on *Pratiques et représentations de la mémoire en Chine*, (*Practices and Representations of Memory in China*), Guangzhou, Argonautes, Center for Intercultural Research, Beaufour Ipsen International contract, (www.argonautes.fr)

In China, shoppers walk or cycle, as young students do in the Netherlands. In Denmark, shoppers may travel by car, by bus, by bicycle, or by foot. The means of transportation may influence how a shopping center is organized, as in Vietnam or China, where it is more important to build enough room for bicycles than for cars. There is a “provisioning system” (Fine and Leopold, 1993),¹² adapted to the needs and the lifestyle of each family, whether it eats fresh or frozen food, whether shopping is done every day or once a month, whether a shopping bag or the trunk of a car is used to carry the groceries home, and how much storage capacity is available. Fifty years ago, the development of cars, shopping centers, and refrigerators impacted the provisioning system in western countries.

The actual purchase itself is the third stage. This moment is what is most closely observed by qualitative marketing studies. During this stage, great cultural categorizations come implicitly into play: clean or dirty, cheap or expensive, fresh or stale, true or untrue, and so on.¹³

Storing goods is the fourth stage of the itinerary. It was an important stage in the old days in rural Europe, and it is still important in sub-Saharan African areas where wheat and millet are stored in lofts. In many countries where grain was the dominant crop, there was a central political power whose the goal was to insure food security by controlling lofts. Nowadays this stage is less crucial, thanks to the presence of refrigerators and freezers in homes. But when there is no modern “loft,” people use other techniques of conservation, such as drying or salting, and they go shopping more frequently.

These small everyday examples highlight the importance of the electric wires mentioned in the introduction.¹⁴ The organization of everyday life, especially for women, is dependant on electric wires. Electricity becomes an analyzer of boundaries between genders within the domestic world. Practices involving electricity are based not only on physical energy but also on cultural and social differences. Physical differences between men and women are less important nowadays, even though, in France, more men use the Internet than women. Controlling energy, whether electric, gas, coal, steam, water, wind, sun, animal, or human power, is of vital importance in all societies, whether this control is exerted symbolically, socially, or physically, through religion, social norms and codes, or army and police power.

¹² Fine Ben, Leopold Ellen, 1993, *The World of Consumption*, London, Routledge.

¹³ Cf. on mistrust, Dominique Desjeux, Sophie Alami, Olivier Le Touzé, Isabelle Ras, Sophie Taponier, with the collaboration of Isabelle Garabuau-Moussaoui and the assistance of Elise Palomares, 1998, “La construction sociale de la dynamique de la méfiance et de la confiance entre La Poste et ses clients. Une approche structurale des stratégies d’acteur” (The Social Construction of Trust and Mistrust between Customers and the French Post Office), University of Rouen, seminar organized by GRIS, Mission de la Recherche de La Poste, and METIS-CNRS, 11 December.

¹⁴ Cf. on electricity, Dominique Desjeux, Cécile Berthier, Sophie Jarraffoux, Isabelle Orhant, Sophie Taponier, 1996, *Anthropologie de l’électricité. Les objets électriques dans la vie quotidienne en France*. (*Anthropology of Electricity: Electric Objects in Daily Life in France*), Paris, l’Harmattan.

Cooking is the fifth stage. The act of cooking has been much less observed by social scientists in urban societies than in rural areas, where Igor de Garine's team of ethnological researchers in exotic societies is a notable example.¹⁵ This stage is more or less strategic, depending on cultures. In America, it is most often a short stage of less than half an hour, except for Thanksgiving Day and certain special occasions, such as the Fourth of July, which may require a long preparation and involve mainly men. In China, France, or Algeria, half an hour to two hours for an ordinary family meal or a formal meal with friends is needed for cooking.

It is often said by the French that Americans are not interested in food. However, separating the time devoted to cooking from the whole food process illustrates the paradox of Americans' food behaviors; they actually spend a great deal of time in eating or snacking. In Florida, where we carried out an exploratory field study with Mark Neumann (USF), it is possible to say that one part of the social life of eating is organized around the car, mobility, and the access to restaurants at any time of the day and night. Douglas Harper, a sociologist at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, designates this phenomenon as "grazing," that is, a perpetual movement in quest of food. In fact, the French are combining two stages of the food process.

Although cooking does not appear as important in America or the Netherlands as in France or China, eating fresh products is important in most countries. However, the meaning of "freshness" changes according to cultures: for Americans it often means a product wrapped in cellophane with an expiration date, with the indication "fat free." For the French, it means a product sold in a street market that comes directly from a farm. For the Chinese, it means a fish or a chicken that is sold still alive.

Eating and table manners compose the sixth stage, which is the one most studied by anthropologists.¹⁶

The last stage, disposal, involving both leftovers and garbage,¹⁷ has until recently been studied relatively little, but it is becoming more crucial because of urbanization. Northern European countries have an older tradition than Southern European countries of managing refuse and using different containers for glass, paper, or organic waste.¹⁸ Some Third-

15 Cf. Igor Garine (de), 1991, "Les modes alimentaires: histoire de l'alimentation et des manières de table", (Food Styles: History of Food and Table Manners), Jean Poirier (Ed.), *Histoire des mœurs*, (History of Manners) vol. I, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "La Pléiade", pp. 1447-1627; cf. the Ph.D. dissertation by Isabelle Garabuau-Moussaoui, (1999), University of Paris V-Sorbonne, on the cooking practices of young French people.

16 Cf. Françoise Saban's research on Chinese food behaviors and specifically "As-tu mangé ? Bonjour" (Have you eaten? Hello), in *L'Etat de la Chine* (The State of China), P. Gentelle (Ed.), Paris, La Découverte, 1989

17 Cf. the current Ph.D. research at the University of Paris V-Sorbonne by Lionel Panafit on "Les ménages et leurs déchets : enjeux et transactions (Households and kitchen waste: stakes and transactions) ."

18 In Denmark at the University of Odense, there are two kinds of trash cans in my office and in my lodging, one for papers and another for waste, which is not the case in France or in China. Outside in the streets or in shopping center parking lots, there are containers for paper, glass, and other trash as well as a bin for recycling clothing. Relations to waste, the environment, and nature constitute an important cultural variable,

World countries have developed strong economic activities around garbage dumps in urban areas such as in Alexandria, Egypt, or Antananarivo, Madagascar.¹⁹ Differences in managing waste stem from a diversity of practices and cultural values.

At this stage of our field studies in China, we are mainly able to describe reality with a micro-sociological and ethnographic approach. This affords us few interpretations and even fewer explanations. Thus far, we have based our interpretations on the research carried out by Zheng Lihua (1995, 1998),²⁰ Anne Cheng (1998),²¹ and François Julien (1992).²² We are attempting to find links between observed practices in daily life and certain historical values of Chinese thought, and we are also trying to observe the appearance of new practices or new values, which is made difficult by a lack of comparative information about urban daily life.

2. DAILY LIFE AND DOMESTIC SPACES IN GUANGZHOU

The itinerary described below is that of a 25-year-old assistant professor who is married with no children. This case centers on what we observed during our field study of the urban middle and upper-middle classes. Some daily practices, such as that of covering commonplace objects such as televisions, telephones, and air conditioners with decorative cloths, are a matter of what we call “bounded qualitative generalization.”²³ Our method does not involve weighting data or evaluating the degree of statistical quantitative generalization. We focus our observation on social mechanisms of a system of action rather than on correlations between social phenomena. We observe the appearance of practices and the diversity among them. We now know that diversity is not as extensive as we thought when we started observing reality 30 years ago, because circumstances are rarely unique. It is nevertheless possible to quantify some of the data afterwards by following up the qualitative survey with a quantitative one.

The goal of this description is to analyze the domestic space in which food behaviors and the purchase itinerary are embedded. This space is made of three main rooms in China:

which is rapidly changing due to urbanization and increasing waste issues. See also D. Desjeux, S. Taponier, 1999, *Report on strategies of communication in waste management s* (in French), Argonautes, ADEME (Environment and Energy Control Agency).

19 Cf. the book by Martine Camacho (1987) on *Les Poubelles de la survie* (Trashcans of Survival), Paris, l'Harmattan.

20 Zheng Lihua, 1995, *Les chinois de Paris et leur jeux de face* (The Chinese of Paris: Their Strategies of Face) preface by Louis-Jean Calvet, Paris, l'Harmattan, coll. “Logiques Sociales”; Zheng Lihua, 1998, *Langage et interactions sociales. La fonction stratégique du langage dans les jeux de face* (Language and Social Interactions: the Strategical Function of Language in Face Games), Paris, l'Harmattan, coll. “Logiques Sociales”.

21 1998, *La pensée chinoise* (Chinese Thought), Paris, Seuil

22 Julien, François, 1992, *La propension des choses. Pour une histoire de l'efficacité en Chine* (*The Propensity of things: A History of Efficiency in China*), Paris, Seuil.

23 Cf. on the notion of “bounded generalization,” Dominique Desjeux, Anne Monjaret, Sophie Taponier, (1998).

the kitchen for cooking, the living room for eating, and the bathroom as a specific stage in the whole process of food consumption. These rooms are presented here in the order that we observed them during our field study, from public to private: the living room, the kitchen, and then the bathroom.

Our observation begins by looking at the neighborhood, which is made up of many high-rise buildings. Then we come to the base of the building where the young assistant professor lives. There is an intercom in the entrance to the building that controls the door, which we frequently observed in Guangzhou. Inside, at the bottom of the stairs, there are about ten bicycles.²⁴ There are electric wires going in all directions. The Chinese seem more concerned with access to electricity than with security or esthetics. The esthetization of daily life seems to be a strong social process of differentiation.

A comparison of the interiors of several apartments shows that this tension between utility and esthetics is indicated by the presence or absence of neon lighting in the living room. At the first stage of the esthetization process, electric wires and neon lighting are conspicuous. At the second stage, a center light has been introduced beside the neon light, and electric wires remain conspicuous. At the third stage, electric wires have become invisible, and indirect lighting has replaced the neon and even the center light. Electricity is no longer a simple matter of utility but rather an indication of a change of social status; neon lighting and electric wires are relegated to the category of objects that are socially forbidden on public display.

Resuming the itinerary, on the fifth floor we approach the apartment. The door opens onto the living room, the first space related to food in the domestic area. It is a room measuring approximately 12 square meters. There is no entrance or corridor. In other cultures, the presence of a corridor may have a social meaning, that of organizing the passage between public and private space, like a “social airlock.” In China, this separation is signified differently: shoes are taken off and placed on the floor or on a small rack near the door.²⁵ The inside intercom is just on the right, above an electric switch. Here the wires run underneath a strip of wood, an intermediate esthetization, between exposed and completely hidden.

Along the wall on the right, by the door, is the console that holds the television, one of the most important pieces of furniture in the room. The television is covered with a red cloth. In other homes, the television is presented like a Buddhist altar, which indicates an importance that was accorded in France or Sweden (according to Orvar Löfgren) in the

24 In the world of material culture, everything seems to indicate that there are “bicycle cultures,” such as China, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands, where bicycles determine how space and movement are organized as opposed to France or the United States, which are car-oriented, or Italy which is motor-scooter oriented!

25 In numerous cultures, in Asia and around the Mediterranean, shoes are taken off when one enters the house and, in Islam, when entering the mosque. This practice may be also related to the importance of rugs in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean. A Chinese colleague in France for the first time used to put his shoes on top of my small bookshelf in the corridor every evening, as in China. He reinterpreted it as a shoe-rack.

1960s. In France, the television was often covered by a cloth, with candles, photos, or some small ornamental objects. Just as in France or Sweden 40 years ago, the television is a prestigious object in China, which starts its “social life” in the living room and finishes a few years later on a bedroom or office floor, then in an attic or a basement before being reborn as a second-hand television. Although the most frequently cited reason for cloth coverings for televisions, phones, and air-conditioners is the presence of dust in Guangzhou, the need to protect these objects confirms their importance.

Wedding photos are placed prominently on the television console, which confirms the importance of this piece of furniture; wedding photos are among the most important family souvenirs. What changes in these photos in different households are the clothes and the social environment. In the apartment of a couple who are around 50, the wedding photo on the nightstand near their bed shows them wearing austere Mao suits. Their photo album shows them with groups of friends and coworkers in the plant or travelling. By contrast, the photo album of a young couple contains over seventy photos of them dressed in different costumes and wedding attire. These photos are highly staged; one may show the bride wearing a white Occidental wedding gown and another a traditional red Chinese wedding dress. The fact that such a book may cost several thousand yuans – with an assistant professor earning 600 to 700 yuans per month — shows how important this ritual of passage is as a memory for the family. The other photos we saw in this home were more focused on the life of the couple and their travels than on friends, unlike those of the older couple. Perhaps this is a sign that there is a nuclearization of the Chinese family.

Some utilitarian objects and ornamental objects are also kept on the television console. Gifts, which are very important objects because they symbolize social links, are often displayed on the television stand. In another apartment, that of a couple in their 50s, the shelves were full of objects that the couple were given by their family and friends, most often former coworkers.

In this older household, a place was occupied by a Buddha, a gift from a former colleague. In another room, there was a statuette of Buddha with an altar and apples. This presence of Buddha, also prevalent in small shops and restaurants where altars with red electric lights are very frequent, concurred strongly with observations of a pagoda and interviews that we carried out during our field study on memory in 1998; the Cantonese attach importance to religious practices such as prayer, fasting, offerings, holidays, and ancestor worship. In a certain way, the television console can be seen as a modern altar, the symbol of the family’s memory, showing its roots, its social network, and its link with divinity.²⁶

26 Cf. our field study carried out at the end of 1998 in Guangzhou on practices and representations of memory in China, D. Desjeux, Sophie Taponier, Zheng Lihua, (1999).

Also in the living room, along the wall on the left, there are a washing machine and a refrigerator, which is painted pastel colors and decorated with tablemats, flowers, and magnets on the door. This placement may seem a bit bizarre to French observers, who usually see these appliances in the kitchen or in the bathroom. It may be because of a lack of place, as is the case for French 18-to-25 year-olds living in an apartment of less than 20 square meters. For when the Chinese have enough space, just like young people in France, they put the refrigerator and the washing machine in the kitchen, according to a study by Séverine Enjolras (1998) in Shanghai.²⁷ The fact that refrigerators, microwaves, and washing machines are in the living room, however, also shows how much importance the Chinese attach to domestic appliances. Placement of appliances is thus culturally significant; an American may be surprised to find a washing machine in the kitchen in France, finding it quite unhygienic!²⁸

At the end of the living room, facing the television console, there is a leather sofa, which, according to young student interviewed about furniture fashion, is younger and trendier than older-looking wooden couches. There is no dining room. A folding table is used as dining table and desk. The folding table was used for our lunch after we went shopping and observed the itinerary. The folding table is a common object in young people's daily life in Guangzhou. The folding table indicates several things, among which are lack of space and generation and social status. As people become older and richer, they get an apartment with a dining room and buy a table, such as the one that we visited in a modern neighborhood of Guangzhou, which was a sign of a new social status.

The dining room was used relatively little, as is often the case in America or among some families in France, where there are two places for eating: the ordinary one and the special one, which sometimes looks like a museum with old family objects, antiques, ornamental furniture, and objects. In the United States, we observed upper-middle-class dining rooms without utilitarian functions, but with a strong decorative and social staging value. That was symbolized by the show-houses with well appointed dining rooms in Celebration, Florida, the "perfect village" built by Disney. The domestic organization of dining space changes from culture to culture: high tables vs. low tables (which are the sign of a formal meal in Morocco vs. an informal meal in France) vs. no table at all (eating on the floor in Senegal, for instance). The shape, the height, and the presence of tables are social signs that communicate conviviality or respect, as well as the place of people on the social scale and in the cycles of generation and age.

²⁷ Graduate thesis .(DEA) at Paris V-Sorbonne, Magistère de Sciences Sociales. Sophie Boissard is also writing a graduate thesis .(DEA) at Paris V-Sorbonne, Magistère de Sciences Sociales.,on daily life in Guangzhou

²⁸ Most intercultural observations are drawn from our project of studies on food behaviors, daily life consumption, and domestic space.

The last wall, to the right of the television console, is occupied by a large bookcase made of 6 elements, indicating the importance its owner attaches to intellectual activity. It is not a neutral object. Full of books and papers, this library follows the owner wherever she moves.²⁹

The living room seems to symbolize new modernity and mass consumption, with the television, household appliances, and the fashionable couch, but this bookcase also shows a link to the roots of the noblest part of the Chinese tradition. What is striking — although not mentioned in the interviews — is the importance nowadays attached to all these objects; the proliferation of photos, domestic appliances, televisions, books, and gifts contrasts with all that we were told about how the Cultural Revolution tried to destroy a part of the collective memory and limit the possession of objects.

The second important room is the kitchen. It is a 2- or 3-square-meter room. It is quite narrow but well equipped, with a stove, a range hood and a microwave. The three shelves full of sauces are a sign that we are in the world of Cantonese cuisine, and there are many pots for making soups or medical food, concoctions that are often made in the south of China. The link between food and health is very strong and vital, as many people try to balance *yin* and *yang* and “hot” and “cold” in their everyday diet.

The three basic cooking objects in Guangzhou are the *wok* (a deep pan), the chopping knife, and the round chopping board made of a thick piece of wood. Chopping food into small pieces, which is necessary because of the use of chopsticks and the stir-frying of meat and vegetables, is an important part of Cantonese cooking. Boiling — making soups and noodles — is another important cooking process. In most of the kitchens, however, we observed no oven. Although knives are very important in the kitchen, knives and forks are practically nonexistent on the table; spoons, bowls, and chopsticks are basic elements of food consumption.

The bathroom is the third space that is indirectly connected with food. It is the end of the itinerary, that is the space of “human waste.” There is a squat toilet, as in many other apartments, a tap, a blue plastic basin that is filled with water and used as a flush, and a small brush. The toilet is in the same space as the bathroom, as in Anglo-Saxon countries, Scandinavia, and North Africa, but unlike France, where most toilets are separate from the bathroom. The bathroom is a 3-square-meter room. The limited number of objects pertaining to the body and to house cleaning objects is striking by comparison to French and American bathrooms: one shampoo, one beauty lotion, a tube of toothpaste, two cups, two toothbrushes — in this family, a washing product, two buckets, a brush, a gas cylinder,

29 The emergence of moving as a new service came up in discussions in our seminars. This indicates great changes in Chinese material culture and a new importance given to objects as decoration and perhaps also as inheritance. We can soon expect to see a market of used goods exchanged through classified ads. There is also street of antique dealers in Guangzhou that might provide insights into the meaning of objects for the Chinese and notions of social class.

a water heater, and a shower, with no shower basin and no curtain — 10 to 20 objects in all. Several times we saw three cups and three toothbrushes aligned in the bathroom, symbolizing the new Chinese family, composed of a father, a mother, and one child. In Western bathrooms, we encounter dozens of objects, even several hundred.³⁰

The last room in the apartment is a bedroom, a 6-square-meter space created from the terrace. The mattress is on the floor near the compact disc player. This room is outside the food space.

As for the supply system, there is a food system of space including the kitchen, dining room, and toilet. In comparison with the old days in China, it is now an integrated, private system – the bathroom is in the individual home – which is bigger than it was 25 years ago, according to our interviews.

3. FOOD ITINERARY: AT HOME, GOING SHOPPING, SHOPPING, COOKING, AND CONSUMPTION.

As we observe Mrs. Xu³¹ who is about to go shopping, she takes 200 yuans and puts the money in the back pocket of her shorts. Her wage is around 700 yuans a month, so this represents a large amount of money for this week's purchase, which includes lunch for her guests. She takes a shopping basket, and we go with her by foot to the street market in her neighborhood, a 15-minute walk. Along the way, there are many small shops, most of which are at the bottom of high-rise buildings or houses. They are not concentrated in a specially zoned neighborhood.

The neighborhood market is a small place where, in the old days, farmers were allowed to sell their own private production. The market starts with small meat shops. Meat is displayed as in sub-Saharan Africa or in French street markets, with no wrapping or protection. Blood, bones, heads, legs, and brains are displayed on the stalls.

Next is the fish and seafood market. The fish and shrimp are alive. They move in basins of water that is oxygenated by means of small tubes connected to special devices. Animals sold live in the market inspire confidence; the Chinese mistrust dead fish.³² Chickens must

30 Cf. Claire-Marie Levesque, 1998, *Reflets aquatiques et expressions corporelles: Etudes des pratiques et des représentations de l'espace et du corps dans la salle de bain*, (Aquatic reflections and expressions of the body: Studies of practices and representations of space and body in the bathroom), Paris, graduate thesis, Paris V-Sorbonne, Magistère de Sciences Sociales.

31 This is a fictitious name.

32 On the other hand, when I showed these photos to American female students, I was asked who killed the fish, particularly who in the supply system certified their hygienic quality after they reached the street market. They also expressed a feeling of disgust at having to kill shrimp and fish by themselves. In intercultural studies, it is very interesting to use repulsion as an analyzer of differences, without making inferences as to what is good or bad (cf. Dominique Bouchet, 1996, *Avoiding Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding*, Odense, Forlag AFVEJE). It is an efficient way to point out the incorporated taboos of each culture and to avoid the idealism of cultural approaches related to the only understanding of the other as a comprehensive solution to the difficulties of cultural relationships. The understanding of the other hits the boundaries of each culture. This difference must be managed rather than disregarded, because it is impossible

also be purchased alive. They are displayed in small cages of ten or so. The same importance given to live animals as a sign of trust is found in other markets such as Qin Ping, in the center of Guangzhou, as well as in other street markets and in front of restaurants where rabbits, pheasants, snakes and fishes are displayed alive.³³

Shopping finishes with the purchase of vegetables, which are displayed on tables or put on sacks on the floor, and of eggs, which may be candled against a bulb in a small box in order to check their freshness.

When Mrs. Xu gets home, she sorts the food products, separating those for today's lunch from those for the week. The meat for the week is cut into pieces on the round chopping board with the chopping knife and stored in a plastic bag in the living room refrigerator.

The meat for the day is washed in the sink under the tap, then cut into small pieces. It takes an hour and half to cook 5 dishes and one soup. This is not an ordinary lunch but rather a meal for guests. The cooking is very rationally organized because there is only a very narrow space between the sink and the work space, about 50 square centimeters. For every dish, the products are washed, put on the round chopping board, cut into small pieces, fried on the stove in the *wok*, then the dish is set on a shelf or on the floor, in the kitchen. After each dish is cooked, everything is cleaned. When the "cooking process" is finished, there is no disorder, and every dish is ready to be served.

When it is time to eat, the moment at which table manners become important, the dishes are set out all together on the folding table. There is no French or Anglo-Saxon serving order.³⁴ Chopsticks are put on the table with the tips, used for picking up food, extended beyond the edge of the table in order to avoid unsanitary contacts. There is no table cloth or napkins. Tissues are used instead when eating. Waste scraps are left on the table, and then collected at the end of the lunch. The dishes are all collective, and people serve themselves with their individual chopsticks, choosing the food they want or asking others to pass dishes that are beyond reach.

for fear of losing one's own identity. This explains the interest of the sociological strategical approach whose objective is to improve the management of the difference in itself but not to change or idealize the culture or the behavior of the other (cf. D. Desjeux, S. Taponier, 1991, op. cit.).

33 The topic of the trust is a relevant example of the limits of too culturalistic an approach, one that takes culture as an essence in itself. I was told by an American colleague in Guangzhou that some American anthropologists classify the Chinese culture among the "mistrust-oriented cultures" unlike the American culture which would be "trust-oriented." It is difficult to agree with such an essentialist categorization; The Chinese or the French, might consider American businessmen "mistrust-oriented" in view of the size of the contracts that must be signed and that demand protection against most hazards. To the Chinese, writing an agreement is a sign of mistrust unlike an oral contract. This shows that trust or mistrust does not exist by itself; the categorization does not tell a lot about the other who is being described, but it does shed light on problem-solving management differences in daily life. Americans make such agreements because of fear of lawsuits; it is impossible to say they are confident or mistrustful. Trust or mistrust are behaviors that are socially constructed, according to perceived risk and uncertainty, the perception of which depends on collective history and personal experience.

34 Cf. on order of dishes, Zheng Lihua (1995)

The bowl of rice is held in the air near the mouth to facilitate the use of chopsticks. The pan of rice is put on a small stool in a corner of the dining room, and the refills the bowls of those who want more rice.

At the end of the lunch, women clear and clean the table, and they wash the dishes in the kitchen. Toothpicks are available to clean teeth. Our lunch is finished in less than half an hour, and we do not stay around the table to chat as people might in France after a meal. The table is folded. The dining room becomes living room, and we sit on the couch in order to continue the discussion.

CONCLUSION

Our itinerary is finished, although it may be considered as not really having an end. For the moment, our approach is mainly descriptive. Interpreting is a long process, so we have launched several studies, on distrust; on memory in family, school, university, and professional life; on food behaviors; and on the images the Chinese have of Europeans. We hope that the accumulation of data will help us in finding the cultural meaning of these practices. The most important goal here is to show the interest of using the itinerary method as a comparative method by focusing more on practices than on values.

The level of practices is that of anthropology applied to marketing. It is possible to understand that if a company wants to launch a product that needs to be cooked in an oven or cut with a knife on the table, there is little chance that it will be successful. The reception of a new product is embedded within a system of practices, a material culture, and a social and cultural meaning that exist before it is introduced into a new culture.

On the theoretical level, this field study posits culture as an factor that can explain behaviors, as opposed to a “differentialist” approach that focuses on the situation of contact between two cultures, two systems of practices, and several patterns of problem-solving.³⁵ An expression of negative feeling is accepted as analyzer of these differences, but with a very strict methodological determination of differences, with no essentialist or normative content. This demands an ascetic professional behavior, which is not always easy to practice or to accept. Once the situation is described and interpreted according to its own logic, we may try to search a causal explanation related to culture or to history, without postulating that a culture is fixed or immutable.

We know that in focusing on practices, we underestimate the differences of culture and of meaning in order to focus on differences that can be described more objectively, those of practices and of material culture. Thus, we have found common points between Chinese and French practices through our studies, in particular in terms of management efficiency.

35 Cf. Dominique Desjeux, 1998, "Les enjeux de l'interculturel" (Intercultural issues), in J.F. Dortier (Ed.), *La communication appliquée aux organisations et à la formation (Communication applied to organizations and training)*, Paris, DEMOS, pp. 107-117

Some French managers manage their company or department as the Chinese do, following the “propensity of things,” by using the opportunity of the situation; some of the Chinese managers plan as the French do.³⁶

With this perspective, the observation of culture shifts from one meaning to another: instead of focusing on values and postulating that they influence behaviors in themselves in an immediate way, we start from uses, practices, and patterns of problem-solving— that is, from situations: a Chinese way of dealing with reality! — in order to show their importance in explaining behaviors.

This creates a double effect of observation, decreasing the importance of values in explaining phenomena and overvaluing the description of universal social mechanisms such as power relationships, the existence of social networks, the search for efficiency, and so on.

What changes from one culture to another is the form that these mechanisms take, and these variations may or may not be determined by values.

Values per se lose their relevance, ceding importance to a socio-anthropological analysis involving context. They take on the status of representing reality, that is, of what a society has selected for its history and what has seemed important to be transmitted or to put on stage, but with a relative independence vis-a-vis concrete behaviors in daily, professional, or political life. Behaviors are the result of a mixture of the effects of situation, the constraints of the social game, and the incorporation of norms — and thus, to a certain extent, values.

This is a sociological approach, with all its limits, its intellectual divisions, and its postulates. However, we often have the feeling that the socio-anthropological approach is in fact closer to Chinese thought because of the importance given to the effect of situation and the collective social game, unlike Western thought, which is more focused on individual motivations, at least at the level of its representations. It is also nearer an African way of thinking in its emphasis on collectivity.³⁷ The interest of this approach is not only the quality of the content yielded — that is a necessary scientific condition — but also its ability to change our perspective/stimulate observation. An important goal of the itinerary method is to widen our scope away from merely focusing on motivations, values, and meanings, without losing these dimensions, to the observation of what is collective, in situation and ordinary ?

Paris-Guangzhou, January-March, 2000

³⁶ Concerning French managers' image of Chinese practices in organization, see Laurence Varga's Master thesis (DEA) at Paris V-Sorbonne in 1991.

³⁷ Dominique Desjeux worked in Madagascar and in the Congo from 1971 to 1979, and also carried out qualitative field studies in sub-Saharan Africa (Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, Cameroon, and Central Africa) and in Maghreb (Algeria and Morocco). Zheng Lihua lived in Paris for 7 years

(English revised by Ray Horn, Magistère of Social Sciences, University of Paris V-Sorbonne)