Who am I?: A Field Study
of Leisure Activities in Urban Beijing

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork data, this study examines the leisure activities of urban residents in Beijing. It demonstrates that participation in leisure activity is a social practice of identity pursuit, one that has evolved with the awareness of selfhood in the post-Mao era. What underlies it is the fundamental transformation of the relationships among the state, society and individuals. It argues that ambiguity, fluidity and multiplicity characterize identity pursuit in leisure; differentiation of time and space construction of leisure facilities by society and individuals lead to a differentiated identity pursuit. Media play a role in providing an important pool of "others" for individuals to negotiate with real world "others" in constructing their sense of selfhood. In their discourse of identity pursuit related to media use, individuals employ different strategies, from accepting and modifying to ignoring and rejecting.

Two decades of market-oriented reform led to the social structural transformation of China. Its once rigid Party-state totalitarianism is now a more relaxed and flexible authoritarianism (Lee, 1990) or authoritarian pluralism (Ji, 1998, p.24). The market is increasingly emerging as the opposing force to the Party-state. China's entire social system and social structure are changing. With the collapse of Communist ideology and the ensuing belief vacuum, the post-reform era has been accompanied by individual self-awareness. The practice of looking for meaning, value and belief naturally looms large. A call for "who am I" puts the notion of identity to the forefront. This study attempts to show how urban Chinese construct identities in their leisure activity pursuits and what role the media play in this process.

Identity is becoming one of the focal points in exploring modern society. Numerous attempts have been made to picture the contours of identity spaces (Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1992; 1996; Cohen, 1994; Mathews, 1996; Sarup, 1996; Lifton, 1993, etc). Identity is formulated in the relationship between self and society (Baumeister, 1997). It is "parts" of the self, internalized positional designations, that exist insofar as the person participates in structured role

relationships, the consequence of being placed as a social object and appropriating the terms of placement for oneself; the former essentialists' claim that identity is "the condition of being a specified person or thing." Identities are the meanings attributed to and by the person to the self as an object in a social situation or social role. Identity is concerned with how people consider themselves in terms of their position in society (Burke and Tully, 1977). The formulation, while taking into account the structure's impact on the individual, ignores the agency of subjects and the interaction between the structure and subjects (Giddens, 1992). A different viewpoint can alter identity from a unified and fixed entity into fragmented, fluid, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities. Identity is regarded as a "moveable feast": formed and transformed continually in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems that surround us (Hall, 1992). The subject is formed and modified in a continual dialogue with the cultural works "outside" and the identities they offer.

In social interactions, the presentation of personal identity comes together with the social identities perceived by others in the process of identity building and revision. Identity is a process of constructing and negotiating. Theories on the self, from G. H. Mead (1934) to Carl Rogers (1951) and current formulations (Schlenker, 1984; Swann, 1987), suggest that human beings are motivated to bring the perceived self into congruence with the subjective ideal self.

Identity in this study is the ongoing sense one has of who one is (Giddens, 1991, p.53-54) and who one may become, as conditioned through one's ongoing interactions with others. It is a never-ending process of construction and reconstruction. Changing situations require corresponding modification and adaptation. Individuals may take initiative in identity pursuit, and society provides constraints and resources for this pursuit. The relationship is established not only from the signifiers derived from the social structure but also from the cultural practices that embed such identity. Individual identities are repeatedly produced and reproduced, constructed and modified in negotiation with one's own images.

Corresponding to the variety of roles people take on in the society, there are different types of identities with varied priorities in their life (see Stryker, 1981, for hierarchy of identities). The Chinese had never had a clearly formulated idea of citizenship or consumer identity, because their identity was given by the party state, and reforms opened the space for their own choices and pursuits. For the first time, they had no choice but to choose (Giddens, 1996). The social differentiation resulted from economic reform in the last two decades has put forth social status as the top identity pursuit. The establishment of consumer culture (Wei & Pan, 1999) led to the consumption boom. Consumption styles define much of people's perceptions as to who they are and who they should be. Leisure as a site for consumption provides a fruitful site for examining identity

pursuit.

Mass Media and Identity Construction

The booming of mass media since the reform has become a key factor in the establishment of a consumer culture (Wei & Pan, 1999). The media have also become an important information sources for business activities and leisure, a site where people identify their social positions in a changing society. Media use and interpretation of media content directly relate to the consumer citizenship as the media divide consumers into separate parts. With the changes in the media, tensions have emerged between its dual roles as a tool of propaganda and a source for entertainment and information (Zhao, 1998; Chen & Lee, 1998; Pan, 1997). Although media still fulfill the function of ideological control and propaganda, the new environment allows for the emergence of media outlets that provide pure consumption and irregular journalistic practices (Pan, 1997; 2000). It opens space for audience interpretation and construction. The emergence of "infor-tainment"[1] media (Zhao, 1998) makes it possible for more diverse voices to be heard. The media's growth as a major representation source comes at the expense of other social representation systems, including interpersonal and social resources. People cite these media discourses based on their social conditions. Media act as one of the key referents in how people perceive their roles and how they perceive other people's roles, by identifying, modifying and counteracting.

With the role transformation of media, market forces have pressured the media to set up their own niche. To survive in this fiercely competitive environment, media define themselves by choosing and constructing potentially profitable target audiences. Thus, audiences acquire a certain kind of consumer citizenship while consuming media products (Turow, 1997). And from the standpoint of the target audience, the lifestyles and needs publicized in the media become the resources by which people identify themselves and view others in society. Identifiable consumers point to media, e.g., magazines, newspapers, radio stations, cable channels and other media outlets, as their most important source in, and meaningful to their ways of, looking at the world (Turow, 1997).

Recent studies have shown that the media are playing an important role in disseminating certain values that may influence identity (Pan & Wei, 1999). While the media are incorporated into peoples' lives to regulate routines and mediate everyday arrangements (e.g., Silverstone, 1994; Meyrowitz, 1985; Scannel, 1988; Lull, 1990 & 1991, etc.), they also indirectly but profoundly influence choices and arrangement of leisure by publicizing information, images, values and models, as well as by adding to the full range of opinions for leisure activities.

Methodology

My data was based on interviews with 34 urban residents of Beijing in the

summer of 1998. Non-participant observations were conducted in film theaters, museums, karaoke halls and parks. The interviewees were sampled from Beijing's seven urban districts (i.e., Dongcheng, Xicheng, Xuanwu, Chaoyang, Haidian, Fengtai and Shijingshan). Their age ranged from 19 to 72; 19 were male and 15 female; their occupations included white collar, blue collar, university professors and government employees, etc. The interviewees were selected first through acquaintances. This was expanded by choosing from an available pool of interviewees, with age, gender, regional districts, education level, work unit affiliation and social economic status taken into account. Four were selected by accident. A taxi driver, for example, became an interviewee, on the job, when I took his taxi. The interviewing sites varied greatly to allow the subjects to talk as naturally as possible. They came from different affiliated work units, including state-owned, profit-seeking and non-profit-seeking enterprises, foreign-funded enterprises, as well as the self-employed and retired. Interviewing contents covered the following: age, gender, economic status (monthly income for 28 individuals were collected; for the other five six, estimates was made according to their occupation, rank and second job participation), education level, employment status, unit affiliation and occupation.

Data

Questions covered how interviewees felt about the ways they spent their after-work hours, what activities they engaged in, their selection and feelings toward these activities, e.g., TV programs and various profit-seeking or non-profit-seeking leisure facilities, activities organized by enterprises or work units, what they considered in their leisure decisions, especially the locale and conditions for their selection and, most important, how they constructed their social images by the types of leisure accessible to them, how they viewed the presentation of different social groups in the media and how they viewed other people's placement, particularly the perception of the media's symbolic significance in daily life, the function of media exposure on identity construction, affirmation and gratification.

Setting Boundaries

Symbolic resources are employed to represent social positioning. Locations, type of leisure, manners and the sources of leisure resources comprise a representational system of social positioning. As has been observed by Bourdieu (1984), an "elective affinity" has been constructed between the physical or other cultural features and class status. As "the seemingly most immediate 'elective affinities' are always partly based on the unconscious deciphering of expressive features, each of which only takes on its meaning and values within the system of its class variations." And the system of signs such as clothing, pronunciation, bearing, posture and manner reinforces and defines and are the basis of antipathies or sympathies. Time and space are among the common symbolic

resources used to differentiate people socially. Certain places are defined as the exclusive past-time location for certain groups of people. Frequent dining out in decent restaurants and horseracing in the suburban Celebrity Club were seen as the preserve of upper white collars and parvenus. Parks, museums and sports centers were typical going for "common folks". Cultural facilities position themselves by presenting certain spatial features, including interior decoration, to satisfy customers of varying social tastes. Boundaries are constructed and reconstructed based on this hierarchical imagination of lifestyles. The continual practice of inclusion and exclusion creates and modifies the social boundaries with symbolic resources.

As what has been observed by Bourdieu (1984) and Lamont (1992), the social classification was not identified solely on the basis of economic and political entities, but also involve cultural dimensions i.e. taste, and the moral dimension. This study argues that since the most important social structural transformation is the social differentiation, the examination of identity will focus on class dimension centering on construction of one's social identities by negotiating among the images from themselves and other reference groups. When the state controlled all the resources, the political identity —*chengfen* (parental social origin) and *hukou* (residence identity) pre-determined people's fate. Marketization opens up new sources of resources and pluralizes channels of choices. Former uni-dimensional identity is turned into multi-dimensional negotiation. People identify who they are along the economic, political and cultural axes respectively and negotiate among the three. This is why the unified identity is becoming more contradictory and identifying is becoming a more difficult process than before. It also leads to another change in identity pursuit, i.e. that the rigidity of social image of oneself is becoming fluid and problematic. The son of a "rightist" had no chance to change his social status in the pre-reform era, while a poor unemployed person can become a millionaire overnight nowadays. The rules of the distribution of social resources have changed drastically and led to the emergence of new social groups and the changing meaning of the former social groups. The identity of newly arising social groups as entrepreneurs, white-collar workers in foreign invested companies, the unemployed and the retired with little social welfare face identity reconstruction. Those former identities have changed drastically after the reform. State owned workers fall from the top ranks of the leading class of the socialist country to almost the bottom of the social construct, losing previous privileges in the market competition. Intellectuals enjoy a higher political status than in the pre-reform era but still feel unbalanced due to poor economic status. As the saying goes 'professors earn less than those selling brown eggs'. Government staff is in the same situation. Inconsistency of status and the induced identity anxiety require identity modification.

Multidimensional Identity Construction
Social and economic dimensions

The following table demonstrates the present situation regarding leisure resources. It indicates how people extract resources for their leisure activities in the existing dual system. Two major sources of resources, state and market, dominate the pursuit of leisure, and this is directly related to identity stereotyping.

Table 1. Sources of leisure resources/status

	Party/state	Market
In's	Government staff	Entrepreneurs
Out's	Retired	Unemployed

Among the In's (those who are positive users of social resources), government staff can take advantage of state resources to facilitate their leisure pursuits, e.g., traveling on a business trip or group outing, etc. Most of these opportunities are in the so-called gray areas (not institutionalized but not illegal either). Although their monthly salary may not be as high, their income is more valuable. (One dollar can serve as 100 dollars, because of the exchange value of power, their invisible resource.) Newly arising entrepreneurs extract leisure resources more from their active involvement in market activities. Ever-increasing leisure and consumption facilities are usually targeted at this sector of population. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the retired and the unemployed, who have lost the support of the working unit. (Pensions are usually tiny compared with accelerating price and consumption trends.) The market also works against them, leaving them as outsiders in a rapidly changing society. One elderly person said her only source of leisure was *tai chi*. "I don't have money to go to expensive places. And *tai chi* can spare me from diseases, which would otherwise make me corrupt."

Economic resources have become the major element in defining one's social status. Various leisure opportunities are provided. Traditional ones, including the cinema, TV, parks and hiking, are used by the majority of people. Newly wealthy businesspeople are attracted to bowling, horseracing and karaoke. Place become an important symbol in defining economic status. People use place, time and costs to identify an economic situation. A retired, hospitalized woman said that she and her family could not afford to go to World Park. The ticket alone would cost one fifth or one sixth of her monthly pension. With two daughters-in-law both out of work, going out was a luxury for her and her family. Given their circumstances, they have mixed perceptions and attitudes toward leisure. On the one hand, they laugh at those who try too hard to keep pace with whatever in vogue. On the other hand, they are frustrated at living outside the flow of social life. Consumption level has become a cultural practice that articulates their status in life.

When talking of shopping, a young couple, both working in foreign-owned companies, claimed that they would not buy for quantity but for quality. Quality, they explained, meant brand-name products such as Apple, Crocodile etc. "We do not go out often, but every time we go out for fun, we choose high-level places and won't make do with second best. That would degrade us. We want the best service, the best product, to feel good. We will only go to places that fit our financial and social level."

In many people's eyes, certain places and activities are correlated with certain groups of people. Street- corner inns seem to attract students and the general public. When I asked whether he had ever played golf or bowled, one senior citizen told me that only businessmen and government officials or young people who worked in foreign-owned companies played such sports. Certain places have been attached with certain tags during certain periods of time. When different types of people go to the same places, their activities will differ, as will the frequency of their visits.

People believe that real leisure is something that is done outside the home: going to the theater or the park, traveling, drinking in a bar or sitting in the cinema. Many do not consider staying at home as leisure in a strict sense. Many of those I interviewed, when answering what kind of leisure activities they did after work, said, "No leisure, just staying home watching TV or taking care of the kids or doing household chores." In their eyes, leisure is what is "physically visible," as has been observed by Kongdo (1990) in her study of identity in a small factory in Japan. Only by going out, only by conspicuous consumption (Wei & Pan, 1999), it seems, could they demonstrate their status and leisure satisfaction. People acquire such things as beepers, mobile phones and cars not only for communication or transportation but also a signifier of status. The leisure offerings advertised in the media drive people to take leisure as something no less serious than going to work.

Similarly, people visit places for more than relaxation or enjoyment. Travel has become a signifier of their capability of conducting certain financially demanding activities. One of my respondents showed me photographs of his recent travels with his girlfriend to Southeast China. When I asked how he felt about the sites, he said he felt nothing toward the places he visited, just that it showed "that we had been there," while many of his friends and colleagues had not. It was something to feel proud of. To some extent, taking good pictures was even more important than viewing the scenery.

Cultural dimension

Bourdieu (1984) calls "taste" the ability to consume highly culturally condensed products. It involves education, intelligence, manners and a command of high culture. High-taste activities are always admired. Those who are able to conduct such activities enjoy a cultural profile above those who cannot. Such activity is valued because "it expresses the intrinsic quality of the

person, i.e., his or her ability to invest in something that cannot be bought, and to use his or her time in a gratuitous, i.e., non-economic way, thus constituting the supreme affirmation of personal excellence" (p. 281, 330). Classical music concerts have a different meaning than such popular music as rock'n'roll and Wang Fei's concerts. People may be impressed by those who go to a Beethoven symphony at the Beijing Music Hall. It's the same with those who visit an exhibition of a famous artist. Taste is also considered important in the way people dress; in the way they decorate their home, in their conversation and their social skills.

Construction of identities

Multi-dimensional sources means that there are more than one "others" by which to define individuals in society, leading to identities rather than an identity. People who associate themselves with different others acquire multiple rather than single, changing rather than fixed and, more likely, conflicting rather than consistent identities. The inevitable inconsistency created by varying self-images can induce self-conflict.

One wealthy businessman said he was not satisfied with such booming popular activities as karaoke or bowling and other expensive pursuits the general public would admire. "It is dull and not meaningful," he said. He would like to try higher-level culture. He once tried a symphony concert at the Beijing Music Hall, but fell asleep. When explaining this, he laughed and said, "No matter how much money I have, I still cannot understand my son's textbooks." While he showed considerable pride in being able to enjoy fine restaurants, buy the most fashionable imported music equipment, he felt frustrated in not being able to sit next to a cultured man and enjoy "high culture." A teacher complained about the rising price of books, saying, "Those who read books cannot afford too many books. Those who can afford to buy them do not read."

Shifting, fluid and confusing identity is a conspicuous feature in the pursuit of leisure. A woman working in a government department talked about her confusion with leisure pursuits. She earnestly wanted to keep up with current consumption trends. "I want my family to enjoy what other people can get access to. . . . If others can, why can't I?" But when she was able to keep pace with the latest styles of entertainment, she doubted that there was any meaning in the exhausting and sometimes mundane pursuit. Yet she was unable to get out of this bind. Identity is not only a realization of oneself but also a process of creating one's ideal self over other possibilities. A saleswoman said she spent all her spare time on her 10-year-old son, who she felt was her only hope. As a young intellectual during the Cultural Revolution, she spent six years in the countryside and regrets having wasted her golden years. "That is why I will not let my son lead the same life as me. She was trying to inject her present identity into her son's future life.

Identity is not decided exclusively by money or power, but involves the

multi-dimensional referents or "others." Identity manifests in many ways: the ability to use different resources to participate in different kinds of leisure activities; the intellectual taste of the activities and other sources of payment; and the emotional and other expressive dimensions of the activities, e.g., happy together with family members. Signification systems are not unitary. Identity is neither a direct mirror image of status nor a completely free construction of the individual. Rather, a combination of the two serves to constrain and facilitate the pursuit of identity.

Strategies in employing media as an identity pursuit source

Media as a representational system maintains a corresponding relationship with social identity through the selection of and contents in media. The production of taste and the products manufactured are also important. Researchers have been aware of the effective strategies of commercial advertising, which aims at creating focused groups for certain products. As elaborated by Turow (1997), consumers are broken up by advertisers. We can see how advertising functions as an effective process of identity construction in the interpretation of leisure pursuits. What is also quite clear is that people also cite media images as new reference sources for identity modification and construction. This has an impact on the so-called "breaking-up process" of consumers.

As has been put forward by Rycroft (1968), identification may involve: 1) The extension of identity to someone else; 2) The borrowing of identity from someone else; and 3) The confusion of identity with someone else. It does not mean establishing the identity of oneself or someone else (p. 67).

Media use was among the major leisure activities enjoyed by the interviewees in their day-to-day life. It has become almost a default action. Voluntarily or by force, people are immersed in the environment of various media. It is almost as natural as going shopping. Media have become one of the reference systems that compose daily life. Identity is the negotiation among the "others," and the media play the role of acting as a reference pool of "others," a collection constructed by media professionals. In using the media, interviewees look for the same images and information that they identify with. They would position their media to match those consumers who are electively or selectively affluent (Turow, 1997). Interviewees, to a great extent, upgrade themselves, although they realize the commercial considerations in these programs and articles.

As for identity and the media, the two are part of the representations demonstrating "elective affinity," according to Bourdieu (1984), i.e., the forms and content and taste toward certain media are a presentation of certain social and cultural status in society. For Beijing residents, clearly positioned media included *Beijing Evening Daily*, for ordinary households, *Beijing Youth Daily*, for students and youth, *Fashionable Shopping,* for young people with higher

incomes, *Computer World,* for those keeping pace with the latest technology, *Female Friends,* for young girls, and *Daily Life*, for housewives, etc. Interviewees would employ these magazines, as well as TV programs, to confirm their identities in certain groups. When talking about a recent hit movie, they would say it wasn't their "cup of tea". One interviewee said he didn't watch TV often, because "it's just bullshit; only people who have nothing to do and are naive enough to watch propaganda would enjoy those dummy programs." Most newly rich businessmen claimed they did not have time to watch TV. When I asked a professor in a high-profile university whether he enjoyed a recently launched TV series, he said he only watched what was instructional and insightful. He wouldn't bother to waste time on those wild MTV shows. "They are mundane and not of our generation's taste." The implication is that only high-taste programs would be fit for his social status and knowledge level. When talking about the current cultural market, the professor expressed his deep concern about the commercialized trend, which "does great harm" to the young generation and to construction of a clean environment. By claiming his likes and dislikes, he put himself in an explicit position as an intellectual with social responsibilities and a style of his own.

Accepting. Consciously or unconsciously, people turn to the media for their images of society. One interviewee identified himself as "doing not bad compared with his contemporaries." He said he was the typical successful guy portrayed in the TV series, *No Excuse.* Talking about his favorite magazine, he said Beijing *Youth Daily* not only talked about the life of his strata but also gave insightful opinions on how to stay abreast of trends. A 24-year-old woman working in a middle school loved going window-shopping and paid attention to cosmetics and other new products advertised in TV commercials. "Even if I cannot afford to buy them, I would rather not be left behind when others talk about the new brands. I do not believe that one day I will not have a chance to live like that." As she was speaking, she was trying to identify herself with someone who belongs to such a social stratum.

Modifying. My respondents often mocked the way TV programs presented their social groups, and they would articulate this reality of theirs. They would laugh at the way someone in a TV series held his mobile phone and negotiated with his business partners. They would call this silly or foolish or unrealistic. Still, this is the most commonly cited TV program in their conversation. The media are the main sources from which they seek modes of presentation and a pool of "others." In media, they construct their ideal self by negotiating its vision with real life.

Rejecting. This is another strategy noted by interviewees to the presentation of their roles in the media. They rejected what is thought to be the element most challenging to their identities. This does not happen only to those who hold a socially desirable economic or cultural position. One professor said he would

never watch the so-called entertainment programs but would rather go out for a walk or take a nap with his precious time. One respondent, who was good at sports, said only those who never worked out would be interested in sports programs. He didn't watch the World Cup matches. Showing interest in sports, especially football, seemed a symbol for men. The respondent constructed his image of masculinity by claiming competence in sports rather than simply being one of the many fans of sports programs.

How people looked at themselves vis-à-vis the media was projected on how they looked at themselves in general. In this case, people constructed their self-awareness by looking at how people viewed media's image and, hence, how they arrived at a strategy to identify themselves. What is interesting is that most people employed media's symbolic resources by claiming that they didn't like the way media portrayed social groups and would go their own way. By saying this, they demonstrated their uniqueness, despite the lack of other capitals such as money, and power.

Conclusions

With the rise of self-awareness following the reforms, individuals employ resources from different sources to define who they are and who they want to be. Their response is characterized by identities rather than identity, fluidity rather than fixity, conflict rather than unification. The media and other sources provide multiple reference groups, and new rules of social resource distribution contribute to the construction of identities.

When the state retreats from the private lives of people, the market enters in its place, consciously or unconsciously, with or without their consent. When people are relieved of the ritual of reading *Selections of Mao Zedong,* they cannot escape the lure of consumption, focusing on what is in vogue, from a stylish blouse to a new sports program. The market works not as an invisible hand (Li, 1992), but as a visible force, with constraints as well as resources. The state, however, does not entirely disappear. It remains a resource integrated into the market and functioning through the market. The state uses market measures to promote ideologies (Zhao, 1998). Following the same logic of the market, however, people translate the resources provided by the state into market terms. On the surface level, individuals enjoy more freedom of choice, and more diverse resources, in a market-driven society. Given the diversity of choices and constraints, people have no choice but to choose (Giddens, 1996). But with so many "others" as reference groups, they cannot see clearly how they can be positioned in such a fluid society. Although conscious of the commercial intentions of manufacturers, individuals, turn to the market to articulate who they are and what they potentially are. If in the pre-reform era, individuals were deprived of a choice of leisure-time activities, being preoccupied with political study or an extra job load, the current situation forces them to make choices regarding their leisure, especially conspicuous consumption, since this is how

they find a place in society. It is paradoxical that, while individuals have been freed somewhat from rigid party-state control, they may not be able to rid themselves of the confusion and anxiety that accompanies the process of the marketization.

Note:
[1] A newly coined term; from "information" and "entertainment." It is used by some scholars to refer to media content composed of a mix of information for business or everyday life and entertainment.

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