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Author(s): Amy Hanser and Jialin Camille Li

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Opting Out? Gated Consumption, Infant Formula and China's Affluent Urban Consumers

Amy Hanser and Jialin Camille Li*

ABSTRACT

Affluent Chinese consumers are increasingly “opting out” of the Chinese marketplace, drawing upon their social networks and superior economic resources to purchase foreign infant formula that they believe to be untainted by contact with China’s suspect markets and untrustworthy distribution channels. Based on interview and media sources, we document these consumer practices and characterize them as highly privatized forms of “gated consumption” which reflect broader patterns of Chinese middle-class lifestyles. As a strategy for dealing with food-safety concerns and marketplace distrust, gated consumption is seemingly apolitical and individualized, yet at the same time exemplifies the fragility of the Chinese Party-state’s promises of prosperity and material well-being.

What happens when Chinese consumers begin to feel that the Chinese marketplace no longer meets one of the most essential of all needs—the safe feeding of infants? This article considers the specific set of consumer crises that have made infant formula and the feeding of babies profoundly fraught in China today. For parents who rely upon infant formula to feed their babies, deciding what formula to purchase and where to buy it is more than just a “headache”; it has also become a sphere in which consumers invest enormous amounts of time and energy in devising safer channels, in the absence of a reliable market–state nexus.

While all Chinese consumers are potentially exposed to the hazards of adulterated food, substituted ingredients or products and counterfeit goods, consumer strategies for confronting these threats, perceived or real, vary enormously, depending upon the economic, cultural and social resources that individuals can bring to bear.¹ This stratification of consumer practices is especially

* We would like to acknowledge the helpful feedback from the editors of *The China Journal* and two anonymous reviewers for the journal. This research was supported by a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. All errors remain our own.

1. Jakob A. Klein, “Everyday Approaches to Food Safety in Kunming”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 214 (June 2013), pp. 376–93; Amy Hanser, “Uncertainty and the Problem of Value: Consumers, Culture and Inequality in Urban China”, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (November 2010), pp. 307–32.

evident in the case of infant formula, as more privileged Chinese draw upon superior economic resources and social networks abroad to secure foreign infant formula.

Drawing on a literature on the Chinese middle class that characterizes this group as largely organized around consumption practices and lifestyle-based identities rooted in “gated” forms of living, we argue that middle-class resources—economic, social and cultural—have enabled these affluent consumers to adopt increasingly “gated” forms of consumption to cope with market and environmental uncertainties in China—the quality of infant formula being one of those uncertainties. Their privatized, individualized gated consumer strategies give them little impetus to view their worry about infant formula as a common or collective problem that might spur them to demand more action from the state. Their personal strategies project an image of compatibility between consumerism and an authoritarian political system, in a context in which economic growth and political repression are mainstays of Communist Party power.² Yet the middle class’s “opting out” reflects a profound lack of faith not only in state and market institutions but also in the state’s symbolic claims to legitimacy, by a group that has reaped many benefits in contemporary China.

Material for this case study is drawn from various sources, including a set of 26 interviews conducted in May and June 2013 in Shanghai with mothers of infants, as well as Chinese-language media reports and parenting websites.

CHINA’S MIDDLE CLASS: GATED LIFESTYLES, GATED CONSUMERS?

The reform era in China is characterized by many contradictions. Rising overall standards of living have been accompanied by an expanding gap between the nation’s “haves” and “have-nots”. The expansion of a market economy has thrust consumers from a Mao-era world of shortage and rationing into a highly competitive consumer marketplace which seeks to satisfy every consumer desire. At the same time, this marketplace is rife with problems, ranging from food safety to counterfeiting to fraudulent practices.

In this complex context, what are the circumstances of the consumerist middle class, their place in society and their relationship to the ruling Party-state? The term “middle class” itself is a problematic label which is usually used in reference to affluent urbanites in China, who are sometimes also referred to as “the new rich”. Using this latter term, David Goodman notes that it is “a broad idea—the

2. Minxin Pei, “Is CCP Rule Fragile or Resilient?”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 27–41.

beneficiaries of economic growth—rather than a precise social group or distinct analytic category”.³

Some scholars have argued that consumption should be viewed as the most important constitutive mechanism for the creation of middle-class identity and membership in China today. For example, Li Zhang maintains that the aspirational element of consumption and lifestyle is an especially powerful facet of China’s middle class, a group for whom consumption serves as a key means for asserting social status in a context in which sources of wealth often remain opaque.⁴ As Zhang observes, “[t]he ability to consume properly is taken not only as the measure of one’s prestige (*zunrong* [尊荣]) and face (*mianzi* [面子]) but also as an indication of whether one deserves membership in a particular [middle-class] community”.⁵

Several studies of China’s middle class have focused upon urban gated residential communities as the critical physical site where middle-class status and identities are asserted and where an evolving middle-class cultural milieu is taking form.⁶ Choon-Piew Pow shows how, in Shanghai, gated forms of housing, surrounded by walls and policed by security guards, serve to create a “middle-class territoriality”.⁷ Middle-class housing estates involve explicit forms of exclusion, carving out urban spaces “purified” of the presence of undesirable outsiders and upholding the “modern” and “civilized” values of safety, order and hygiene.⁸ Luigi Tomba observes that, as well as resulting in a “segregation of interests”,⁹ the

3. David S. G. Goodman, “Introduction: The New Rich in China: The Dimensions of Social Change”, in David S. G. Goodman (ed.), *The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.

4. Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2010), p. 9; see also Luigi Tomba, “Creating an Urban Middle Class: Social Engineering in Beijing”, *The China Journal*, No. 51 (January 2004), pp. 1–26; Luigi Tomba, “Of Quality, Harmony, and Community: Civilization and the Middle Class in Urban China”, *positions: east asia cultures critique*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2009), pp. 591–616; Luigi Tomba, “Middle Classes in China: Force for Political Change or Guarantee of Stability?”, *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2009), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v6i2.1026>.

5. Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise*, p. 122.

6. For example, Luigi Tomba, “Creating an Urban Middle Class”; Luigi Tomba, “Of Quality, Harmony, and Community”; Luigi Tomba, “Gating Urban Spaces in China: Inclusion, Exclusion and Government”, in Samer Bagaen and Ola Uduku (eds), *Gated Communities: Social Sustainability in Contemporary and Historical Gated Developments* (London: Earthscan, 2010), pp. 27–37.

7. Choon-Piew Pow, *Gated Communities in China: Class, Privilege and the Moral Politics of the Good Life* (London: Routledge, 2009); on Beijing, see Friederike Fleischer, *Suburban Beijing: Housing and Consumption in Contemporary China* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2010), and Guillaume Giroir, “The Purple Jade Villas (Beijing): A Golden Ghetto in Red China”, in Georg Glasze, Chris Webster and Klaus Frantz (eds), *Private Cities: Global and Local Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 142–52.

8. Choon-Piew Pow, *Gated Communities in China*, p. 129; Werner Breitung, “Enclave Urbanism in China: Attitudes Towards Gated Communities in Guangzhou”, *Urban Geography*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2012), pp. 278–94.

9. Luigi Tomba, “Gating Urban Spaces in China”, pp. 33–34. The segregation of interests that Tomba describes resembles the cellular quality of Chinese labor protests described by Ching Kwan Lee in *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

“forting-up” of Chinese cities addresses both homebuyer and local government concerns with security. A desire for “secure” spaces has been found to be the highest of homebuyer priorities¹⁰—this is also the case in other developed and developing nations with high levels of inequality between affluent élites and the rest of the population.¹¹

The flip side of exclusive physical and social boundaries is their ability to create a sense of membership among those included, generating sets of common interests around which homeowners can and do organize.¹² Studies have shown that private property ownership regularly leads middle-class urban Chinese to assert collective interests, usually against developers or real-estate management companies through homeowners’ associations or collective law suits.¹³ What kind of collectivity does this represent? The associations and their protests are compartmentalized in that they are tolerated by the local state only when they remain within the walls of housing estates.¹⁴ Several studies claim that homeowners’ associations are not a basis for broader political organization and democratization or for challenging China’s one-Party state.¹⁵

10. Luigi Tomba, “Gating Urban Spaces in China”, p. 31. Another line of argument claims that gated housing is the rule, not the exception, in Chinese cities, and is therefore not necessarily limited to affluent urbanites. Werner Breitung, “Enclave Urbanism in China”; Chris Webster, Fulong Wu and Yanjing Zhao, “China’s Modern Gated Cities”, in Georg Glasze, Chris Webster and Klaus Frantz (eds), *Private Cities*, pp. 153–69. Huang suggests that gated living has roots in China’s collectivist culture and is not necessarily exclusionary in nature: Youqin Huang, “Collectivism, Political Control, and Gating in Chinese Cities”, *Urban Geography*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (2006), pp. 507–25. Nevertheless, Breitung notes that the “emerging demand for privacy, the meaning of individual ownership, the desire for social distinction, and the particular concept of security” are all associated with contemporary gated housing in urban China, meaning that, in the current context, the link between affluence and exclusive, gated housing is strong. Werner Breitung, “Enclave Urbanism in China”, pp. 291–92.

11. Examples include Mike Davis’ portrayal of a “Fortress L.A.” in which secure enclaves closely associated with upscale lifestyles result in the destruction of public space (Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* [New York: Verso, 1990]); see also Teresa Caldeira’s “city of walls” and “fortified enclaves” in Sao Paulo, which function as “status symbols and instruments of social separation” (Teresa Caldeira, “Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation”, *Public Culture*, Vol. 8 [1996], p. 304).

12. Youqin Huang, “Collectivism, Political Control, and Gating in Chinese Cities”.

13. Benjamin L. Read, “Democratizing the Neighbourhood? New Private Housing and Home-Owner Self-Organization in Urban China”, *The China Journal*, No. 49 (January 2003), pp. 31–59; Benjamin L. Read, “Assessing Variation in Civil Society Organizations: China’s Homeowner Associations in Comparative Perspective”, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 9 (2008), pp. 1240–65; Yongshun Cai, “China’s Moderate Middle Class: The Case of Homeowners’ Resistance”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (2005), pp. 777–99; Luigi Tomba, “Residential Space and Collective Interest Formation in Beijing’s Housing Disputes”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 184 (2005), pp. 934–51; Luigi Tomba, “Gating Urban Spaces in China”; Wang Feng, Haitao Yin and Zhiren Zhou, “The Adoption of Bottom-Up Governance in China’s Homeowner Associations”, *Management and Organization Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2012), pp. 559–83.

14. Luigi Tomba, “Gating Urban Spaces in China”, p. 33. For a contrasting view, see Thomas Johnson, “The Health Factor in Anti-Waste Incinerator Campaigns in Beijing and Guangzhou”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 214 (June 2013), pp. 356–75.

15. Luigi Tomba, “Gating Urban Spaces in China”; Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise*; Yongshun Cai, “China’s Moderate Middle Class”; Jonathan Unger, “China’s Conservative Middle Class”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 169, No. 3 (2006), pp. 27–31.

Together, this body of research portrays a consumption-based middle-class status and identity that is, in many ways, gated, security-conscious and inward-looking. Does this represent a particular way of dealing with problems in contemporary China, and does gated middle-class consumption reflect a specific configuration of state–society relations?

INVERTED QUARANTINE AND GATED CONSUMPTION

Andrew Szasz, in a study of American suburbs, has described something akin to “gated consumption” in the form of what he dubs “inverted quarantine”, by which he means a reversal of the more public-minded practice of containing a threat to public health and safety through isolation of the danger. Inverted quarantine operates instead by protecting the individual from a dangerous environment “by erecting some sort of barrier or enclosure and withdrawing behind it or inside it”.¹⁶ Although historically élites practiced inverted quarantine to protect themselves from the masses, the “dangerous classes”, Szasz argues that the practice has diffused downward. Szasz characterizes the suburbs as a form of inverted quarantine that involves withdrawal into a secure, controlled space, resulting in a narrowed sense of the collectivities to which one belongs and towards which one might be responsible, and, as a result, suburbanites are “less and less able or willing to address pressing social problems”.¹⁷ Inverted quarantine is reflected in an array of consumer practices ranging from drinking bottled water to purchasing environmentally “safe” products like organic foods and body products—a consumerist response to social problems such as inequality or environmental pollution, offering individualized solutions to collective problems.

Szasz’s argument falls within a broader set of critiques that cast consumerist orientations as a threat to politically engaged citizenship in the West.¹⁸ While this concern may seem far removed from China’s single-Party authoritarian rule, the concept of “inverted quarantine” effectively captures consumer strategies of affluent Chinese today. However, whereas in liberal democracies inverted quarantine represents a choice to rely upon market solutions over collective, political ones, gated consumption in a one-party system such as China’s can be viewed as alleviating potential pressures for political reform. In China, concern about safety and security is not unique to affluent urban consumers. As Yunxiang Yan points out, food-safety scares, often widely publicized through the media and the

16. Andrew Szasz, *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

17. Andrew Szasz, *Shopping Our Way to Safety*, p. 94.

18. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Michael Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?”, *Global Environmental Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2001), pp. 31–52.

Internet, have produced widespread distrust of both food sellers and the food industry more generally.¹⁹ Similarly, Jing Wang argues that “[i]t is ‘safety’ rather than ‘desire’ that speaks to consumers across regions and social strata in China.”²⁰ The ways of achieving safety vary significantly, however, according to material means and social and cultural resources. While gated consumption represents a set of strategies readily available to anyone with the means to pursue them, it ultimately leaves the resource-poor still exposed to hazards: it is, in effect, inverted quarantine.

METHODOLOGY

Information for this article comes primarily from two sources: a set of interviews carried out with 26 Shanghai mothers in May–June 2013, and reports in the Chinese mass media. Roughly 85 articles, most published between June 2008 and December 2010, were gathered through a text-based search on three databases for the terms “foreign milk powder”, “imported milk powder” and closely related terms.²¹ Given the centrality of Hong Kong as a key place to go to purchase milk powder, we also gathered relevant reporting from the *South China Morning Post* since the 2008 melamine incident. We supplemented these articles with reports in industry publications as well as material gathered from blog postings (in English and Chinese), discussion boards and threads on a variety of Chinese parenting websites.

The information gathered through interviewing was part of a larger investigation into the consumption of imported/foreign goods in contemporary China. Our interviewing began with several professional women, whom we asked to introduce us to other women who had had a child within the past four to five years. Most of them had purchased infant formula, though several had exclusively breastfed their infants. None of our interviewees fed their babies infant formula produced by Chinese companies, though three did use Dumex, a brand often understood to be “local” by Shanghai consumers but owned by France’s Groupe Danone. The interviewees engaged in a wide range of strategies for sourcing “safe enough” infant formula.

All our interviewees had breastfed their infants, and for some mothers breastfeeding represented a clearly superior feeding choice for reasons of food safety.

19. Yunxiang Yan, “Food Safety and Social Risk in Contemporary China”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (2012), p. 717; see also Jakob A. Klein, “Everyday Approaches to Food Safety in Kunming”.

20. Jing Wang, *Brand New China: Advertising, Media and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 18.

21. These databases were China Academic Journals (which includes popular magazines), the China Core Newspapers Full-Text Database and the news database Food Industry Net (www.foodqs.cn), which supports an extensive database of food-related reporting in the Chinese media. Many of these newspaper reports are duplicated and cached on Chinese news websites, parenting websites and other Internet venues.

They also cited other factors, such as World Health Organization recommendations about the immunity advantages of breast milk and attachment theory regarding mother–child bonding but, while most felt that breastmilk was superior to formula, they did not generally equate breastfeeding with good mothering. Many felt that formula was perfectly adequate. In fact, 24 of our 26 interviewees had made the transition to infant formula or expected to do so in the foreseeable future. Switching from breast milk to formula was most commonly associated with the mother’s return to employment, though there were also other reasons, including the mother’s inability to supply enough maternal milk, the inconvenience of breastfeeding or dislike of the physical demands related to it.

Our interviewees ranged in age from 27 to 41, with reported monthly household incomes ranging from 10,000 to 40,000 yuan, which placed them significantly above the average disposable household income in Shanghai of 3,700 yuan per month in 2013.²² All were permanent Shanghai residents (*hukou* 户口 holders), though a number of them had settled in Shanghai through marriage or formal workplace arrangements. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and more than one hour. While our interview sample was small, and while China’s news media are subject to state controls and censorship, the interviews and media reports revealed strikingly similar strategies being adopted by middle-class consumers.

There is some evidence that lower-income urban families also use foreign formula brands, though they do not necessarily have access to transnational or specialized channels for these products.²³ Jialin Li’s ongoing research in Shanghai suggests that migrant women in that city are more likely to avoid formula entirely, delaying re-employment in order to breastfeed exclusively. However, our article focuses on consumers with the resources to “opt out” of the Chinese domestic marketplace—and our finding is that overwhelmingly they do so.

GENERALIZED ANXIETY AND CLASS STRATEGIES: INFANT FORMULA AND FOOD SAFETY IN CHINA

In September 2008, China’s Health Ministry initiated a recall of powdered infant formula produced by the Sanlu Group, the company commanding the largest share of the country’s infant formula market.²⁴ Some of the company’s powdered milk had been contaminated with melamine, an industrial chemical. As the domestic media reported on the contamination and the Chinese government began

22. *Shanghai Statistical Yearbook*, <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/sjfb/201401/266445.html>, 年 1-4 季度城市居民家庭人均收支情况.

23. Qian Gong and Peter Jackson, “Consuming Anxiety? Parenting Practices in China after the Infant Formula Scandal”, *Food, Culture & Society*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2012), pp. 557–78.

24. Shumei Chen, “Sham or Shame: Rethinking the [sic] China’s Milk Powder Scandal from a Legal Perspective”, *Journal of Risk Research*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (2009), pp. 725–47.

to take action, panic spread among families feeding their babies infant formula. In just five days, initial reports of one death and 11 infants suffering kidney stones in Gansu Province ballooned to reports of over 6,000 sickened children.²⁵ State testing expanded, and the products of some 22 domestic dairy companies were found to contain measurable levels of melamine.²⁶ Media reports conveyed images of frantic parents inundating local hospitals to have their children tested and rushing to supermarkets in search of refunds and replacements for the suspect milk powder.²⁷ By the end of September, the number of ill children was reported to be more than 50,000, with at least four infants dead. By January 2009, government estimates put the number of affected children at 300,000.²⁸

The weeks and months that followed the initial reporting brought recalls of more domestic dairy products in China (including liquid milk and yogurt). Officials sought to demonstrate strong action by arresting and eventually executing two milk sellers and sentencing the chairwoman of Sanlu to 15 years' imprisonment.²⁹ China's "Formula-Gate" (*naifenmen* 奶粉门) produced widespread anger among Chinese consumers, and criticism within and outside China of the country's food-safety system.

Consumer distrust extended not just to markets and market regulators but also to an inability to acquire accurate information about existing problems with China's food supply.³⁰ The widespread poisoning of infants with melamine-contaminated formula was the result of intentional efforts by farmers to add water to the milk that they sold and then hide this by artificially boosting measured protein levels by adding melamine.³¹ The damage was compounded by the delay of companies and government authorities in addressing and publicizing the problem, especially during the Beijing Summer Olympics. Concerns had been raised by health officials in Gansu Province as early as July, but state media did not report these concerns until September, and only after whistle-blowing by a

25. "China Says 6,244 More Children Ill from Tainted Milk", BBC Worldwide Monitoring (17 September 2008).

26. Shi Chengzhang, Du Meiyang and Dong Jiguang, "Naifenmen shijian: kaowen Zhongguo naizhipin hangye de linghun" (The "Formula Gate" Incident: Interrogating the Soul of China's Dairy Industry), *Renren jiankang* (Everyone Healthy), Vol. 19 (2008), pp. 10–15.

27. "Panic Spreads as More Fall Ill in Milk Powder Scandal", *South China Morning Post* (14 September 2008), p. 5; "Rush to Dump Tainted Baby Milk: Anxious Parents Flock to Shops Seeking Refunds and Alternative Powders", *South China Morning Post* (13 September 2008), p. 4.

28. "Second HK Child Has Kidney Stone", *South China Morning Post* (23 September 2008), p. 1; "The Sanlu Trial: Diary of a Dairy Disaster", *Caijing Magazine* (15 January 2009).

29. "Timeline: China Milk Scandal", BBC News Online (25 January 2010), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7720404.stm>, last accessed 2 March 2012; "Parents' Fury Over Melamine Sentences", *South China Morning Post* (23 January 2009), p. 4.

30. Guobin Yang, "Contesting Food Safety in the Chinese Media: Between Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony", *The China Quarterly*, No. 214 (June 2013), pp. 337–55.

31. Hao Xin and Richard Stone, "Chinese Probe Unmasks High-Tech Adulteration With Melamine", *Science*, No. 322 (November 2008), pp. 1310–11.

New Zealand-based partner dairy company.³² Even then, there was reportedly Chinese government pressure on domestic news sources to “tone down” coverage of the infant formula scandal.³³

The number of reported food-safety incidents has grown sharply since the late 1990s,³⁴ and the incidents range from the use of industrial ingredients or the addition of prohibited dyes and chemicals to offering counterfeit goods for sale. Food and product safety concerns have become pervasive across social groups,³⁵ and a growing lack of public confidence in China’s market, regulatory and legal institutions has been labeled a “crisis of trust”.³⁶ A new phrase has been added to the Chinese vocabulary: *youdu shipin* 有毒食品, or “poisonous food”.³⁷ Many urban consumers prefer to buy fresh local food, directly from farmers if possible, and to wash it thoroughly before consuming it; in the case of processed foods, there is evidence that consumers rely upon brands and trusted retail venues to ensure quality and safety, and there is a willingness in urban areas to pay more for products certified as safe.³⁸ Foreign products, especially those imported from developed countries, enjoy a higher reputation for food safety.³⁹

Strategies for securing safe food are not uniform across social groups. As one example, the affluent can afford to contract farmers to produce “safe” food for

32. Shi Chengzhang, Du Meiyan and Dong Jiguang, “Naifenmen shijian”; “Firm Probed Over ‘Bad’ Baby Milk”, *China Daily* (11 September 2008); “China Investigates Milk Powder After 14 Babies Fall Ill”, BBC Worldwide Monitoring (10 September 2008).

33. “Censorship Hammer Comes Down Over Scandal”, *South China Morning Post* (16 September 2008), p. 5; see Guobin Yang, “Contesting Food Safety in the Chinese Media”, for an extended discussion of media coverage of the incident.

34. Zenobia C. Y. Chan and Wing-Fu Lai, “Revisiting the Melamine Contamination Event in China: Implications for Ethics in Food Technology”, *Trends in Food Science and Technology*, Vol. 20, No. 8 (2009), pp. 366–73.

35. Yunxiang Yan, “Food Safety and Social Risk in Contemporary China”; Jakob A. Klein, “Everyday Approaches to Food Safety in Kunming”.

36. Sun Liping, *Duanli: 20 shiji 90 niandai yilai de Zhongguo shehui* (Cleavage: Chinese Society Since the 1990s) (Beijing: Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House, 2003); Beverly Hooper, “Consumer Voices: Asserting Rights in Post-Mao China”, *China Information*, Vol. 16 (2000), pp. 92–128; Amy Hanser, “Uncertainty and the Problem of Value”; Waikung Tam and Dali Yang, “Food Safety and the Development of Regulatory Institutions in China”, *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2005), pp. 5–36; Yunxiang Yan, “Food Safety and Social Risk in Contemporary China”.

37. Yunxiang Yan, “Food Safety and Social Risk in Contemporary China”. Food safety violations are a staple of media reporting in China and help to create what Ann Veeck and her co-authors characterize as “a generalized perception that the Chinese food supply is fraught with risks”. Ann Veeck, Hongyan Yu and Alvin C. Burns, “Consumer Risks and New Food Systems in Urban China”, *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2010), pp. 222–37.

38. Ann Veeck, Hongyan Yu and Alvin C. Burns, “Consumer Risks and New Food Systems in Urban China”; Jakob A. Klein, “Everyday Approaches to Food Safety in Kunming”; Caiping Zhang, Junfei Bai, Bryan T. Lohmar and Jikun Huang, “How Do Consumers Determine the Safety of Milk in Beijing, China?”, *China Economic Review*, Vol. 21 (2010), pp. 45–54; Zhigang Wang, Yanna Mao and Fred Gale, “Chinese Consumer Demand for Food Safety Attributes in Milk Products”, *Food Policy*, No. 33 (2008), pp. 27–36.

39. John Knight, Hongzhi Gao, Tony Garrett and Ken Deans, “Quest for Social Safety in Imported Foods in China: Gatekeeper Perceptions”, *Appetite*, No. 50 (2008), pp. 146–57.

them; Yunxiang Yan notes a “surge of contracted green food production by government agencies and large state-owned enterprises”, a practice known as *tegong* (特供) or “special provisioning”.⁴⁰ The practice has a history dating back to at least the 1950s, when special provisioning was used to assure food supplies for high-ranking officials when shortages were common.⁴¹ In recent years, media reports have drawn attention to the practice in the context of food safety, rather than food shortage.⁴² Similarly, consumption of infant formula is stratified, with efforts by privileged consumers to “opt out” of the Chinese marketplace.

China's Stratified Dairy Market

Even before the 2008 milk scare, the market for dairy products, and for infant formula in particular, was stratified. In recent years, domestic milk production has grown rapidly—from roughly seven million tons in the mid-1990s to over 18 million tons in 2003, making China the world's seventh largest dairy producer,⁴³ but affluent urban consumers heavily favored imported and foreign-brand infant formula. A 2007 survey carried out in 14 major Chinese cities found that the three brands which consumers most commonly stated that they had purchased were all foreign.⁴⁴ There is a fuzzy distinction between foreign-branded and imported formula, since some foreign companies, such as Switzerland's Nestlé and the US's Mead Johnson, either manufacture infant formula domestically from imported milk powder or have localized their milk production entirely, while many Chinese companies manufacture infant formula from imported milk powder. Consumers are therefore confronted with choices ranging from “imports in the original packaging” (*yuanzhuang jinkou* 原装进口) or imported milk packaged and/or processed in China (under either foreign or domestic brand names) to domestically sourced and processed dairy product (either foreign-branded or domestic).

As much as 90 per cent of the high-end infant formula market has been captured by imported and foreign-brand infant formula. By contrast, the market for

40. Yunxiang Yan, “Food Safety and Social Risk in Contemporary China”, p. 723.

41. Yunxiang Yan, “Food Safety and Social Risk in Contemporary China”, p. 723; for a more detailed history, see Geremie Barmé, “Editorial: More Saliva than Tea”, *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 29 (March 2012), <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/editorial.php?issue=029>, last accessed 2 March 2015.

42. “*Southern Weekend*: Special Organic Food Supply for Officials Only”, *China Digital Times* (1 June 2011), <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/06/southern-weekend-special-organic-food-supply-for-officials-only/>, accessed 2 August 2013; “That Place Called ‘Customs Shed’”, *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern Weekend) (6 May 2011), original text archived at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2011/南方周末-“低调”种菜/>, accessed 2 August 2013.

43. Frank Fuller, Jikun Huang, Hengyun Ma and Scott Rozelle, “Got Milk? The Rapid Rise of China's Dairy Sector and its Future Prospects”, *Food Policy*, Vol. 31 (2006), pp. 201–15.

44. Wu Hongwei, “14 chengshi yingyouer naifen shichang diaocha baogao” (Report on Survey of the Infant Formula Market in 14 Cities), *Zhongguo ruyue* (China Dairy) Vol. 8 (2008), pp. 22–25.

low-end infant formula, which costs a fraction of imported formula, is occupied entirely by Chinese brands.⁴⁵ Prior to the Sanlu scandal, consumption of foreign vs. domestic infant formula already reflected a clear class divide, with high-end formula in 2008 costing 150–200 yuan or more for a 900-gram tin, within the financial reach only of very affluent consumers. Infants can easily consume a large tin in a single week, costing a family 600–800 yuan or more a month in 2008 for imported formula. In comparison, Sanlu's infant formula cost only 18 yuan for a 400-gram bag.⁴⁶

The infants who were most directly affected by the Sanlu Milk Powder poisonings were more likely to have been born to poor rural parents,⁴⁷ but the Sanlu Incident created an industry-wide crisis and shook the confidence of consumers who had never used Sanlu's products.⁴⁸ Fears about domestic infant formula stretched across socioeconomic lines, and still do today, as a number of incidents of contamination of formula—most recently in June 2012—have continued to stoke consumer fears.⁴⁹ Thus, while the Chinese government has sought to shine a spotlight on its efforts to improve food-safety regulation—for example, by canceling the licenses of almost half of China's existing dairy producers in 2011⁵⁰—China's more affluent consumers have increasingly opted out of China's market altogether.

Opting Out

A domestic news report estimated that 90 per cent of “white-collar mothers” purchase foreign-brand formula for their children, a figure reflected in our small Shanghai interview sample.⁵¹ Accordingly, trade data show a significant increase in imports of packaged milk powder, roughly one-third of this being infant formula. Industry observers suggest that, in the wake of the Sanlu scandal, foreign

45. Wang Dingmian, “Zhongguo ruye guo ‘yangnian’” (China's Dairy Industry Passes a “Foreign” Year), *Nongjing zazhi* (Agriculture Economics Magazine), Vol. 231, No. 3 (2010), pp. 58–60.

46. “175 wan dai naifen bei wuran, Shaanxi fumu danxin hui you houyizheng” (1.75 Million Bags of Milk Powder Contaminated, Shaanxi Parents Worry There Will Be Medical After-Effects), Huashang wang (Huashang net) (12 September 2008), http://www.hsw.cn/news/2008-09/12/contentu_10284050.htm, last accessed 2 March 2012.

47. Deng Luwen, “Du naifen beihou de qiongfù chaju” (Behind Toxic Milk Powder, the Gap Between Rich and Poor), *Zhongguo shehui zhokan* (Chinese Society), Vol. 20 (2008), pp. 44. For parallels with the 2004 infant formula incident, see Waikung Tam and Dali Yang, “Food Safety and the Development of Regulatory Institutions in China”.

48. Shi Chengzhang, Du Meiyang and Dong Jiguang, “Naifenmen shijian”.

49. “China Outcry at New Tainted Milk Scandal”, *Financial Times (US Edition)* (16 June 2012), p. 9.

50. “Nearly Half of China's Dairy Producers Fail to Get New Licenses”, Xinhua China Economic Information Service (2 April 2011).

51. Tan Guomin, “Yang pinpai naifen: gui de yiding hao ma?” (Foreign Brand Milk Powder: Does More Expensive Necessarily Mean Better?), *Jiankang* (Health Magazine), No. 8 (2010), pp. 6–8.

companies began to reach down even into China's mid-range formula market,⁵² resulting in a severe over-supply of domestic milk powder and the destruction of both milk and dairy cows.⁵³ This particular food scare has had enormous staying power. Imports of infant formula have grown every year since the Sanlu Incident, at rates that often approach 20 per cent.⁵⁴ Foreign manufacturers of infant formula have seen their market share surge by roughly 40 to 70 per cent in China's large and medium-sized cities.⁵⁵ A survey in the northern city of Changchun found that, in more exclusive stores specializing in baby products, the only formula available is imported.⁵⁶

Strikingly, the prices for imported products have been increasing by as much as 10 to 15 per cent per year.⁵⁷ Our interviewees reported monthly expenditures on imported infant formula ranging from 500 to 2,000 yuan, costs that the Chinese media has characterized as extreme. For example, one article critical of consumers' "blind faith" in imported formula blazoned the title: "10,000 [yuan] in One Year for Milk Powder!"⁵⁸

In part to keep their own costs in check, consumers often resort to complicated channels to acquire foreign infant formula. A significant amount enters China by consumers making personal arrangements to carry it in, rather than to purchase it through commercial channels in China,⁵⁹ and larger shipments (often from Hong Kong) arrive through smuggling and so-called "grey" channels.⁶⁰ The small-scale avenues include tins of milk carried by individual travelers across the border between Hong Kong, Macao and China. Our interviewees described how they arranged for friends or relatives living or traveling abroad to mail formula to them in China, or how they themselves purchased it in person while traveling outside China. Eight of our interviewees described "cousins" (*biaomei* 表妹,

52. Wang Dingmian, "Zhongguo ruyue guo 'yangnian'".

53. "Naifen jinkou mengzeng, guonei naifen xingshi yanjun" (Sharp Increase in Imported Milk Powder, Outlook for Domestic Dairy Industry Grim), Xinhuanet (6 August 2009); Lin Hua, "Zhongguo jian ru yang naifen shidai" (China Gradually Enters a Foreign Milk Powder Age), *Zhongguo waizi* (China Foreign Investment), No. 8 (2010), pp. 44–45.

54. Chen Qiu, Yang Xiuwen and Ding Fang, "2012 nian Zhongguo naiye maoyi fenxi baogao" (2012 Analysis of China's Dairy Industry Trade), *Zhongguo nainiu* (Dairy Economy), No. 4 (2013), pp. 39–45.

55. Deng Yaqing, "Higher Faith, Higher Price: While Foreign Milk Powder Producers See Profits Swell, Consumers Aren't Complaining", *Beijing Review* (25 July 2013).

56. Li Xiaoyue and Li Qingqing, "Jingzhen yu xiwang—Changchun diqu jinkou naifen shichang diaocha" (Competition and Hope: A Survey of the Market for Imported Infant Formula in the Changchun Locality), *Huazhang* (Magnificent Writing), No. 23 (2013), p. 51.

57. Deng Yaqing, "Higher Faith, Higher Price".

58. "Naifen qian 1 nian 1 wan! Nianqing mami wu mixin yuanzhuang jinkou" (10,000 [Yuan] in One Year for Milk Powder! Young Mommies' Mistaken Faith in Original-Package Imports), *Xinxi shibao* (Information Times) (11 November 2009); also "Bailing mama duo xuanze yang naifen" (White Collar Mothers Are More Likely to Select Foreign Milk Powder), *Xiaofei ribao* (Consumer Daily News) (12 March 2010), p. A02.

59. Wang Dingmian, "Zhongguo ruyue guo 'yangnian'".

60. Ray Collins and Ximing Sun, "China's Grey Channels as Access Points for Foreign Food Products to the Chinese Domestic Market", *China Information*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2010), pp. 61–74.

biaojie 表姐) in places like the United States or France who had supplied infant formula to them. One mother described relying upon a family friend working as a tour guide to New Zealand to maintain her supply of formula. Even purchases within China often involve special channels: a number of women reported reliance on professional or personal connections to secure formula directly from the units officially responsible for importing or distributing a given brand of formula.

Some mothers explained how they had decided upon a specific brand prior to the baby's birth, based on Internet research and online discussion forums and through word-of-mouth. Some described being influenced by conversations with other mothers as they began weaning their babies from breastfeeding. For example, one young mother recalled sitting among a group of mothers, listening to a conversation about products for babies. "They'll tell you brands, and I'll ask where I can buy it, and they say you can't [buy it in China] . . . the only option is to purchase from abroad [*tao* 淘]". Our interviews revealed a shifting constellation of preferred countries-of-origin for infant formula—Japan was first preferred (given the perceived physical similarities between Chinese and Japanese babies) and then, after the 2011 earthquake and fears about radiation contamination in Japanese products, New Zealand and Australia came to be favored. At the time of our interviews, German formula was growing in popularity. The volume mailed from overseas became significant enough to prompt the Chinese government to introduce new customs regulations in September 2010, reducing both the weight and value of items which travelers can bring into the country tax-free and raising the costs of both self-imported and Internet-sourced formula.⁶¹

The scale of these consumer strategies has had ripple effects, affecting local supplies as far away as New Zealand, where in 2009 supermarket chains placed restrictions on the number of tins of formula that customers could purchase at one time.⁶² Some of this demand is driven by online traders, who purchase infant formula abroad and re-sell it through online retail portals like Taobao. For example, one interviewee described stocking up on infant formula during a family vacation to Australia, and while in an Australian supermarket she observed "Chinese girls in their 20s" buying up large quantities of infant formula, and empty shelves for formula brands, suggesting a bustling "buying agent" (*dai gou* 代购) business. A report in the *China Daily* quotes an online dealer in foreign formula saying that the government's restrictions "won't disrupt my business . . . I'll

61. "Jinkou shuǐ tiāozhèng, yáng nǎifēn wǎnggòu tǐjiǎ bǐrán" (Adjustments to Import Duties, the Price of Internet-Purchased Foreign Milk Powder Must Also Rise), *Zhōngguó liánhè shāngbào* (China United Business News) (23 August 2010), p. C01.

62. "Mothers Buy Formula Online", *China Daily* (25 March 2010), p. 28, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-03/25/content_9638509.htm, last accessed 6 March 2012; "China Sales Lead to NZ Baby Milk Rationing", *The New Zealand Herald* (16 January 2010), http://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=10620570, accessed 5 June 2014. Australia has experienced similar issues, see "Chinese Safety Concern Empties Distant Shelves", *The New York Times* (7 January 2013), p. A10.

just have to make more trips to the store”.⁶³ Other regions of the world have also been affected at times: online bulletin-board discussions on a parenting website describe Japanese pharmacies imposing restrictions on infant formula purchases in response to Chinese purchasers, and Radio Netherlands Worldwide reported in late 2010 that some Dutch stores were restricting formula purchases in order to stymie Chinese traders.⁶⁴

Ironically, in a context in which trust in standard market channels is so low, a virtual marketplace such as Taobao has emerged. The lower prices often offered by Taobao vendors have given rise to a lively Internet trade in foreign infant formula. Although many of our informants explicitly identified Internet purchases as highly dubious, a minority felt that they had developed reliable online channels for formula. For example, one woman who worked for a government bureau responsible for food-safety inspections had professional knowledge about a particular Taobao seller; and another described using a Taobao vendor after observing her co-worker purchasing reliable formula from this source. Yet another mother, still breastfeeding, reported that she would rely upon a QQ-based mothers’ group to find an online source when she eventually weaned her child.⁶⁵ In one case, a woman described how her husband had found a supplier on Taobao selling the soy-based formula needed by her baby with a cow’s milk sensitivity, and the lower cost of the online product was an important factor.⁶⁶ Some other interviewees have become what is popularly dubbed “online overseas shoppers” (*haitao* 海淘), purchasing formula and other baby products directly from foreign websites such as amazon.com or cvs.com.

A key source for infant formula is Hong Kong. In the immediate wake of the Sanlu scandal, the Chinese media regularly reported on shopping trips to Hong Kong and Macao, sometimes on a recurring basis, to purchase “real” imported formula. One article described Chinese travel agencies bringing tourist groups

63. “Mothers Buy Formula Online”; see also “Bailing mama duo xuanze yang naifen”.

64. “Chinese Buying Up Dutch Baby Milk Powder”, Radio Netherlands Worldwide (24 November 2010), <http://www.rnw.nl/english/article/chinese-buying-dutch-baby-milk-powder>, last accessed 6 March 2012. The demand for infant formula in China has led the government of New Zealand to highlight regulations governing the export of infant formula on its own food safety web pages. See “Infant Formula Exports”, <http://www.foodsafety.govt.nz/industry/exporting/introduction/infant-formula.htm>, accessed 11 January 2013. On Japan, see “Xue de jiaoxun! Jiuchu Taobao Mingzhi naifen de jiahuo” (Blood Lesson! Uncovering Fake Meiji Infant Formula on Taobao), <http://cmt.pcbaby.com.cn/topic/a0/r0/p1/ps30/t12777930.html>, comment 41.

65. Sascha Matuszak describes resale networks emerging from groups of mothers who meet in online forums, such as the Chengdu-based “Chengdumama” (www.cdmama.cn; there are cognates for cities across China), and develop friendships, which may then form the basis for one of the mothers—with an overseas contact willing to ship formula to China—setting up a Taobao business selling imported formula to her friends and their networks. See Sascha Matuszak, “Raising a Child in Chengdu: Sourcing Baby Products”, *Chengdu Living* (31 March 2010), <http://www.chengduliving.com/raising-a-child-in-chengdu-sourcing-baby-products/>, last accessed 6 March 2012.

66. Taobao may be especially attractive to Chinese families without access to the kinds of trustworthy retail outlets (such as major supermarkets) that a city like Shanghai offers in abundance.

directly to shopping centers where they could purchase quality-guaranteed tins of formula.⁶⁷ Such cross-border shopping trips, coupled with unauthorized cross-border traders in infant formula, have become controversial in Hong Kong, as local residents have repeatedly complained that the mainland rush to snap up large quantities results in unstable and insufficient local supplies.⁶⁸ Some supermarkets place infant formula behind counters and restrict the number of cans that can be purchased at one time, whereas tourist-oriented shops in Kowloon display stacks of imported formula next to Chinese medicine and dried seafood. At the 2011 Lunar New Year, a period of peak demand from visiting mainlanders, the Hong Kong government received a petition from residents concerned about baby formula supplies,⁶⁹ and soon took action. In May 2011, Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption arrested 15 people, including a number of workers from Hong Kong supermarkets, who were redirecting Hong Kong supplies of infant formula to traders smuggling large quantities into China⁷⁰ and, in March 2013, 45 people were arrested as part of an infant formula "parallel goods trading syndicate."⁷¹ More controversial, especially within mainland China, was the imposition in March 2013 of a temporary two-can limit for travelers taking infant formula out of the city; travelers under the age of 16 are no longer allowed to carry any formula at all.⁷²

At the heart of all these strategies are efforts by affluent consumers to circumvent what they perceive to be a problematic Chinese marketplace. As a mother who bought all of her formula and other baby products directly from abroad emphasized, food regulation is better outside China whereas within China fake products are common. One woman stated that it all comes down to Chinese factories: after her overseas source of infant formula became too difficult to maintain, she chose a new brand of infant formula, primarily because no factories in China produce it, and relies upon a friend who works for the formula company in Shanghai—and therefore not on market channels—to secure the product.

67. "Shimin baoming gang'ao you qianggou jinkou naifen" (City Residents Sign Up for Hong Kong–Macao Travel for Imported Milk Powder Shopping Binges), *Nanfang ribao* (Southern Daily) (25 September 2008).

68. "Milk Powder from HK Preferred", *South China Morning Post* (3 April 2010), p. 2; "HK Cashes in on Trust of Mainlanders", *South China Morning Post* (17 February 2010), p. 1; "Gangfu cheng naifen gongying huoyuan chongshi, jiang yin ying xuqiu er zengjia" (Hong Kong Government States That Milk Powder Supplies Abundant, in the Future Supplies Will Increase in Accordance With Demand), *Zhongguo xinwen wang* (China News Net) (4 May 2011), <http://www.chinanews.com/ga/2011/05-04/3016723.shtml>, last accessed 6 March 2012.

69. "Shortage of Infant Milk Causes Stir", *South China Morning Post* (15 February 2011), p. 6.

70. "18 Arrested Over Milk-Powder Bribery Ring; Supermarket and Store Workers Paid to Help Mainland Traders Stock Up, ICAC Alleges", *South China Morning Post* (10 May 2011), p. 3.

71. "Milk Powder Busts Lead to 45 Arrests at Mainland Border", *South China Morning Post* (4 March 2013), p. 1. The phrase "parallel goods trading" is commonly used in Hong Kong media accounts, and refers to people who purchase goods in Hong Kong and resell them for a profit across the border in mainland China.

72. "Milk Powder Limits Start Next Month", *South China Morning Post* (23 February 2013), p. 4.

She added, “I feel that Chinese people are willing to sell fake things, sell expired things, just for a little money”. Another mother explained that she preferred not only imported formula but also imported diapers, because she does not trust things produced in China: “If someone breaks a law or a regulation, they get fined but nothing more. It’s a bad system that rewards those who seek to make the most money.” The confidence in foreign products is so strong that one mother reported a friend saying to her that infant formula was safer for a baby than breast milk—but only if the formula were foreign!

Even breastfeeding followed the logic of gated consumption. Many interviewees had used breast pumps, and they overwhelmingly preferred foreign brands and imported equipment. Breast pumps offered women who returned to work or who had difficulty breastfeeding a means to provide breast milk for their babies and to avoid using formula. Some women had only supplied their babies with breast milk using a pump, and had never nursed directly, while some had created substantial stockpiles of frozen breast milk in anticipation of weaning. One interviewee described how she had filled her own freezer and half of her mother’s freezer with stored pumped milk. Though breastfeeding was valued in its own right, this strong preference for breast milk despite the challenges of expressing milk by mechanical means and of packaging and storing large quantities of it also reflected deeply held concerns about food safety.

These strategies all speak to the economic and often transnational social resources at the disposal of China’s middle class. Social networks and cultural knowledge are mobilized, but the strategies are individualized, addressing only a single family’s feeding issues at a time (or potentially creating a small business opportunity while serving the needs of a circle of friends or acquaintances).

CONCLUSION

As the descriptions above demonstrate, gated consumption acts to insulate the consumer, and her baby, from the unknown and uncertain dangers of China’s food products, in what appears to be a clear case of “inverted quarantine”. For some of the women whom we interviewed, these quarantine practices expanded well beyond infant formula, to home air purifiers, purchases of imported baby food or snacks, reliance on special channels for securing meat and other domestic food for the baby, and even to breast pumps and milk storage bags, baby toys, diapers and baby wipes. Yet all of the respondents simultaneously recognized the limitations of such efforts. As one woman observed, “You have to eat! You have to drink!” According to another Shanghai mother to whom we spoke, “I try to improve the things in my surroundings that I can control, but I also feel that we cannot possibly isolate (*gejue* 隔绝) ourselves completely from these [threats]”. Yet another mother observed: “As adults, we have become used to it; you can’t

avoid eating out, can you? But you still have options regarding baby food . . . you should not let [your child] be touched by (*jiechu* 接触) Chinese problems too early.”

Given the reliance on social networks for information about and material access to foreign infant formula, should such strategies really be considered “individualized” responses to public problems, and what is the broader significance of such consumer practices? Similar questions have been taken up in the literature on pollution and protest in China. For example, Anna Lora-Wainwright notes that both rural and urban citizens often feel powerless to oppose environmental problems and turn as a result to “individualized strategies to protect their own bodies”.⁷³ Bryan Tilt’s study of environmental pollution in rural Sichuan emphasizes how, in the course of economic reforms, “the individual” has become key to understanding how people fit into society, reflected not only in institutional arrangements but also in people’s understanding of their own place in society and how they should behave.⁷⁴ Jakob Klein argues, in contrast, that we should not be so quick to adopt an individualized model for understanding reactions to environmental and other threats in China. Using food-safety concerns as an example, Klein contends that consumers instead are embedded within and strategize through contexts of local food culture, family ties and obligations, and everyday efforts to establish networks of trust. Yet he also provides an important caveat, noting that everyday food consumption strategies are stratified practices rooted in ideas about individual consumer responsibility that work most effectively in China for middle-class (and, implicitly, *élite*) consumers, given their greater material resources.⁷⁵

The reliance on personal networks emphasizing the importance of family or trust-infused personal ties is, however, consistent with the gated—and therefore very private—nature of such consumer strategies. The way in which infant formula consumers mobilize their knowledge, networks and economic resources is representative of what John Osburg describes as “relational ethics”, whereby mutual obligation extends only or primarily to those with whom one maintains ties, rather than with “tiny publics” which might lead to larger forms of collective action.⁷⁶ The reliance on what we might characterize as the “large privates”

73. Anna Lora-Wainwright, “Introduction: Dying for Development: Pollution, Illness and the Limits of Citizen’s Agency in China”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 214 (June 2013), p. 247.

74. Bryan Tilt, “Industrial Pollution and Environmental Health in Rural China: Risk, Uncertainty and Individualization”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 214 (June 2013), pp. 283–301.

75. Jakob A. Klein, “Everyday Approaches to Food Safety in Kunming”. Klein also suggests that anxieties about modernization in China are more acute among working-class people, who have fewer alternatives than middle-class families.

76. John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China’s New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Gary Alan Fine and Brooke Harrington, “Tiny Publics: Small Groups and Civil Society”, *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2004), pp. 341–56.

of mothers' groups, co-workers and work-related contacts, former classmates or family members to gain access to safe, foreign infant formula represents an intertwined reliance on markets and personal networks, producing the kind of dispersed and diffuse action that is a common characteristic of consumerist problem-solving strategies.

Gated consumption practices such as with infant formula raise larger questions about state legitimacy in China today. Indeed, the "resilience" of China's one-Party authoritarian political system has been attributed to many factors, including the Communist Party-state's ability to adapt to new circumstances and respond to crises and threats in ways that maintain its power and legitimacy.⁷⁷ By the turn of the 21st century, that legitimacy largely rested upon economic performance—specifically, the state's ability to deliver economic growth and material well-being—as well as on claims to moral legitimacy rooted in the notion of a benevolent government morally responsible for its people's well-being.⁷⁸ The lack of confidence in China's domestic market for infant formula, however, raises the question of how strong the state's legitimacy claims are in the eyes of middle-class consumers.

Certainly, China's authoritarian context, in which claims to legitimacy are accompanied by repressive and coercive policies,⁷⁹ means that people are pushed towards seemingly apolitical, individualized solutions. As both Klein and Guobin Yang note, food-safety issues have become politically sensitive in China, leaving little room for collective mobilization without raising the real possibility of state repression.⁸⁰ As our interviewees reported, in the case of infant formula, feeding decisions are usually worked out in the private sphere of the home and the family, negotiated among mothers, fathers and grandparents in response to breastfeeding challenges, workplace demands and other constraints.⁸¹ There is a striking relationship between the consumerist strategies and authoritarian rule in China.

At the same time, the lack of collective protest or public dissent does not mean that people accept the status quo, and our interviews revealed that in some cases deep pessimism about Chinese society underlies gated consumer practices. For

77. Elizabeth Perry, "Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: 'Re-Orienting' Party Propaganda", Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series (2013); Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-Society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

78. Bin Xu, "For Whom the Bell Tolls: State-Society Relations and the Sichuan Earthquake Mourning in China", *Theory and Society*, Vol. 42 (2013), pp. 509–42.

79. Minxin Pei, "Is CCP Rule Fragile or Resilient?"

80. Jakob A. Klein, "Everyday Approaches to Food Safety in Kunming"; Guobin Yang, "Contesting Food Safety in the Chinese Media". As one example, Zhao Lianhai, a Beijing man whose son suffered kidney damage as a result of consuming Sanlu's formula, was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison on charges of "disrupting social harmony", a consequence of his activism on behalf of affected families. "China Sentences Activist in Milk Scandal to Prison", *New York Times* (11 November 2010), p. A12.

81. Gong and Jackson make a similar observation; see Qian Gong and Peter Jackson, "Consuming Anxiety?"

example, one mother, who not only exclusively used foreign infant formula but also only buys imported snacks and toys for her child if she can, prefaced her explanation for this line of action by saying: “I still love my country, but . . .”. She went on to explain that she does not have enough energy or knowledge to discern which domestic products might be safe; “it is too frightening”. “Foreign countries value their children’s development and view this as their future”, she noted, whereas in China people pursue advantage for themselves and do not consider the future. “If I can choose foreign [things] for my child, I will”. In the words of another mother, who saw her purchase of foreign infant formula as rooted in a moral crisis in Chinese society, people selling fake products within China “have no conscience . . . they have acted to hurt the next generation . . . it is a sorrowful (*beì'āi* 悲哀) situation”.

Many of our interviewees recognized the class-bound nature of their own feeding practices and solutions. They frequently added a phrase like “if you have the economic means” to their characterization of domestic formula as the “no-alternative alternative”. It is unclear how well even the gated forms of consumption ameliorate middle-class anxieties and dissatisfaction. For example, one mother went so far as to suggest that the Chinese regulatory and production system is so broken—that Chinese manufacturers and regulators “will do anything for money”—that the only reasonable option is to send her child abroad eventually, if she can afford it. “I don’t have the capacity to change [China] . . . so I won’t try to. My husband and I and my parents will just stay here, but for the next generation, if they can leave, if we have the economic means to let them leave, then do your best to leave and not stay in China.”

An underlying loss of faith in China’s future may suggest that the dreams and aspirations of the middle class are not only gated and private, but may very well lie outside China itself. This could, then, represent the deepest irony of gated consumption practices, which quarantine the individual family unit or the “large private” of trust-based private networks by reaching *outside* the gates of China’s own markets, but also outside the reach of state institutions.