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Conceptualizing the roles of cultural intermediaries in the making of a fine wine consumption cultura in China

Conceptualisation des rôles des intermédiaires culturels dans la création d'une culture de la consommation de vins fins en Chine

15 December 2021.

Jennifer Smith Maguire

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PREO

Conceptualizing the roles of cultural intermediaries in the making of a fine wine consumption culture in China

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Context
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Context

- 1 China is now among the world's top ten wine consuming countries. Chinese consumers have a clear desire for gaining greater knowledge of the material qualities and conventional practices of wine, as evidenced by China being the largest market for WSET (Wine & Spirit Education Trust), the global leader in provision of wine education courses¹. However, a fine wine market is not yet secure in China: China's per capita wine consumption remains very low, and grape wine remains peripheral in a domestic alcoholic beverages market dominated by beer, hard cider, flavored alcoholic beverages and grain-based alcohols. There remain significant gulfs between the po-

tential for a mass, middle-class fine wine market and the current emergent state of a fine wine culture in China. In this context, consumer tastes and practices cannot be taken for granted, creating opportunities for the interventions of a cadre of wine intermediaries who—through their expertise in matters of taste and value both with regard to wine *and* Chinese consumption—attempt to ‘attach’ Chinese consumers to a wine consumption culture that is rooted elsewhere, in European heritage. This context offers a fertile setting for exploring the role of cultural intermediaries in the emergence and development of new markets.

Purpose

- 2 The purpose of the research was to identify different roles played by the intermediaries in their efforts to construct a fine wine consumption culture in China. In turn, we make two contributions. Empirically, we offer insights into the Chinese fine wine market from the specific perspective of taste makers working in the highly affluent, first-tier city of Shanghai. Our theoretical contribution speaks to a growing body of research on the significance of constructions of legitimacy to the development of markets². This research has yet to extend attention to the means by which legitimacy is constructed as the basis of ‘market attachments’³ between consumers and goods. Such insights are especially needed in the case of emerging markets for goods for which there is an established culture of consumption rooted in another cultural heritage—as is the case for fine wine in China. We thus offer a novel conceptualization of the role of cultural intermediaries in market development and cultural globalization.

Methodology

- 3 The paper reports on exploratory, interpretive research involving semi-structured interviews with a small sample of Chinese fine wine intermediaries (5 wine writers/educators; 5 sommeliers/retailers; 3 brand representatives). Nine of the respondents were Chinese; 12 were based primarily in Shanghai. The degree of professionalization within the sample ranged from widely, from one to 20 years of experience, and from relative amateurs to those working in elite hospitality settings. An interpretive thematic analysis identified findings.

Findings

- 4 Accounts of cultural intermediaries call attention to their roles as gate keepers and consecrators. Our findings suggest three additional, heretofore under-explored roles of intermediaries in the creation of an emerging cadre of fine wine consumers. First, the intermediaries serve as *proxies* for an existing ideal consumer and a future, desired consumer. In this, they undertake the typical work of a cultural intermediary, singularizing and negotiating relevant points of attachment for Chinese consumers by bridging attributes of the ‘established’ European wine culture with Chinese cultural norms and traditions. Second, the intermediaries serve as *exemplars* for an existing, not-yet-legitimate consumer. In this, intermediaries take up an explicitly pedagogical position vis-à-vis their consumers, which we suggest in the case of emerging markets is especially important. Third, linking these two roles, the intermediaries operate as *functional democratizers*: they are part of opening up access to the ‘established’ European wine culture, while also contributing to the performance and dissemination of new, local codes of wine consumption conduct. Via their market interventions, they assist in ‘fitting’ emerging consumers to a global consumption regime.

Implications

- 5 These findings highlight the ‘soft power’ politics bound up in the emergence of new consumer cultures, which entail negotiations between and hybridizations of domestic and imported notions of ‘the legitimate.’ The findings also suggest new insights into intermediaries as a key corps of market actors who serve as both an approximation of, and role model for an emerging consumer body. Cultural intermediaries in emerging markets are the advance guard, whose readings and renderings of likely points of attachment between consumers (current and potential) and products (e.g. wine’s properties, established meanings and practices of use) are indicative of potential future market dynamics. Understanding the local population of cultural intermediaries is thus significant to anticipating pathways to institutionalizing new forms of taste and consumption practices.

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- 1 N. Wang, "WSET reports strong demand from China", *The Drinks Business*, 2018, Retrieved 25.01.19 from <https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/08/wset-reports-strong-demand-from-china/>
- 2 e.g. A. Humphreys, "Megamarketing: The creation of markets as a social process", *Journal of Marketing*, 74 (March), 2010, p. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.74.2.1>
- 3 F. Cochoy, J. Deville & L. McFall (Eds.), *Markets and The Arts of Attachment*, London, Routledge, 2017.
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English

The paper reports on exploratory, interpretive research involving semi-structured interviews with a small sample of Chinese fine wine intermediaries. We provide insights into the Chinese fine wine market from the perspective of taste makers working in the highly affluent, first-tier city of Shanghai. Our analysis offers a novel conceptualization of the role of cultural intermediaries in market development, contributing to a growing body of research on the significance of constructions of legitimacy to the development of markets, and suggesting how an understanding the local intermediary populations is significant to anticipating pathways for institutionalizing new forms of taste and consumption practices.

Français

L'article rend compte d'une recherche exploratoire et interprétative impliquant des entretiens semi-structurés avec un petit échantillon d'intermédiaires chinois dans le domaine des vins fins. Nous fournissons des informations sur le marché chinois des vins fins du point de vue des dégustateurs travaillant dans la ville de Shanghai, une ville très riche et de premier rang

dans la consommation vinicole. Notre analyse offre une nouvelle conceptualisation du rôle des intermédiaires culturels dans le développement du marché. Elle contribue à un ensemble croissant de recherches dévolues à l'importance des constructions de la légitimité pour le développement des marchés et suggérant comment une compréhension des populations intermédiaires locales est importante pour anticiper les voies d'institutionnalisation de nouvelles formes de goût et de pratiques de consommation.

Mots-clés

culture de consommation, intermédiaires culturelles, marchés émergents, légitimité

Keywords

consumption culture, cultural intermediaries, emerging markets, legitimacy, wine

Jennifer Smith Maguire

Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University