

# The Lure of Car Culture

## Gender, Class and Nation in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Car Culture in China<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*The Lure of Car Culture. Gender, Class and Nation in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Car Culture in China*

The aim of this article is to scrutinize car culture and gender in post-socialist China and to show how discourses of mobility and gender have come to be intertwined with the new middle class and ideas of nation and cars as imagined communities. The article departs from theoretical and methodological considerations of gender and car culture and argues that gender and cars are entangled in both global and local assemblages. Using *China Daily* as the main source of analysis, the article examines how dominant ideas of cars and gender have interfaced with the emerging Chinese middle class and new ideas of masculinity, femininity and Chineseness. Also, the article locates car culture as a new site of cultivating individual senses, life styles and new moral aspects of social life. Present-day urban car culture in China both challenges and radicalizes fixed figures of gendered and masculinised car culture; while at the same time carving out new gaps related to class, gender and more sustainable modes of transportation.

### KEYWORDS

*Car culture, gender, class, China, media*

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In present-day China car ownership and use has become exposed as part of the new value matrix (*suzhi*) of Chinese modernization and as a sign of belonging to the emerging Chinese middle class.<sup>2</sup> (Zhang 2008, 2010, Chunling 2010). For this group it now seems both un-cool and unthinkable to use the bike as a daily mode of transport. This means that over the last decades millions of citizens in urban China have abandoned two-wheelers or crowded public transportation in preference for the more comfortable and socially indispensable four-wheeler. Today, to own a car is to possess one of the ultimate material markers of belonging to the middle class, and the car seems to exert a strong current of fascination both among Chinese men and women. The result is that the kingdom of the bicycle has been turned into the world's largest car-owning nation in just a few decades.

The scale of the recent peak in car ownership in China is indeed impressive and has over the last decade made China the biggest car-market in the world. According to articles in *China Daily*, in 2013 the number of private cars in China reached 85 million compared to only six million ten years earlier. While men took the lead as drivers at the turn of the millennium, in recent years the number of women drivers has accelerated and they are now registered both as drivers and owners. Between 2003 to 2013 the total number of women with a driver's licence increased massively from 20 million to 60 million. Officially women today make up 40 % of Chinese car-owners, compared to only 25 % in 2003. Yet surging numbers may conceal attempts to bypass new government regulations limiting car ownership and driving in some city areas. Nevertheless, women car drivers still only make up a minority of 22 % of all Chinese drivers. The lack of gender balance has in particular alerted local and global car

producers, who regard Chinese women as a new potential market to boost sales figures.

In general the lure of car culture in China has to be seen not only as an individual choice deriving from a middle-class fascination, but as being intertwined with an influential car industry and the symbolic power of the car as an epitome of modernity named as "the commodity form as such in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Ross 1995: 17). In 1994, the Chinese government designated the automobile industry as one of the 'pillars' of economic development (Gallagher 2006, Dunne 2011). Meaning that automobile industry and joint venture enterprises merged national, local and foreign interests, and their combined efforts made cars a powerful engine for economic development and market expansion, and as such an initial element of Chinese modernization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When we look at car culture, transport and gender in terms of policy and research, it turns out to be a vital but also neglected field, which is lagging behind concerns about gender equality in family, workplace, health and education. Transport and mobility have e.g. been omitted in trendsetting readers from Sage, such as *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (2005), and *Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies* (2006). The geographer Susan Hanson has pointed to significant gaps both in existing feminist studies and in mainstream transport research and has called for refined analysis in either field (Hanson 2010). According to Hanson, feminist analysis has focused too heavily on gender and has underplayed specificities of mobility and transport; feminist research, she argues, based on qualitative analysis has mainly focused on how mobility shapes gender but not on how gender shapes mobility. Several studies have pointed to transport and mobility as producing gender stereotypes, indicating notions of men and masculinity

as being linked with speed and mobility, while women and femininity are seen as synonymous with immobility and aligned with home and domesticity; an enduring feature that surfaces in everyday practices as well as in multiple cultural and political forms (Christaldi 2005; Grieco et al. 1989; Hjorthol 1990, 1998, 2000; Næss 2007; Polk 2004). Such ideas support the unequal distribution of resources, for example in prioritizing of cars, rather than public transportation and non-motorized transport, and hampers the recognition of different kinds of mobility (Transgen 2007). In what follows, I am going to address how cars, new mobilities and changing ideas of gender have intermingled in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban China. Based mainly on an analysis of articles in *China Daily*, I will scrutinize how discourses of mobility and gender have come to be intertwined with new and dominant ideas of nation and of cars as imagined communities, I will analyse gender and the emerging middle class as implicated in the making of the new hegemonic cultures of mobility and cars. Present-day car culture in China tends both to radicalize and to challenge fixed figures of a masculinized car culture, while at the same time carving out new gaps related to class, gender and other more sustainable modes of transportation.

#### RESEARCH APPROACHES

When discussing gender in car culture and transport research, there is an overall tendency to conflate women with gender and argue that gender sensitive research should focus on women's specific needs and practices, which relate to domestic responsibility and family obligations (de Madariaga 2013). While such an approach might have certain assets, it is also in danger of treating and reproducing women as the 'other' in transport and car discourses. Besides, it leaves the visceral circle that is routinely presumed to be formed by men, masculi-

nity and cars as un-problematized and taken for granted. At present, a few, distinctive Nordic studies of men and car culture have provided findings showing that cars have been co-producers of gender and that they have reinforced the symbolic link between men, masculinity and machines (Balkmar 2012:16, Landström 2006). Moreover, they contend that the symbolic link between men, masculinity and cars is a cultural phenomenon that is continuously (re)produced in varied ways in cultural meaning-making.

Both Hanson, Sheller and others have argued that research aimed at addressing low carbon and multiple forms of mobility needs to deconstruct core ideas of choice and individuality; among other things a more forward looking transport research needs to include ideas of gender as constructed and intersecting with other categories such as class and age, as well as institutional and geographic context. If the current car culture is to take a more sustainable turn, new questions needs to be asked; it must be addressed in a broad sense as a culture embedded in intimate relationship between cars and people (Miller 2001:17) and move towards locality and "lived experience of dwelling with cars in all of its complexity, ambiguity and contradictions." (Sheller 2004: 222). In this article, I will demonstrate how living with cars has eventually become part of everyday middle class life in urban China; a hegemonic horizon that tends to wipe out critical concerns over low carbon society and sustainable forms of mobility.

To further develop complex ideas of transport, gender and mobility as they are implied in the current making of urban Chinese society and middle class culture, I will make use of a couple of relevant concepts. First the idea of 'assemblages' provides a promising analytical horizon for exploring the formation of current post-socialist modernity and car culture. Dant (2004) assumes the assemblage driver-car,

as a (genderless) product of human design, manufacture and choice and as enabling a form of social action that has become routine and habitual and which affect many aspects of life in late modern society. Combined with a gendered notion of interpellation, it supports analytical sensibilities and allows us to make links between car culture and mobility on the one hand and on the other hand to certain globalizing processes of culture whereby new subjectivities and new routines come into being.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of global assemblage(s) is useful for examining how social relations have been intertwined with material objects at multiple levels in the creation of car cultures around the world. Global assemblages, according to anthropologists Zhang and Ong (2008), are marked by a particular 'global' quality and refer to phenomena that are attractive, mobile, dynamic, that move across analytical borders and at the same time reconstitute 'society', 'culture' and 'economy' in their known or imagined forms. Cars and new forms of mobility clearly illustrate both such processes and their material forms, which change the horizon of society and daily lives (Sheng 2008). We need only think of the exploding car market, elevated highways, clean and extensive subways, high speed trains and new airports that connect urban centres and which enable new subjectivities and new social forms.

Secondly, there is the notion of interpellation which enables the understanding of how technologies and subjectivities interact and are constituted in the use and appeal of cars. Interpellation as a concept derives from the French philosopher Louis Althusser and refers to 'hailing' as a kind of subjectivation of a person into her or his social and ideological position by an authority figure. In this context the idea of interpellation assumes that cars can be viewed as artefacts that construct and enable gendered subjects (Landström 2006: 35, Lees-Maffei 2002). Landström

argues that certain processes of interpellation initially invite men into an imagined homo-social community and into a shared culture of cars and transport artefacts. Car culture thus becomes implied in the doing of heterosexual masculinity and pleasure and in such a stereotyped framework women are often constructed as practising a rational femininity as opposed to or even as a threat to this type of male sociality and pleasure.

Gender can be regarded as one of most productive approaches for making explicit many of the complex issues in car culture, as noted by Miller (2001: 32). A point which I will pursue in the following by comparing and contrasting the media representations of car culture and gender in urban China. I will explore which changes and new sensibilities that are emerging and to what extent they show evidence of more relaxed or new ideas of gender and cars.

#### CHINA DAILY AS A SOURCE FOR SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

I have chosen *China Daily* as a primary source for my analysis for several reasons. First, *China Daily*, as the oldest Chinese newspaper in the English language, provided first-hand access to both current and historical discussions and to representations of car culture and gender in China; a priceless resource for me as a scholar with European background with no knowledge of spoken or written Chinese. Second, *China Daily's* online archives, established in 1995, offered access to a wide selection of articles with a particularly extensive coverage of the years after 2000. I have supplemented the online records with a screening of the paper editions dating back to 1981 and to the initial years of post-socialist reform and change. Third, *China Daily* in this period devoted extensive attention to the emerging car culture, to the middle class and to elucidating gender relevant issues. All in all, I regard *China Daily* as a unique platform

from which current and day-to-day representations and negotiations of Chinese modernity can be tracked in relation to state, market, class, family, gender and cars. While in the early 1980s *China Daily* addressed emerging everyday routines in the framework of socialist ethics, over the last decade the newspaper has become quintessentially middle-class in orientation and today serves the individualistic and consumer ambitions of the urban middle class, not least in its radical promotion of car culture (Shirk 2011). On top of this, *China Daily* used to act as a testing ground for government issued criticism and for the introduction of new directions and positions in Chinese domestic and foreign policy; for instance in addressing greening and smarting policies, air pollution, new low carbon technologies and regulations meant to curb air pollution. Here, *China Daily* frequently provides a double platform as Chinese window dressing aimed at the west and as a cosmopolitan space for aspiring Chinese citizens.

When it comes to car culture, it is no surprise that *China Daily* has been an eager and active promoter of cars and car culture in China. Or that, in quantitative terms, articles on cars and car culture outnumber texts on other transport modes by the thousands. From 2000 to 2013 the total number of Beijing related articles on cars amounted to nearly 19,000 (18,919) while the number of articles dealing with bikes and biking came to just over 300. The amount of coverage reflects the public and private interest in the two modes of transportation and the growing hegemony of car culture as well as market interests. In spite of their immense popularity, electric-bikes seem to be placed as the ‘inappropriate other’ at the lowest level of media attention, and for both Beijing and China the combined total of articles came to a bare 170.

I have operationalized the empirical evidence from *China Daily* using the metho-

dological approach suggested by Norman Fairclough and his critical discourse analysis. It consists of a three-tiered analytical model, focusing on 1) text, 2) discursive practice and 3) social practice. While text in this article refers to textual analysis of newspaper articles, discursive practice refers to the contextual and intertextual structures of genre and style and to aesthetics and immediate references to other media. Social practice in this context refers to the broader social and political framework and to overall ways of representing car culture, gender and modernization in China. At the same time the following analysis is inspired by cultural ethnography suggested by Swedish anthropologists such as Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, and ideas of material bricolage and multilevel analysis (Ehn & Löfgren 2010). The themes which are in focus of the following paragraphs cross cuts strict tiers and represent multi analytical processes. While the themes emerged out of explorative screenings of the *China Daily* articles, they have been approached by the inclusion of additional material and analytical perspectives.<sup>4</sup> The first analytical focus is on car culture as imagined and gendered communities and the impacts of colours, nation and gender in present-day Chinese car culture. This is followed by paragraphs on the construction of middle class car-practices, related to middle class masculinity and female car lovers. I end with an analysis of car shows as significant cultural and gendered events that spell out new moral aspects of social life in present day China.

#### CAR CULTURES AS IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

It has been argued that the making of 21<sup>st</sup> century modernity and consumer communities corresponds to the formation of nation states as imagined communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Anderson 1983; Small 2013; Cayla & Eckhardt 2008). Today it is

claimed that cars and other consumer goods have replaced media and political arenas as the channel for the imagination; and that the imagined communities are now situated in transnational connections and regional consciousness as much as within national boundaries. I will show how such developments are manifested in the case of present day car culture, where nation states are entangled in new hybridities but are in no way made obsolete. This is epitomized in the marketing strategies of German car brands in China such as the VW Volkswagen, BMW and Mercedes-Benz, which have unique ways of tapping into Sino-western connections and cosmopolitan business ideals. Here the car industry is active in carving out new channels and sensibilities, balancing the feeling of global connectivity with ideas of Chinese distinctiveness. Such new transnational branding strategies interpellate gender and nation in multiple ways. The Chinese car culture links to a global model of masculinity whereby the imagined needs and pleasures of the male business and government elite have been central and have been actively incorporated. This can be seen both in the launch of longer and more pretentious luxury car-models assumed to attract male Chinese consumers who like to move around in chauffeured cars (Dunne 2011), and in the introduction of new shapes, colours, names for cars, all of which contain both overt and underplayed gender and national components.

Indeed, the car industry at present applies a variety of class and gendered branding strategies that co-constitute cars, Chinese middle-class culture and gendered subjectivities. In 2009 for example, the German luxury brand BMW launched a high profile *BMW Culture Journey* in collaboration with the Capital Museum in Beijing, followed in 2010 by a BMW ArtPOwer 100 award, which was an initiative taken in cooperation with the Art Value Magazine. Both initiatives were

intended to raise public awareness of cultural heritage as well as contemporary art in China. Both equipped the BMW with the sort of cultural hype that would appeal to their potential upper middle-class and cosmopolitan customers (Ong 2012). Yet Mercedes-Benz made an even bolder intervention with the Mercedes-Benz Arena, a prestigious building at EXPO 2010 in Shanghai. The arena is now promoted as a lifestyle scene, with arts, sports and design presented as Mercedes core values in line with customers' elegant lifestyles, and branded as a place where the "icon of motion will meet the icon of entertainment."<sup>5</sup> Since the world of high culture and elegance is routinely seen as soft and feminine and as an efficient avenue to reach women, cars are here merged with culture in new ways that present the car world as potentially re-gendered, as broader and less masculine.<sup>6</sup>

The branding strategy of the popular and low-end brand Volkswagen in China, the *renmin* car, or the 'people's car', differs in several respects from the luxury car segment. The aim of the VW has been to position the brand more bluntly as a central stakeholder in the Chinese economic miracle and to give it a place in the creation of present-day Chinese modernity. Yet the success of the VW also connects to an imagined historical and cultural perception amongst Chinese and Germans. One example that conflates its image and the innovative forces of the middle-class woman consumer with the image of the Chineseness and the Chinese consumer is the case of the VW Neeza model. This model, named after Ne-zha, a little boy with supernatural powers in Chinese mythology who flies on a Wind-fire Wheel, was launched in 2006 as a Chinese-German Cinderella story, a model that was feminine and soft, that combined the elegance of the sedan in the front with the efficiency of the SUV in the back. The rejuvenated Neeza model was presented as a mythological and



technological twist of the most modern western technologies with features such as colours and form that were derived from the Chinese characteristics.<sup>7</sup> It symbolized the merging of Sino-German bonds, even in its introduction of an understated, yet ultimately feminine coding, and according to VW its colour and softer forms were designed to meet the preferences of the Chinese consumers, notably white-collar families in the big cities.

Colours are not innocent, and the colour red introduced by the VW Neeza is certainly of vital importance in Chinese history and imagination (Young 2013, Roszbach 1994). Colours are imbued with power, history and gender to a degree that is often not recognized. Imagine the impossible picture of small governmental cars in colours of purple or red – in contrast to the black cars that are universal signifiers of power both in the east as well as in the west. In China, the power of black in cars became historically materialized in the so-called ‘red-flag limousines’, which were robust and big black cars of Soviet or Chinese origin and only allowed for the party elite during the first decades of the PRC. It is a trend that has been continued in current governmental cars, used by elite party members and civil servants. They still consist of big, black cars, but now of western origin, which are both admired and contested in the current Chinese public.

What is more, colour(s) can be seen as immaterial qualities with the ability to materialize into objects and surfaces. Colourful cars can be compared with a virus contaminating and infecting the car. This is exemplified by the brightly coloured electric cars paraded in current car-shows. Such cars might offer a different and potentially destabilizing sense of the meaning and materiality of a car, while at the same time they seem to offer closer proximity to women as seen in car show depictions. The co-dependency of coloured surfaces, designs and the technical inner struc-

tures and bodies of cars has been rendered hierarchical; with colours and designs seen as secondary and feminine, while the motor and other technical devices are regarded as primary and masculine (Corvette Quaterly 2008, IBM Business Consulting Service 2010). The question is, of course, whether the coloured wrapping and renewed designs of the cars, seen also in mainstream production such as the reformed VWs, destabilize the meaning and disrupt the strong and enduring power of cars as symbolizing men and masculinity, or whether they just represent a brief transgressive moment in the long history of black cars and male supremacy in the car culture. It is hard to predict, but new possibilities seem to be emerging. The gradual inclusion of both gender and regional differences in car designs and production, taken together, might be one sign among many that the hegemonic position of both western technologies and western masculinities are being re-negotiated and perhaps weakened at the current stage of globalization.

#### MIDDLE CLASS, MASCULINITIES AND CAR CULTURE

The white-collar segment that represents China’s rising middle-class of men and women has been of vital importance in the on-going marketization and promotion of car culture in China. It is interesting that both media and market here have been active in exposing the image of a new gender equal family ideal. Hence, a central target in car branding has been the well-educated couple, consisting of an outgoing career woman and a ‘soft’ or metrosexual man, as the main targets for car branding (Hird 2009). The car market to some extent participates in the constitution of a new Chinese family ideal, where modernity and gender equality is transferred to the family sphere, with men participating in family affairs such as domestic work and in taking the kids to the kindergarten. Men in

this group are labelled ‘educated men’ and were the first targets of the Chinese auto-marketing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the post WTO era, when the car market took off.

Studies of Chinese masculinity have depicted how multiple forms of masculinity exist and have revealed how notions of masculinity past and present circulate in contemporary culture and debates. In a pioneering study, Kam Louie has claimed that the dyad Wen – Wu in Chinese tradition is a paradigm that explains the performance of gender identities in particular masculinity.” (Louie 2002: 4).<sup>8</sup> Wen values surface in the New Chinese white-collar and middle-class masculinity, embodied in the feminized, emasculated man, said to be at the symbolic heart of China’s economic success (Hird 2010). I would argue that motorized mobility and driving abilities belong to this range of new normative and cultivated skills in this group.

The second significant representation of masculinity and cars is related to the Wu side of the dyad, stressing martial values, which are currently embodied in the new entrepreneurial masculinity, characterized as strong, masculine, and aggressive (Zhong 2000, Hird: 30). A related representation, is that of the corporate globalized (Chinese) male who has been re-sexualized and has joined the ranks of an imagined transnational male. This image links more directly to the influential notion of hegemonic masculinity in western masculinity studies (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). In present-day marketing of car culture it seems as if the soft and educated male has somehow disappeared; the masculine and aggressive seem to proliferate and is represented in the shape of the conspicuous and adventurous car consumer which seems to embody present-day Wu masculinity.

One example of such gendered market constructions is the media-mediated marketing reports which are from time to time presented to *China Daily* readers. There is,

for example, a McKinsey report from 2012 on luxury car consumers, which nourishes notions of aggressive consumerism and strong masculinity. The report describes Chinese customers as bluntly “obsessed with presenting a successful image” and many younger male buyers were portrayed as seeing the car as a ‘business card’ signalling their credibility. The report also presents differences carved out along gendered lines, with male buyers favouring “socially recognized” premium brands in contrast to female buyers, who “put a priority on exterior styling, safety features and comfort.” Another report along the same lines divided China’s luxury car buyers into five segments. A majority of the customers were identified as younger males, while women made up a distinct and more mature group among business and executive people.

Yet quantitative sociological evidence of gendered preferences and practices are scattered and uneven when it comes to gender and class assumptions. My own survey from late 2013, which involved 240 respondents in the Shanghai metropolitan area, provided unstable sociological evidence of consumer preferences and gender similar to the findings of Landström (2006). Most of the respondents, irrespective of gender, pointed to the family car as their dream-car and not to the luxury sedans that marketing gurus, the business community and car-producers assumed they would want. The desire for a family car reflects the central position held by the Chinese family, and resembles the social dimensions in car culture, the car as a family member, as claimed by Sheller (2004:229).

#### WOMEN CAR LOVERS AND INNOVATIONS

In *China Daily* women consumers are represented in discourses that in detailed media portraits e.g. construes a new type of woman, who is described as feeling close proximity and love for her car. This dis-



course tends to present women as having emotions and taking pleasure for cars.

“It has been a long day at work, but the 27 year old lawyer Li Liali is about to meet a dear friend in the parking lot of North Beijing Guohua Plaza that is her red Buick regal. The woman’s exhausted expression melt into a grin as she slides into the driver’s seat. She fires up the engine, wraps the seat-belt around her, tunes on the Gs tracker and shifts into gear.”<sup>9</sup>

The female car lover can, as noted by Balkmar (2012: 138), be regarded as an emerging symbol of women and cars, and she challenges the dominant ideas of men’s monopoly of car pleasure. Such gendered interpellations moderate popular wisdom that attributes to men and masculinity the evils of car culture and the idea of cars as a kind of metallic phallus linked to men and bodily desires (Landström 2006).

The representations of female car lovers in *China Daily*, however, are frequently moderated by an essentialist twist. Women drivers are often portrayed as drivers but they are framed into a heteronormative context, where their interests and pleasure are romanticized and tamed. What is more, the bold efforts in Chinese branding are directed at married middle-class couples, tend to leave the figure of the single and independent female car-owner in a marginal position. Here the Mini Cooper features as an exception. The Mini Cooper, which was launched in Britain as part of western youth culture in the 1960s, has been reintroduced and is now the leading car in the mini luxury segment in China. To date, 80 % of mini cars in China are owned by women. Hence the Mini is presented as being imbued with a specific appeal to women, and this is transposed into commercial slogans and narratives that address single women at a mature age.<sup>10</sup> “I am already over 60, but I would like to have a car that shows my real feeling at

heart,” says the fictional auntie Chen, who is named as one of the first owners of a Mini car in China. Mini car-owners in China are described by the Mini Cooper marketing director as, “fashionable women who enjoy good-looking things and usually don’t care whether a car can seat four adults or just her and her pet.”

To see the bonding of feelings to cars as particular feminine confirms stereotypes of women and the image of women as more emotional than men. However, creating a strategic relationship between women and the mini car might create an unwanted image where men might feel excluded. In marketing the Mini Cooper it seems that the car company has been aware of the dangers and ambiguities in identifying the Cooper as a women’s car and much emphasis has been made on broadening the appeal to men and young people as well. Yet it is striking that the Mini seems to challenge the Chinese ideal of a family car by celebrating the individuality of the well-off single woman. In this way the Mini is also in the business of co-producing the image of an independent lifestyle among a certain group of women in present-day China, which is a far cry from the victimizing ideas of leftover women as pursued in present day China (see review of Fincher 2013 in this volume).

#### CAR SHOWS – AS GLOBAL ASSEMBLAGES AND GENDERED INTERPELLATIONS

So far, car-shows have figured as a rather unnoticed assemblage of materiality and bodies, of local and global car culture and gender (Balkmar 2012). In western contexts car shows have traditionally been regarded as an exclusive site of male pleasure; and as paradigmatic events appealing to an exclusive homo-social community of car lovers and car pleasures for men, while women are made the ‘other’ in various ways, as show girls, wives and girlfriends which is also echoed in Chinese car

journalism.<sup>11</sup> Yet in China a different trend is that this closed script seems to be in flux and on the way to form new contexts and combinations of pleasure, practicality and morality.<sup>12</sup> Chinese car shows in particular have turned into mass events and into a new clearing house for new bodily expressions and discussions. The Beijing auto-show in 2012 became a signature show in this regard, with well-known female pop stars parading as car models.<sup>13</sup> The lavish display of bodies, clothes and cars made both the models and the car shows into targets of moral outcry and controversy. It was criticized for being ‘vulgar and inappropriate’ and the show was in colourful phrases condemned as a ‘breast show’ rather than a car show. The media attention even motivated the public authorities to issue ‘serious reprimand’. The *Beijing Capital Ethics Development Office* in an official note denounced such undesirable business philosophy, described as “vulgar promotion methods.”<sup>14</sup> A number of Chinese *netizens* joined in the criticism, describing the shows as “totally ruined by these models” and calling for a return to the exhibitions of the past. A more provocative statement contended that the exhibition should be divided into two parts, cars and models to be exhibited in separate halls.

The heated debates exhibited controversies around new forms of (im)morality and showcased various discourses about cars, gender and sexuality in post-socialist China. Yet it is interesting to note how the debate transformed bodies into a threat to the whole idea of car shows. All of these debates can be linked to what the American scholar Lisa Rofels calls *desiring China*, meaning that the new car culture can be regarded as a material and discursive location for the production of new desires and new ethics. Car shows and their gendered implications for instance reveal that there is no unilateral platform for morality and self in post-socialist China. In addition to

becoming an evident part of the lives of many urban Chinese, cars have become a site for creating new standards and ethics; car culture at several levels acts as site for negotiating moral boundaries and for establishing a new set of ethics related to bodily freedom and constraints.<sup>15</sup> While car and car use has become an accepted part of Chinese city life, new moral and ethical boundaries are surfacing.

#### SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

In this article, I have analysed the entanglements of cars, gender and nation in the making of a hegemonic car culture in China, and argued that car culture has been implicated in producing new forms and representations of gender that tend to destabilize existing discourses. These representations also pursue how the closed script of car culture and masculinity is being re-negotiated in the varied representations of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, car culture and individual mobility seem to present interesting and unexplored paradoxes in the current landscape of Chinese culture and media. During the process of analysis, I realized that Chinese car journalism and media representations of car culture seem to provide a relatively peaceful refugee in the Chinese media landscape compared with the chased tropes of liberal freedom ideal as democratic rights. Whereas car culture and mobility are imbued with strong western ideas of modernity, mobility and liberal overtones of individual rights and choice (Creswell 2006), they seem to have been included in Chinese culture in a rather unproblematic and seamless way.

While the lure of present day car culture is featured by *China Daily* as central in middle-class affordances, it is also concealing the structural asymmetries of class and gender which prevails along with growing inequalities in Chinese society. Yet this media based analysis has its obvious limita-

tions; it conveys China as a modern car nation, while vital perspectives are left behind, e.g. new and emerging social inequality in transportation including the many women and urban poor who are left to insufficient modes of mobility, such as crowded public transport or as dependent on male chauffeured cars or scooters. I am here relying on my own everyday observations, interviews and a mini survey, conducted during extended research stays in urbanities such as Beijing and Shanghai over the last decade. Due to the lack of data on gender specific practices in transport and mobility in the otherwise quite rich and detailed Chinese household surveys and other quantitative resources (see Lu and Wang in this volume).

It is hard to predict how the Chinese government will handle what seem a demanding act of advancing sustainability, equality and growth at the same time. A paradox that become paramount in a mobility culture as the Chinese marked by an immense car fascination and with gender, class and moral subjectivities on the move. It seems as if Chinese car culture at the very moment proliferate such challenges rather than providing solutions to the future of accountable, equal and sustainable mobility.

## NOTES

1. This article is part of an ongoing research project: *Remaking middle-class families China-Denmark*, which has a specific focus on the politics of the home and car as lenses for the new social or new regimes of living in the east and the west. The project is based on a bricolage of interviews and observations, written and visual sources, strategic documents collected among urban citizens, in the mass media, at car-show rooms, institutions and among experts. So far the project focus has been on China and in its initial phases the project has been supported by the Sino-Danish Research Centre in Beijing.
2. The burgeoning middle class in China can be seen as shaped by political economy, market forces,

socialist state rule and neoliberal technique and is a process of tensions, contradictions and fragmentations (Zhang 2010). In Chinese, middle class is often referred to in economic terms as a middle income stratum, *zhongjian shouru jiecheng*, or middle-income-group *zhongdeng shouru qunti*. Middle class is still a contested concept in Chinese contexts, where many still see themselves as working class; a more popular idea identifies middle class with the super-rich and with lavish consumption (Chungling 2009).

3. Performativity is a related concept suggesting that processes of interpellation are enacted according to gendered scripts and gendered economies of pleasures expressed in the concept of a heteronormative gender matrix, Butler 1990.

4. *China Daily* is the oldest Chinese newspaper in English. It was started in 1981 and reached a daily circulation of 500,000 copies in 2013. A third of the newspaper's editions reach a worldwide public overseas. In 1981 most of the editorial staff had a commitment to the CCP, but the staff today is more mixed, being mainly Chinese whose articles are edited and polished by westerners or Chinese expatriates. Other more recent Chinese newspapers with English versions such as *Shanghai Daily*, *Renmin Daily* and *Global Times* have more limited local or populist profiles.

5. *China Daily* 4.1. 2010, *China Daily* 28.2.

2011. *China Daily* 21.12, 2009: Benz wins naming rights to new arena. In the same year Mercedes showed record growth in China with a 224 % increase in sales. In 2012 German luxury brands accounted for 80% of luxury car sales in China: Benz, BMW, Audi and Volkswagen cf. Boomborg News, March 4th 2013.

6. E.g. compared with the masculine coding of sports sponsorships. The woman appeal in high culture has recently been substantiated in both Scandinavia and in the UK, see [http://kum.dk/uploads/tx\\_templavoila/endeelig\\_danskernes\\_kulturvaner\\_pdfa.pdf](http://kum.dk/uploads/tx_templavoila/endeelig_danskernes_kulturvaner_pdfa.pdf); [http://www.kulturradet.se/Documents/publikationer/2010/kulturvanor\\_sverige%201987-2009.pdf](http://www.kulturradet.se/Documents/publikationer/2010/kulturvanor_sverige%201987-2009.pdf); [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/Equality\\_and\\_diversity\\_within\\_the\\_arts\\_and\\_cultural\\_sector\\_in\\_England.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/Equality_and_diversity_within_the_arts_and_cultural_sector_in_England.pdf)

7. *China Daily* 15.11 2006

8. Most of Louie's points here are referred from: Hird 2010.

9. *China Daily* 16.9.2010. "Steering the market"

10. *China Daily* 23.12. 2010 "Mini branding for youthful market and young at heart."

11. *China Daily* 23.11.2006. Patrick Whiteley. "Watching the Wheels go round."

12. The significance of auto shows and of *China Daily's* role in promoting them is evidenced in the number of articles that related to car shows, which totaling 3566 in the period.
13. *China Daily* 5.4. 2010: From the Chinese Press, and 28.4. 2010: "Car Show Models Denounced for Revealing Attire."
14. *China Daily* 5.4. 2012: From the Press.
15. Another car-related area subject to moral and ethical debates is the *nouveau riche*, the *Tubaus*, who display luxury car-brands and irresponsible driving.

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Note on newspapers articles: The analysis is based on a selection of approximately 50 articles mainly from the online archive of *China Daily*, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/>, supplemented by relevant articles from *People's Daily* online <http://en.people.cn/> and *Global Times* <http://www.globaltimes.cn/index.html>. In order to reduce the length of reference list, only articles directly referred to in the text are included in the notes.