

## RENEWING ETHNOGRAPHIC THEORY

### Function and Change in China: Reviving Mauss' "total social fact" to gain knowledge of changing markets

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*This paper attempts to revive Mauss's concept of the total social fact as a method to establish understanding of new markets. Our case study of alcohol in China illuminates the spirit baijiu's connections to the total social facts of guanxi (social capital) and hierarchy. We outline the distinction between symbols that communicate meaning and total social facts that communicate function. We propose a methodology based on using total social facts as a heuristic device, removed from some of the problematic assumptions of classical functionalism.*

### CASE STUDY: BAIJIU IN CHINA

#### Baijiu stories from the field

Two Americans and an Englishman had come to China to study female drinking practices—it sounded like a setup to a bad joke. We had been asked by our client, a spirits company, to identify future “opportunities” for alcohol-based products in the Chinese market. Although our primary focus was wine and spirits, a quick glance up and down supermarket aisles told us that alcohol has found its way into a surprisingly diverse set of categories: carbonated tea-flavored beer, wine-based facial cleansers and hair-masks, and vigor-enhancing “muscle wines,” which indicated the breadth of possible opportunities for new offerings in this industry.

We decided to scope our study broadly; in addition to studying consumption of Western spirits and wines in relation to women's lifestyles and aspirations, we also explored their perspectives on traditional Chinese spirits, such as *baijiu* and *huangjiu*, which turned out to be a fortuitous decision.

Gu, a businesswoman in her late 30s, filled the trunk of her car with name brand *baijiu*: Wuliangye and Maotai. The rampant counterfeiting of high-end *baijius* is such a problem that she could not find a dependable source. For her, worse than being poisoned by “fake” dumplings would be to buy fake *baijiu* for a client: a loss of face from which she could not recover. She stocked the “heavy fragrance” type *baijiu* for clients who had become friends, in which case the sweet aroma mirrored their friendship. Maotai, with its mythic connection to Mao's victorious Long March and the later warming of Sino-American diplomacy, was reserved for government clients who were straightforward in their symbolism and believed that the power of Mao and Nixon could be symbolically channeled through replicating the consumption of Maotai. For Gu, keeping a stock of *baijiu* in her car meant being ready for an impromptu invitation for a business meal, which in the Chinese world of *guanxi* (social capital) and connections could mean the difference between new business or none. In her car she also kept Canadian icewine, a sweet taste she acquired when visiting her Chinese-Canadian boyfriend abroad. This she reserved for romantic meals and double dates with friends, and demarcated a professional/personal boundary. Gu's behaviors and beliefs about *baijiu*—where to buy it, store it, when to drink which kind, with whom, and finally when not to drink it—exposed deeply held beliefs

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ranging from anxiety over the safety of food supply, to the corrupt *guanxi* business culture, and the fine-tuning of relationships spanning the spectrum from the professional to the romantic.

Younger, foreign educated, or female Chinese professionals and entrepreneurs, such as our respondents, are rebelling against the dominance of *baijiu* and what it represents. In particular, they are beginning to reject the relentless *ganbei* bottoms-up toasting culture that's a necessity for career advancement. Our respondent Li, a 28 year old newlywed from Shanghai, claimed that she barely drank. She avoided business dinners because of the *baijiu* toasting rituals that forced all participants into drunkenness, which isn't seemly for a married woman. Yet when asked about their plans for children, her mood changed. Their parents were pressuring them, though they still wanted to have fun and pursue their interests. Her interests were karaoke and clubbing. Of course she drank at these events: sometimes three large bottles of whiskey among six people. But that's only Western whiskey with green tea, nothing like *baijiu*. Li denied that she could even get drunk off of whiskey; it was *baijiu* that's the rough stuff, that makes her drunk, that she is forced to drink at work banquets by her male bosses, and forced by her in-laws to provide at their wedding, at great cost. For Li, *baijiu* was so mythical that it dominated her entire conception of drinking, and it represented everything oppressive about her life: her parents and in-laws, her hierarchical work situation, and even the patriarchal expectations that she bear a (male) child as soon as possible.

Another respondent, Yu, equally successful in her career, recalled how she, as the oldest grandchild, was responsible for starting the toasts to her grandfather and patriarch at family banquets. One day when she was twelve, her uncle urged her to ask to toast with *baijiu* instead of water. None of the women in her family, or village, ever drank. Young Yu had coughed, but no one laughed or questioned her *baijiu* drinking. She remembered the moment as a rite of passage. For Yu, it was her first step of defining a new generation of women, and she did so by co-opting a traditionally male liquor. Now, in her mid-30s, she drank *sanbianjiu*, a traditional male vigor tonic made by infusing rice whiskey with three animal penises, when out with friends at the Beijing equivalent of a dive bar. Showing her comfort and mastery with "male" spirits, instead of rejecting them, was Yu's way of creating her own female identity.

## BAIJIU AS A PRISM FOR CHINA'S TOTAL SOCIAL FACTS

In these cases, the practices and beliefs around upholding traditional *baijiu* consumption and also purposefully rejecting it illuminate many facets of Chinese society. We argue that *baijiu* was able to efficiently illuminate for us so many aspects of Chinese society because it acts like a prism that reflects and refracts two of the key 'total social facts' that shape contemporary China: social hierarchy and *guanxi*. Hierarchy is a defining characteristic of Chinese society, and the respect and propriety generated around it is deeply rooted in everything from Confucianism to CCP organization and family dinner seating arrangements. Though our study was explicitly about Western spirits in 'modern' Chinese women's lives, *baijiu* repeatedly resurfaced in our discussions, and was a gateway to discussions about the traditional, patriarchal culture that our respondents defined themselves by—and against. Helen Siu's *Agents and Victims in South China* examined how social hierarchies in rural southern China have evolved over the last century, and how seemingly powerless peasants navigate these complex hierarchies (Siu 1989). Our respondents were similarly navigating and rebelling against complex, historically-determined social hierarchies, and we saw how their *baijiu* practices reflected these social processes.

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*Guanxi* is the interplay between influence, relationships, obligation and “face” that defines many social and professional relationships in Chinese society. Mayfair Yang has shown that *guanxi* plays an important role in determining urban-rural relationships, gender dynamics, urban occupational strata, corporate and administrative uses, and obtaining the necessities of everyday urban life, including scarce goods, promotions, geographic mobility, health care, housing, political advancement, transportation, better education, and recreational activities, all of which Yang claims is not nearly an exhaustive list (Yang 1994). Yunxiang Yan also examines gift-giving and *guanxi* in a Chinese village, further elaborating the related concepts of *renqing* (norms of interpersonal behavior), *mianzi* (“face”), and *bao* (reciprocity), within a historical context of the dramatic transformations of the past four decades (Yan 1996). Building on Yang and Yan’s conceptions of *guanxi* as well as our own research, we assert that *guanxi* influences these various aspects of society because it is a total social fact.

The “total social fact” is a concept introduced by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century French sociologist Marcel Mauss in his seminal study of gift exchange. Mauss’s mentor Émile Durkheim’s defined the concept of the “social fact:”

...there are ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual. Not only are these types of behaviour and thinking external to the individual, but they are endowed with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which, whether he wishes it or not, they impose themselves upon him. Undoubtedly when I conform to them of my own free will, this coercion is not felt or felt hardly at all, since it is unnecessary (Durkheim 1982).

Influenced by the concept of the social fact, Mauss’s own work examined seemingly “decadent” potlatches among Pacific Northwest Indians, shell necklace gift networks in Oceania, and ancient Roman slave gifting. Across all of these phenomena, Mauss identified a pattern he called the total social fact, which involves:

“the totality of society and its institutions ... all these phenomena are at the same time juridical, economic, religious, and even aesthetic and morphological, etc. ... thus these are more than themes, more than the bare bones of institutions, more than complex institutions, even more than systems of institutions divided, for example, law, economy, etc. They are whole entities, entire social systems ... it is by considering the whole entity that we could perceive what is essential” (Mauss 2009).

These are system-level phenomena (and as such can help us better understand whole societies), but they also manifest themselves at the individual-level. As Durkheim famously asserted, “man is double,” at once “an individual being that has its basis in the body” and “a social being that represents within us the highest reality” (Durkheim 1995). From this conception of “man,” we see how our respondents were compelled and coerced by the total social facts of *guanxi* and social hierarchy, by forces they could barely perceive. The behavior and practices of these individuals around *bajiu* was a response to both individual and social forces: individual drivers and collective norms.

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### TOTAL SOCIAL FACTS AND SYMBOLS

It is important here to make a distinction between total social facts and symbols, as they have different theoretical and methodological implications. Theoretically, although both symbols and total social facts communicate larger cultural values and beliefs, symbols communicate meaning, while total social facts communicate (and enact) function. For example, the great American highway system is rich with symbolic meaning (representing American progress, freedom, the conquering of nature, and so on). Or to take a classic example, Clifford Geertz's text on the Balinese cockfight (Geertz 1977) analyzed the symbolic meaning of the cockfight within Balinese culture, and influenced generations of anthropologists and ethnographers with a methodology based on "thick description" as a way to uncover cultural meaning. The American highway system and the Balinese cockfight are powerful symbols that communicate meaning by representing larger cultural values and beliefs.

In contrast, total social facts do not symbolize, but actually structure and govern relationships and interactions across a society. Some symbols, such as *bajiu*, can serve as powerful lenses into the total social facts that influence a society's social relationships. *Bajiu* is in itself rich with symbolic meaning, as demonstrated by our vignette at the beginning of the paper where Li rejects *bajiu*, thereby symbolically rejecting all of the patriarchy and other social constraints that it represents. In this case, the total social facts of hierarchy and *guanxi* were precisely what invested *bajiu* with such strong symbolic meaning. Studying things that have both symbolic meaning and are closely linked to a total social fact can enable applied ethnographers to understand both the ways that society functions, but also the cultural meanings of the object as a symbol. For example, studying *bajiu* as a lens into *guanxi* helps us understand how *guanxi* works and permeates all levels of Chinese society, while studying *bajiu* as a symbol helps us understand its symbolic meaning and value.

### CRITIQUES OF FUNCTIONALISM

Durkheim defined sociology as the study of social facts, and Mauss' concept of the total social fact built on this conception, locating total social facts squarely within functionalist theory. Later scholars came to critique functionalism's implicit assumption that societies evolve towards progress and equilibrium. This teleological view was considered incompatible with the change and conflict obvious in most societies. Functionalism as an approach to understanding societies became largely irrelevant, and critical theory, structuralism and post structuralism gained favor. Even as functionalist thinking reappeared more recently in sociology, as through Jeffrey Alexander (1998), and interdisciplinarily, as in Systems Theory, total social facts have been left behind.

We don't assume that we can cleanly lift the concept of the total social fact away from its theoretical context within functionalism. The concept of the total social fact and its fundamental ability to encompass the entire social system is premised on the assumption that a society can be considered a system. The notion of a system with parts that have specific functions is based on the assumption that such a system should ideally be in static, in equilibrium and well-functioning. These assumptions leave the theory open to critique by just about any type of post-modern theory, conflict theory, practice theory, and so on.

We do not assume that the societies we study are static, well-functioning, or in equilibrium. Instead, we propose to use the total social fact as a methodological equivalent of a contrast medium, such as iodine or barium, that makes visible the branches and linkages of the system. It allows the

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researcher to take an X-ray of the system, but does not assume that the system is functioning. This is a more cautious, diagnostic use of the total social fact—a heuristic device that jettisons much of the theoretical baggage of functionalism.

To continue using the diagnostic metaphor, studying total social facts reveals which branches of the system (which parts of society) are functioning well, and which are not. As design and strategy researchers, the blockages and dysfunctions represent problems, and therefore areas where there is an opportunity for a solution. Likewise, areas of vigor and health in the society we study can serve as inspiration and best practices to be used to guide our solutions.

If we return to the ethnographic vignettes, and how these women each responded differently to the coercion of *guanxi*, we see the struggle between Durkheim's two halves of "man," the social and the individual. The women's different responses to *guanxi* show the interplay of individual agency and social norms or realities within the women themselves. By studying the total social facts of *guanxi* and hierarchy through *bajjin*, we were not limited to a static view of society. In fact, seeing women rejecting, embracing, and co-opting *bajjin* and *guanxi* helps us better understand the changes and conflicts in contemporary Chinese society. Yang more recently revisited the topic of *guanxi* to argue that "the final word on *guanxi* can never be concluded, caught as this social phenomenon is, in the fluctuating stream of history, and resilient as it is in adapting to new institutional arrangements with the introduction of capitalism," critiquing approaches that "treat *guanxi* as a fixed essentialized phenomenon which can only wither away with the onslaught of new legal and commercial regimes" (Yang 2002).

Similarly, in our research, observing respondents' behaviors and attitudes gives us insight into the process of social change in China. The functionalist study of total social facts is not limited by a static equilibristic perspective, but in fact illuminates the interplay between the individual and the social, as well as a view into the mechanisms for social transformation.

## METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In our consulting practice, the objects of our studies are often brands, products, or services. There are an infinite number of objects and phenomena that form the objects of our research studies. Very few of the topics we are asked to study are total social facts in themselves: these brands, products, services do not permeate the many facets of social reality, and therefore cannot be used to shed light on society as a whole. Some examples of topics of research projects that are *not* total social facts are: ostomy bags, manicure embellishments, and water pumps. A symbolic approach, in the tradition of Geertz, that attempts to uncover the symbolic meanings these objects communicate may prove to have limited effectiveness. There is a limit to how many times we can ask our respondents "but what do water pumps really *mean* to you" and how many word associations we can ask them to draw. However, we propose another way to study these mundane objects. Instead of, or in addition to, exploring the meaning they communicate, let us investigate the total social facts to which they are connected, and these objects' role in the *functions* of those total social facts.

We now revisit Durkheim's definition of the external social facts behind cultural norms: they exert "compelling and coercive power" that is "not felt or felt hardly at all." These "not felt or felt hardly at all" social norms that coerce human behavior may sound familiar to ethnographic practitioners. For us at least, these are often at the heart of our richest insights and research findings. The unstated, barely perceived yet coercive norms often shape behavior in ways that fall outside of rational predictions.

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Large corporations accustomed to predicting consumer behavior through rationally premised quantitative analysis can often overlook seemingly “irrational” behavior driven by these “not felt” coercive norms. We propose a methodology that analyzes function in addition to meaning, through the heuristic device of the total social fact. Such a methodology will help us uncover these “not felt” norms that compel and coerce behavior.

Alexander Gofman identifies in Mauss two parallel meanings of the idea of total social facts, each of which has methodological implications for applied ethnographic research. The first of Gofman’s interpretations of the total social fact as “*epistemological and methodological* above all else,” which is “to study *all social facts as total*.” The second interpretation is that total social facts are “*specific ontological entities* which are *sui generis* (to speak in a Durkheimian vein) and distinct from other social facts” (Gofman 1998). Both meanings of total facts are useful for our discussion of methodology, and we argue for using the first as a means for connecting with the second.

### 1. “Study all social facts as total”

The first meaning calls for the sociologist or ethnographer to “to study *all social facts as total*.” Taking a ‘total’ approach means looking at phenomena in relation to other parts of the system, and seeing how they work together as a system.

In practice, this means framing research and business questions not as sharp inquiries that tunnel down into a specific problem, but looking at context, and expanding even what we consider context. A contextual or ecological approach is widely accepted, but by looking at the social fact or research phenomenon and how it permeates every aspect of the social system, or as many institutions as is credible, we can understand how these disparate parts form a system and function as a system.

Even more concretely, this means expanding the subject of research (whether it is a product, service, brand, segment...) until it can be linked with a total social fact. For instance, this would mean expanding the research topic from insulin injection devices to diabetes, or illness, and looking at the intersections of economics, class, religion, culture, health, and education. However, while treating every object of study as if it were a total social fact is valuable methodologically, total social facts remain distinct ontological objects.

### 2. Total social facts as *sui generis*

The second posits the total social facts as *sui generis*, because of their unique position as “phenomena which penetrate every aspect of the concrete social system; they concentrate it and constitute its focus, they are the constitutive elements, the generators and motors of the system” (Gofman 1998:67).

This interpretation has two implications for methodology:

**Parallel lines of inquiry** – We propose researching a total social fact in parallel to the main industry focus a study. For example, if hired by an air conditioning manufacturer hoping to break into the Chinese market, we would propose to study both air conditioning, as would be expected, but also in parallel, study *hajiū*. Client companies might find this approach irrational, but we anticipate that

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studying *baijiu* would be one of the most effective and fruitful approaches to uncovering how people think about and experience the home, social mobility, health, and progress that would help guide the client's design directions and strategy.

Different markets would require different phenomena be studied to reflect that society's total social facts, in addition to the client's actual target research area. Identifying those phenomena could be done through a combination of short expert interviews and review of cultural literature. For example, for a client entering the Indian market, weddings would probably be able to give a comprehensive reflection of that society's total social facts; or soccer in Spain, pubs in the UK, barbeques in the U.S., and so on.

**Continuous Inquiry** – Once fruitful total social facts are identified through past research, we propose maintaining a running line of inquiry into the total social fact, over time. Adding to, tracking, and observing the evolution of the areas uncovered by *baijiu* would enable us to have a more nuanced, longitudinal vision of China and the changes that are occurring than those covered publicly in newspapers and industry reports. Sustaining these lines of inquiry, more nuanced than social or economic indicators, might be an efficient but also intellectually compelling way of studying changing societies.

## THE STUDY OF TOTAL SOCIAL FACTS IN PRACTICE

The global business landscape is littered with the failed attempts of foreign companies to enter unfamiliar markets. In China, American giants like Amazon and Google have both, to say the least, found it difficult to capitalize on the opportunities of the growing market. In this section we use the US consumer electronics retailer Best Buy as a case study in how studying total social facts can potentially help companies avoid such struggles.

In 2006, Best Buy tried to replicate their “big box” retail strategy and a high-end shopping experience targeting 1<sup>st</sup> tier cities and high-income consumers. David Deno, Best Buy's Asia Chief until earlier this year reflected on Best Buy's initial strategy in China by saying “we were stupid and we were arrogant” (Biz Journals 2012). What Best Buy didn't understand was how and why lower income consumers, earning an average of \$800/month in Tier 2 and 3 cities could be a powerful value generator.

Zhao, a respondent in Chengdu, was a self-styled ‘entrepreneur’ who rode a beat-up scooter to business meetings and spent his nights at cheap disco clubs that played bad Korean pop. As a low income, young, migrant, he wasn't exactly the type of consumer that Best Buy thought they should target. However, when we started discussing *baijiu* with him, we discovered that he spent exorbitant amounts of money (upwards of \$300) on bottles of the famous Maotai brand of *baijiu* when treating potential business clients and officials involved in his industry. Spending so much money on this spirit seemed entirely natural, expected even, because it demonstrated his facility with handling the complexities of China's social hierarchies. It also highlighted an economic ability to afford the high quality stuff, which was important for signaling to potential partners that he was somebody worth doing business with.

Zhao is just one, but a particularly clear example that Tier 2 and 3 residents are ambitious consumers willing to outspend their Tier 1 counterparts in their efforts to get ahead. A conversation

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with Zhao about *baijiu* illuminated the value of products that help people maneuver their way up social hierarchies.

Best Buy closed its Chinese stores last year and is now focused on building its new Five Star brand in China. After over seven years of trial and error, they have stumbled upon a formula that appears to be winning: focusing on lower tier cities, and the emerging middle classes who buy home appliances as shining symbols of success and progression. By understanding how Chinese consumers perceive social hierarchies in these lower tier cities, an \$800/month consumer base begins to make much more sense.

Even though it would have been a difficult conceptual leap for a consumer electronics retailer to make, we argue that studying *baijiu* would have helped them avoid a decade's worth of costly experimentation and the reputation of a global brand.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that the theoretical construct of the total social fact can be used methodologically to enable researchers to efficiently go deep and go broad in unfamiliar markets. Moreover, using total social facts as a methodological tool doesn't necessarily presume that the society of study is well functioning or static. On the contrary, it can actually highlight potential business opportunities (in the 'dysfunctional' areas of the system), as well as sources of business inspiration and transferrable value (from well-functioning areas of the system). More generally, understanding a society's total social facts can provide both the applied anthropologist and their client with a deep cultural understanding that can inform all of their future projects in that market. For example, the insights into Chinese society gained from studying *baijiu* were rich enough to be applicable beyond the scope of that particular project. We have since used the understanding of social hierarchy and *guanxi* developed during that project to studies ranging from healthcare to technology.

In practice, we suggest at the very least finding ways to expand the client's research frame to increase the likelihood of linking up with the society's total social facts. Another approach is to pursue a parallel line of inquiry to the client's target research topic, studying a phenomenon such as *baijiu* in China that, like a prism, reflects and refracts that society's total social facts. Finally, by tracking over time these phenomena and how they reflect the underlying total social facts, researchers can gain insights into crucial changes in the society, as well as emergent areas of opportunity.

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