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BE MY VALENTINE:  
BOUQUETS,  
MARRIAGE, AND  
MIDDLE CLASS  
HEGEMONY IN  
URBAN CHINA

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# **Be My Valentine: bouquets, marriage, and middle class hegemony in urban China<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on data collected in Nanjing (People's Republic of China) between 2007 and 2012, this paper analyses the popularisation of Valentine's Day celebrations in urban China. In present-day China, practices like offering and receiving Valentine's flowers participate in the production of a model of life based on class distinction and social difference. In accordance with the party/state's call for the building of a 'harmonious society', this model of life naturalises social difference and casts inequality as the consequence of different levels of human quality. As Valentine's Day celebrations become increasingly popular across different social groups, the 'middle class way of life' becomes a hegemonic model, together with specific repertoires for the articulation of feelings and visions of family life. This emerging common sense helps concealing the exploitative reality of the 'industry of romance', while at the same time providing a justification for the status quo and a basis for social consent.

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## Introduction

During the past 15 years, the celebration of Valentine's Day has become increasingly visible in urban mainland China. This paper draws on ethnographic data collected in Nanjing between 2007 and 2012 in order to show that while the exchange of flowers on February 14th has become a popular practice across the social spectrum, it has also become increasingly associated with ideas of distinction and social difference. Social difference is pivotal to the production and the marketing of Valentine bouquets, which in turn happens in exploitative working conditions.

While informants readily recognise Valentine's Day as a 'foreign' festivity, they also articulate their wish to take part in it in terms of 'giving face' to their spouse (or prospective bride) according to customs that they hold as 'essentially Chinese'. The combination of 'Chinese' values and of conspicuous consumption habits commonly associated with 'foreign' countries implicitly sustains the state's effort to produce a 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*), where conjugal and familial stability constitute the moral flipside of material prosperity. In order to deconstruct this linkage, it is necessary to look at the complex process of meaning production standing behind the everyday use of terms like 'foreign' or 'romantic'. Far from considering it too 'foreign', middle-class informants identify this gift giving practice as a way to transcend what they perceive to be the limits of 'Chinese tradition' and of Maoist egalitarianism; this process evokes the domestication of an imagined cosmopolitan middle-class ideal by way of renegotiating the social actor's and the nation's position in the world (Rofel 2007; Zhan 2009).

Following Graeber (2001), I argue that during the moment of gift exchange the value generated during the production and sale of Valentine's flowers is transferred to the realm of 'values': ideas that are held to be good and just by the authorities and by society at large. Giving and receiving Valentine's flowers has become one of the many ways in which today's urban couples can enact and embody, to different extents, the hegemonic ideal of life: a prosperous family based on heterosexual marriage and conjugal stability.

While some informants can afford to buy the expensive bouquets that embody this imagined ideal of cosmopolitan distinction, this paper investigates how less affluent informants relate to this gift giving practice. Most people cannot afford to embody this middle-class ideal, 'harmonious' family life based on differences of class and gender, and yet they attempt to participate in different ways in such celebrations as Valentine's Day. Other informants, instead, discretely suggest that this kind of festivity is 'too fancy' for them, pointing at other ways to express attachment to their loved ones.

### Valentine's Day in Nanjing: 2000–2007

My first contact with Valentine's Day in urban China goes back to the year 2000. At the time, I was a language student at Nanjing University. One sunny February day I decided to make the most of the unusually good weather and walk in town. As I was approaching my destination I saw a man who, sitting on an empty space at the side of the main road, was plucking wilted petals off a huge bunch of red roses. I realised that he was trying to make the roses look all alike and equally fresh. It was February 14th and he was going to try to make some money by selling the flowers to passers-by.

At the time, I did not investigate the issue any further, but once I came back as an anthropologist in 2007 I quickly realised that love and courtship had turned into a big and very visible business.

As Valentine's Day approached, many shops turned pink or red with new decorations. I asked my informants, who were manual labourers of rural origin, whether they celebrated Valentine's Day, and I received mixed replies. Girls and young women seemed keen on receiving flowers, and young men felt they had the obligation to buy at least one red rose for their girlfriend in order to make her happy; working family mothers, however, received my questions with sarcastic jeers and mentioned that they did not care about red roses or that they were 'not very romantic'. One of my informants, who had been married for over ten years to her husband and worked as a baker, pointed out that 'Instead of buying flowers he could cook dinner, for once. That would certainly make me happy!' All her colleagues, men and women, laughed approvingly. One of the male bakers confirmed that his own wife would have certainly shared this opinion.

One may think that attitudes towards Valentine's mainly changed according to age, marital status, and length of the relationship. However, I soon realised that not only young people attached importance to Valentine's Day. Liu Ying,<sup>3</sup> for example, a thirty-year-old friend, was married to a company manager and had a good position in the administration of a large international firm. She told me that on the morning of Valentine's Day her female colleagues held a competition about who would be the first one to receive flowers from her husband. In the early morning of February 14th, bouquets of various shapes and colours would start flowing into the offices of her company, delivered by service personnel hired by flower retailers. "But why receive these flowers at work?" I asked, "their husbands may want to give them the flowers privately, in person." Liu Ying shook her head, signalling that I was missing the point: "Receiving flowers at work means that your husband is giving you 'face' [*mianzi*] in front of everyone else.<sup>4</sup> The first one to receive the flowers feels proud; for the rest, their husbands will have an unlucky day [*daomei*]."

My friend regarded this kind of behaviour as silly and unfair on the husband, who had the pressure to perform in what looked like a ritual competition. I cannot be sure whether at that time this kind of competition was widespread in Nanjing, however the habit of receiving Valentine's flowers at the office was certainly common.

### **Valentine's Day in Nanjing, 2011**

I came back to Nanjing in late 2011 to collect ethnographic data on courtship, match-making, and marriage as an avenue of class mobility. As the winter arrived and grew colder, people started preparing for the main ritual event of the year, the Spring Festival, which that year (2012) would take place in late January. In China, Spring Festival is largely considered to be the most important family holiday; as an anthropologist working on marriage, I was looking forward to spending some special moments with different informants in order to collect data on how people celebrated this important family occasion. However, my closest informants suggested that, besides taking part to Spring Festival celebrations, I should think about doing something special on Valentine's Day, because this was a great day to collect data on courtship and marriage. At first I did not pay too much attention to their suggestion, as I assumed Valentine's Day celebrations would not be very

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<sup>3</sup> All names in this paper are anonymised to protect the identity of informants. References to particular areas of the city are kept unspecific.

<sup>4</sup> I cannot recall how many conversations I had on the importance, which 'face' supposedly holds among Chinese people, something that – according to many of my informants – 'Westerners' cannot easily understand because 'there is no such concern in the West'.

prominent. It was a long-term friend of mine, born and raised in Nanjing, who insisted that I should take this celebration seriously.

Following my friend's advice, a few days before February 14th I contacted Mr Tang, the owner of the largest and oldest flower shop in Nanjing, in order to ask him for an interview. Mr Tang, a local man in his late 40s, at first looked a bit suspicious and said that during the following days he would be too busy to see me, because he and his staff had to prepare flowers for the massive deliveries of February 14th. He told me that during the three days before Valentine's Day he would hire extra staff and work around the clock to start deliveries in the early morning, when people arrived at their offices. Hearing that the whole shop was going to be busy with exceptional activities, I insisted that he let me see the preparations. The owner accepted without any enthusiasm, probably because he was still a bit diffident about me, or because he thought I would be in his way at such a busy time. He also said that he would be able to give me a formal interview after Valentine's Day, when the business was quieter again.

On the afternoon on February 13th I went to the shop with my friend, who had been a customer of the shop for some time. The owner recognised my friend straight away and relaxed about our presence. As he had anticipated to me, the shop was full of people who, wrapped up in their aprons, were busy putting together bunches of roses and flowers of any colour, shape, and dimension. The owner kept running around to supervise and help his staff, which in turn worked silently, mechanically, as if they were running against time. The whole place was in a silent frenzy of cutting, plucking, wrapping, spraying, and decorating. My friend and I could not talk to anyone – indeed the workers would not even talk to each other. As I would learn later, only very few of them were working there on a long-term basis; around ten young women had been hired to help on those three busy days. As the staff and the owner were too busy to even check on us, we moved around in order to look at the bunches that had already been prepared (see annex, picture 1, 2, 3).<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the huge variations in size, colour, and decoration, many bouquets had been dyed with rather artificial-looking colours, or were made of flowers that were (wholly or partly) artificial; some flowers were coated with thick dark (generally dark red or blue) colour and then sprayed with sparkling silver (see annex, picture 4). As I would learn later on from the owner, these flowers were the most expensive and were imported from Japan, hence they added a touch of exoticism to a Valentine's present. In other cases, the flowers themselves could be replaced with chocolates attached to the top of artificial stalks (generally Ferrero Rocher served to this purpose, due to their size, the golden colour of their packaging, and the renowned quality of the chocolate) (picture 5); flowers could also be replaced by small bear- or rabbit-shaped puppets, which held in their hands the words 'I love you' or 'marry me' (see annex, picture 4, 5). I was intrigued by these 'marry me' puppets, which suggested an explicit link between the practice of giving Valentine's bouquets and marriage itself.

The day after, morning of Valentine's Day, I wanted to see more about the trade of flowers in town, so I tried to find places where red roses were sold. The weather was wet and dreadful: the temperature was just above freezing, the sky was grey and promised drizzling rain for the rest of the day. For this reason, all those who had planned to sell flowers on the street – mainly unemployed people or students hoping to make some extra cash – had a hard time finding a decent spot to sell. The only ones I saw would stand at the exit of the underground stations, where they could still protect themselves and the flowers from the rain. Underground stations were good places

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<sup>5</sup> All pictures have been taken by the author.

to catch those absent-minded men who had forgotten about buying flowers beforehand. However, as I was told that I could find some flower traders in the south of the city, so I took the underground and travelled for some thirty minutes in that direction. The friend who had come with me to Mr Tang's shop the day before agreed to come along in this expedition as well.

When, around midday, we arrived at the station that had been indicated to us, I found that in this area there was a number of shops and hothouses, where plants were being grown and sold. For these shops, however, Valentine's was a day like any other, and that particular day was possibly a low-profile one due to the bad weather. That said, I found that a couple of businesses were also trading in cut flowers and were active for Valentine's. One of them still had a few buckets of pink roses waiting to be packed and delivered but, as the owner told us, most of the work had already been done during the previous days, in order to prepare bouquets that would then be delivered in the early morning. The flowers in the buckets were waiting to be packed one by one and taken away to be sold on the street. The workshop however looked quiet and almost empty, the owners were eager to see the end of what had been a very busy few days.

The second shop that traded in cut flowers was a rather different one. The front room looked very busy, and some customers were actually hanging out trying to make a bargain. We were welcomed by a petite woman in her late forties, who smiled sweetly and invited us in. We eventually followed her through the front room into the back room, where the atmosphere was much quieter. This was a 'hybrid' room, where some domestic elements (for example a bunk bed) would mix with some elements of the workshop. While she talked to us, she kept packing red roses one by one and spraying each of them with sparkling silver. She told us that it was her younger brother's business, and that she was there to lend a hand during the busy period of Valentine's Day: "The whole family has been helping because this is the best time of the year to make money." I told her that I had seen other traders losing sleep before Valentine's Day. "It goes without saying!" she said "My younger brother has hardly slept for three days!" The woman was full of praise for her brother who, she said, worked harder than anybody but sold flowers at the lowest prices. This, according to her, was the secret of his flourishing business. While she was speaking to us, she kept packing flowers one by one. Her younger brother, a neat-looking man in his mid-thirties, kept to the front room and did not seem interested in talking to the weird researchers. I asked whether buying and giving flowers for Valentine's had always been as popular as nowadays. She shook her head and replied: "It's with the Reform<sup>6</sup> that we've become romantic."

My friend and I soon felt like leaving, as the owner of the shop looked a bit suspicious about us and we did not want him to scold his sister for talking to us. We went out again to the grey February sky and icy rain, and we decided to go back to the city centre in order to see whether anything was happening in the trading heart of Nanjing, Xinjiekou. When we arrived there, we found that the main commercial square, a large space surrounded by shopping malls, was not very crowded – the weather was truly ghastly that day and it was no surprise that people would not enjoy a stroll in the open air. Many shops, however, were especially decorated for Valentine's Day; bridal photo studios and jewellery shops had put in place special offers for people interested in booking a photo shoot or buying an engagement ring on that day. The businesses that were directly involved in the wedding industry were ostensibly trying to capitalise on this day, confirming the presence of a link between Valentine's Day celebrations and marriage.

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'Reform' refers to the Open Door Reform that was initiated by Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s.

That same evening I went out for dinner with some friends in what could be considered an ‘upper class’ restaurant. Normally, this restaurant was rather quiet during weekdays but that day (Tuesday) we found it to be completely packed. The customers were mostly couples in their 20s and 30s. After dinner we decided to go to one of the most popular entertainment areas of the city in order to see what was going on there.<sup>7</sup> As we arrived, we found that the whole area was unusually crowded for a Tuesday. The rain had finally stopped and many young men and women were drifting from one bar to the other showing off their fancy clothes, as if they were on a Saturday night out. Most bars and clubs had some kind of Valentine’s Day decoration, some of which particularly visible (see annex, picture 8, 9).

### ‘Foreign’ Festivities, ‘Chinese’ Weddings

That evening I went back home thinking that my friend had been right in pushing me to take a closer look at Valentine’s Day celebrations. In particular, the words of the woman florist had stuck in my head: “It’s with the Reform that we’ve become romantic”. Although I was not lucky enough to discuss this further with her, I could hear more about this association from Mr Tang. When I went to visit him at his shop at the end of the same week, Mr Tang was much more cheerful than he had been on Tuesday and certainly did not shy away from talking. He showed me the upper floor of his flower shop, which was in fact a showroom for his wedding service company, and finally we sat in his office where we talked for a couple of hours. We started talking about Valentine’s Day, and the processes that brought Chinese people to celebrate it:

“Before the Open Door Reform we did not celebrate foreign festivities [*yangjie*].<sup>8</sup> Now we celebrate everything. As this is good for trade, the state [*guojia*, country/state] cannot be against it. Young people embrace these festivities particularly easily. Not the elderly though (...) they have not been raised in this kind of environment (...) for example, they do not really eat at places like McDonald’s. But the country’s economy advances and for this reason we celebrate more and more festivities.”

He went on to explain to me how he opened his shop in 1989:

“At the time, people did not really buy many flowers. Back then, most people’s salary would range from 30 to 40 Yuan a month! I studied gardening [*yuanyi*] until 1985 and then worked in a factory for four years. I thought that with trade, a consumer culture would emerge, and it worked. You know, this was the first real flower shop to open in Nanjing. As the economy developed, salaries also increased and people started spending on flowers.”

I conceded that spending on flowers might be linked to the development of a market economy, and that in Europe, too, people bought flowers for Valentine’s Day. But how could he explain the price of the bouquets that I saw in his shop the day before Valentine’s Day? Many of them were around 1,000 Yuan, basically as much as the monthly rent for a small apartment. Mr Tang looked at me as if I was missing the point:

<sup>7</sup> As with many other cities in China, the local government picked one particular area to develop entertainment businesses: restaurants, clubs, karaoke bars, and the like.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Foreign’ does not really convey the connotation of the term *yang*, which refers to the ocean and to people that come from the ocean, i.e. the invaders. *Yang* is generally used to talk about European, American and Japanese colonial imperialism, and it is also a component of the appellative historically attached to foreign imperialists: *yanggui*, or ‘foreign devils’.

“The bouquets are large and expensive because it’s all a question of face [*mianzi*]. People with a high income want to show that they have style [*pinwei*] and they are high quality people [*suzhi gao*]. They are people who want to enjoy [*xianshou*], and for this [enjoying] money is never enough. A person’s status is very important. And this is why you have many prices for the roses. Take the roses you find on the street on Valentine’s Day. When you buy them, their price ranges from 10 to 30 Yuan each. But the low quality ones really cost between 3 and 5 Yuan, while the expensive ones are almost impossible to find on the street. These roses have to go together with a special packaging, and for a business it is important to use that to get a name, to create a trademark.”

Mr Tang went on explaining how he had come to expand his business. According to him, Valentine’s Day was one of the preferred, if not the preferred, day for making marriage proposals – the other ones were Spring Festival and, in third place, Christmas (another *yangjie*). Mr Tang told me that as the flower business picked up, he realised there was more potential in the wedding industry. His customers would order flowers for their weddings and eventually ask him to organise the banquet, or to introduce a host for the ceremony. He therefore expanded his company and opened a wedding studio. According to Mr Tang, most of the customers that contacted his company to plan a wedding could spend between 10,000 and 20,000 Yuan for their wedding (between 1,220–2,450 euros).<sup>9</sup> His company could organise everything, from the photo shoot before the wedding to car rentals (the preferred cars were generally black Audis), from the music to the flower displays, from the wedding gowns (generally three) to the banquet hall. But who paid for all this? In most cases, up to 90%, it was the groom’s family, he told me. “This is the tradition. But nowadays, there are many only daughters. If the family of the bride are nice people, they will also take on part of the expenses.”

Mr Tang’s words confirmed the link between Valentine’s Day celebrations, engagement, and marriage. This was intriguing to me as, on the one hand, Valentine’s Day was considered by everyone a celebration coming from ‘foreign tradition’, yet on the other, marriage was regularly presented by informants as a passage whose importance was fundamentally ‘Chinese’. If the core of ‘being Chinese’ was to value ‘family’ over anything else, and family was about making the right marriage choices, then marriage was important to Chinese people as to nobody else in the world. So, if attaching much value to marriage was one of the most important aspects of ‘being Chinese’ this same value could be expressed and enhanced through a practice that was by many, if not by all, recognised to be ‘foreign’.

There might have been some irony in Mr Tang’s use of the word *yang*, since he was making most of his money thanks to festivities imported from the lands of the foreign invaders. Significantly, Mr Tang mentioned that his second best business occasion was Spring Festival, which was unanimously considered to be a distinctively ‘Chinese’ custom. In his view, both Valentine’s Day, the ‘foreign’ festivity, and Spring Festival, the ‘distinctively Chinese’ family celebration, were just good days for business. From his point of view, the Open Door Reform had brought about these opportunities, and his readiness to seize them had been his own merit; similarly, the woman whom I interviewed on Valentine’s Day in her brother’s shop underlined her brother’s propensity to work

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<sup>9</sup> These prices were middle to low range. Mr Tang’s wedding studio, in fact, was not one of the fanciest in Nanjing. Nanjing itself, being a provincial capital, is largely considered to be less ‘posh’ than Beijing or Shanghai, where the most privileged could be served by larger, fancier, and more expensive wedding studios.

hard, while at the same time recognising that only after the Reform people had turned their interest to buying flowers – or, to put it in her words, had become ‘romantic’.

In agreement with the sellers, most consumers would define Valentine’s Day as something ‘romantic’ and ‘foreign’: my informants, in fact, recognised Valentine’s Day as a festivity that had come from abroad, and some would identify it as a ‘European tradition’. However, people would give and receive flowers to ‘give face’ to their spouse and reclaim this act as ‘typically Chinese’. This originally ‘foreign’ act of giving could be considered Chinese because it was performed in order to underline the importance of marriage and family, which for most of my informants represented a ‘specifically Chinese’ concern; in addition, it was typically Chinese because it allowed men to ‘give face’ to their spouses: a practice that foreigners could not understand, because it belonged to Chinese custom only. While the exchange of flowers on Valentine’s Day was indicated as a ‘foreign’ practice, it involved a process of meaning production that could not be separated from its local context. On the one hand, people would in fact identify the meanings they were producing through this practice as ‘native’ and even nationalistic; on the other, their claim that this practice had ‘foreign’ origin was deeply embedded in their own local and national history, and was hence loaded with particular meanings.

My informants often boasted China’s long-lasting history and culture, as well as the Chinese people’s attachment to family values. Yet, they drew on what they considered a ‘European’ or ‘foreign’ tradition in order to be ‘romantic’ (*langman*). Being ‘romantic’ was then associated with being more similar to ‘foreigners’, who, many informants believed, could choose their partners independently of any kind of social and/or family pressure.<sup>10</sup> Celebrating this ideal form of conjugality also implied a desire to distance oneself from the often-invoked ‘traditional society’. For most people, ‘traditional society’ was one that they had never experienced but that, they had been told, had been oppressive and feudal: pre-1949 society, when forced marriage and child betrothal were common. With the Liberation in 1949, the Communist state had outlawed ‘feudal’ practices and had claimed that it would ‘modernise’ marriage in China. While it was not a mystery that many of these shifts had been inspired by ‘Western’ ideas and custom, the Chinese Communist Party was the one institution that had most successfully re-appropriated and re-elaborated them, notably through the Marriage Law of 1950.<sup>11</sup>

More recent changes in the Marriage Law have highlighted the responsibilities that different generations within the same family have towards each other (Palmer 1995; Croll 1999). This has coincided, on the one hand, with the accelerating privatisation of service provision and, on the other, with the official rehabilitation of Confucianism as a ‘fine national tradition’. As Confucian familism has already served as ideological referent for those keen to praise the rise of ‘Asian capitalism’ in South East Asia (Greenhalgh 1994), the Chinese leadership is keen on re-appropriating it in order to promote its vision of a ‘harmonious society’.<sup>12</sup> In this view it may be

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<sup>10</sup> In her article on Valentine’s Day in Japan, Creighton (1993) argues that her informants articulate their own way of celebrating this ‘foreign’ festivity as a way of endorsing ideals of gender equality that they perceive as intimately linked with ‘the West’. As she mentions, whether this link between ‘the West’ and gender equality may or may not be present is beside the point. Similarly, during my fieldwork I found that many informants saw ‘the West’ as a place populated by individuals who, free of conformism and social pressure, could make completely autonomous choices and, as a consequence, enjoy happier lives.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of how the Marriage Law of 1950 was actually implemented, see Croll, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> This model of society highlights the post-Mao leadership’s desire to move away from Maoist egalitarianism. The fundamental premise of the ‘harmonious society’ is that not only are people different: their differences are pivotal to the allocation of social roles and to maintaining social stability. In this view, despite professing a focus on social equity, the

noted that, for people of marriageable age, public practices of courtship need to be closely connected to marriage. While Chinese people are now more ‘modern’ and therefore readier to spend on fancy articles to show love to their dear ones, they have not forgotten their family values, which are officially posited as the core of ‘Chinese culture’ and make them superior to the hyper-modern ‘Westerners’.

It is through ideological moves of this kind that the Chinese leadership has successfully re-proposed itself as the bearer of national identity and as the modernising agent of the country. At the same time, the party/state re-casted the family<sup>13</sup> as the primary safety net in the context of the state’s systematic services cutback. Notably, while family-based and quasi-kin (e.g. village-based) relations acquire a growing importance for people’s livelihoods and social position, state policy, state propaganda, and the media (both state-controlled and private) posit the family as the site of privacy, feelings, and enjoyments that have nothing to do with politics and social conflict (Evans 1997; Rofel 1999). While Maoist politics directly engaged the conjugal couple as yet another site for the construction of socialism (Evans 1997, 2002), nowadays courtship and marriage are spaces to practice all things romantic and to celebrate feelings that have to do more with a comfortable lifestyle than with socialist utopia.

### **Cosmopolitan Romance with Chinese Characteristics**

As the woman packing flowers for her brother’s business reminded me on Valentine’s Day, performing romanticism and taking part in flamboyant forms of consumption were, for many people, two sides of the same coin. The Maoist state could not accept, let alone promote, the display of massive decorations celebrating “LOVE” in commercial spaces like shopping malls and entertainment cities. After over thirty years of Open Door policy, however, conspicuous consumption constituted the principal arena where people had the opportunity to articulate feelings of attachment to each other. As both romance and market economy were largely thought to be connected with an imagined ‘West’, practicing romance through consumption was a sign of cosmopolitan distinction (Rofel 2007: 125–127): a way to project oneself – and eventually the nation – “into a global future imagined as wealthy and successful” (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2005: 130).

Hence, being ‘romantic’ seemed to be an important, even essential part of conjugal life for my informants in Nanjing. Buying and giving flowers on Valentine’s Day was yet another way to “get on track with the world”, a way of “wordling” (Zhan 2009) Chinese practices of courtship and marriage. Building on ethnographies that have explained the workings of globalisation in terms of ‘wordly encounters’ (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2005; Rofel 2007; Zhan 2009), I argue that this process does not correspond to a simple opening up to or passive reception of a ‘global’ or ‘Western’ standard. It is rather an everyday practice that “begins with imagining and fashioning a universalistic middle-class consumption pattern and lifestyle in the image of the white middle class of the United States and of the European Union” (Zhan 2009: 43–44). For social actors, the reappropriation of this imagined lifestyle through consumption practices constitutes a way to

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leadership has also conceded that some people would have to ‘get rich first’, with the rest of ‘the people’ eventually following (Anagnost 2008: 501; Solinger 2003: 953).

<sup>13</sup> By ‘family’ I refer here to the specific configuration sponsored by the Reform state. This ideal family is based on the conjugal, heterosexual couple and includes one child (or at most two children) together with the elderly parents. This model reflects the officially sponsored allocation of care responsibilities among different sexes and generations in the context of the state’s services cutback.

transcend the local and to “domesticate” cosmopolitanism itself “by way of renegotiating China’s place in the world” (Rofel 2007: 111).

Buying and giving flowers on Valentine’s Day was a way to reappropriate an allegedly ‘foreign’ practice in order to perform romance and conjugality in ways that were at once Chinese and cosmopolitan. As Rofel argues, in order to understand how this can come about it is necessary to question the idea that words like ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘local’ may constitute opposite categories with stable meanings. On the contrary, both analytical categories are “given meanings through specific representational practices” (Rofel 2007: 134). In cities like post-Mao Nanjing, cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics takes shape through all those practices that allow social actors to think about themselves as transcending at once the constraints of “traditional society” and those of Maoist egalitarianism (ibid.: 123–129). Shopping for a Valentine’s bouquet is one of the many ways in which Chinese citizens can ‘world’ China by building themselves a consumer identity that is all about modernity and distinction, but that does not threaten the superiority of Chinese family values.

### **Popular Habits and Class Distinction**

My middle-class informants certainly embodied a desire for a consumer identity that revolved around cosmopolitan distinction; however, after seeing the price tags on Mr Tang’s bouquets and the crowds of elegantly dressed young people filling the alleys of Nanjing’s entertainment quarter, I started wondering whether this trope was shared by larger amounts of people, in particular, by the less affluent groups. The day after Valentine’s Day, I asked people whether they had received or given flowers, and most of them told me that they had, to some extent, participated in the Valentine’s Day frenzy. Most of the people I talked to were over twenty-five; among them, even those who could only count on a modest income proudly confirmed that they either had received their due or done their duty. I then decided to visit a young couple I knew from my previous fieldwork, in order to ask whether they had celebrated Valentine’s Day. This young couple belonged to a large family of rural-born manual labourers hailing from Sichuan, whose social background was therefore very similar to that of the bakers mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Part of the family had been living in Nanjing for around 15 years and were employed in street retail. As for this young couple, the husband was in his mid-twenties and had a modest employment in trade; his wife – a cheerful girl of twenty-two who had been introduced to him by co-villagers in Sichuan – was busy caring for their newly born baby under the supervision of her mother- and father-in-law. As soon as I mentioned flowers, the young man jovially claimed that he had done his duty and that he had bought his wife a rose. The girl was quick to seize the opportunity to tease her husband: “One! One rose you bought me! How good is that?!” “Our son was just born” joked back the husband “next year I’ll buy you two!”

The parents of the young men laughed discretely as the young couple pretended to have an argument about Valentine’s Day. They were happy with their daughter-in-law and with how the new couple was getting along. Before marrying, their son used to live and work in the nearby town of Wuxi, but once he married he decided to move back to Nanjing. The young bride, who was just 21 at the time of marriage, not only agreed to live with her in-laws: she soon became pregnant and gave birth to a son, which consolidated her status in her husband’s family. Her cheerful and

positive character did the rest – she seemed to get along quite well with her in-laws, and they would soon provide precious support in term of childcare.

Valentine's Day, with its foreign aura, had not tainted the appearance of propriety that surrounded this three-generation family. The celebration appeared to be perfectly compatible with the fact that the young couple had met through introduction and were living in an extended household, where economic resources and labour were pooled under the supervision of the older generation. That said, the groom's parents certainly did not have arguments over Valentine gifts and considered them to be 'things for the young people'. Their attitude was similar to the one I had seen during my first fieldwork in 2007, when I collected ethnographic data among manual labourers who had been born before the start of the Open Door policy. People like them would often remind me how childhood and youth were different back then, when people had more children, money was less important, and the pace of life was much slower than nowadays. For them, Valentine's Day flowers were expensive goods with no substantial value – certainly less important than saving up for an uncertain future.

The years between my first observations in 2000 and my last fieldwork in 2012 saw a dramatic increase in the importance of this ritual occasion across the social spectrum. For professional, middle-class men in their late twenties and early thirties, buying and giving sophisticated Valentine bouquets was a way to perform as the ideal husband (or husband to be): a caring, affectionate man with both taste and economic means. In contrast, informants who worked as shop vendors or had manual jobs could not afford to buy more than one red rose, or a few at most.<sup>14</sup> Despite their limited means, however, many manual labourers in their twenties and early thirties were expected to give some flowers to their wives, and hence made an effort to buy what they could afford: fewer, cheaper flowers, which they delivered themselves to their wives without much public fuss about it. More and more people were celebrating Valentine's Day, albeit in different ways.

It was precisely this idea of difference, or rather distinction, that emerged from the words of Mr Tang, while he was explaining his marketing strategies to me. For Mr Tang, buying an expensive bouquet, and one coming from an exotic country or from a fancy shop was not only a way to show off a high, spendable income, but also to flaunt one's taste and sophistication. In other words, by spending money on a fancy article, the consumer could prove his high quality (*suzhi*) as a person, something that was generally considered to add an important symbolic and moral value to economic prosperity (Anagnost 2006, 2008; Hsu 2007; Yan 2003).

As some of the abovementioned authors have indicated (Anagnost 2006, 2008; Tomba 2009; Zhang 2008, 2010) state and market policy, advertisement, and propaganda suggest that 'the middle classes' are not only 'well-off', but can also flaunt qualities that make them better than other (poorer) people.<sup>15</sup> Being middle class, in fact, is not only about high income and profit, but also about being highly educated, 'civilised', family-oriented – in other words, 'high *suzhi*'. Middle class hegemony is then built and maintained through the promotion of a specific 'way of life': the lived practice of class or, to use Crehan's (2002) words, "class culture". The importance attached to wealth, but also to *suzhi*, style, and/or taste all, pertain to what is considered to be 'common sense': positions that are implicitly agreed upon – at least to some extent – by everyone, including those

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<sup>14</sup> The number 2 and the number 4 were inauspicious; while number 3 was not an unlucky one, a bunch of three roses would still look cheap compared to one counting to auspicious numbers like 6, 8 or 9.

<sup>15</sup> The privileged sections of society have by now enjoyed several years of official endorsement by the state and the Party, which has defined them as "advanced productive forces" (Solinger 2003).

who are excluded by them.<sup>16</sup> While the ‘middle classes’ may be largely imagined, or constitute a tiny part of the actual population, the values and the practices normally associated with ‘being middle class’ are today commonly accepted as good and desirable.

In her work on home ownership in Kunming, Li Zhang (2008, 2010) highlighted how her informants used taste and distinction as parameters to position people within the class hierarchy. In her book, she describes the feeling of self-worth that a mistress boasts after she has been given a mansion by her married lover (Zhang 2010). In the words and actions of Li Zhang’s informants, the value of a person and of her/his feelings are increasingly assessed and articulated in material, even monetary terms. In many ways, this account recalls the words of my informants Liu Ying and Mr Tang. It was by spending money on a fancy bouquet and by giving it as a present in a public way that men could give face (*mianzi*) to their wives and eventually be considered to be attentive husbands.

An elegant present could be easily associated with the material wealth of the buyer (and, by extension, of the recipient); however, it also endowed the giver with a number of other desirable features: blessed with an elegant taste, civilised, caring, romantic, and committed. This was the ideal middle-class man: a good provider with solid family values, who deserved his comfortable social position and shared the benefits of his work with his loved ones. The exchange of expensive, sophisticated presents was also the public sign of a successful, unfaltering conjugal relationship. As the responsibility for conjugal happiness was largely considered to be ‘women’s work’, a public statement of steadfast attachment certainly added to the status of the receiving wife.

### **Valentine Bouquets as Tokens of Value**

As Mr Tang pointed out, a nicely packed, branded rose that was delivered and received in a certain way was not only ‘a flower’: it bore a specific social and symbolic value. The role of gift giving as a means to ‘build relationships’ among human beings has been of particular interest for those authors working on value from both a Maussian (Strathern 1990) and a Marxist standpoint (Graeber 2001).<sup>17</sup> In this perspective, my informants certainly showed a keen interest in building relationships with their prospective spouses. Yet, while this particular kind of gift exchange clearly aims at the building of relationships, the same ritual of gift exchange does place the giver and the receiver in different positions of power. In addition, this particular gift exchange ritual is preceded by another exchange, the commercial kind, in the context of a market economy and of a fast-growing consumer culture. In other words, both the giver and the receiver, and the relationship they enact through the gift giving ritual, are part of larger relational fields that stretch well beyond the personal sphere. By participating in this gift giving ritual, my informants took part in China’s consumer-led, globally-oriented market economy and positioned themselves vis-à-vis the state that had promoted and fostered this particular kind of society.

The elaborate bouquets that I saw in Mr Tang’s shop on the day before Valentine’s Day were not bearers of abstract meaning only, but they were material objects produced and distributed through the investment of human labour in a particular historical context: that of post-Mao capitalist

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<sup>16</sup> According to Gramsci (1971: 328), “one might say ‘ideology’, here, but on condition that the word is used in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life.”

<sup>17</sup> Graeber’s theory of value explicitly builds on Nancy Munn’s work on the value of actions. According to Graeber, Munn sees value as “the way people represent their own actions to themselves” (Graeber 2001: 45).

economy. The ethnographic data reported in the paper pertain only to the last stage of the flower processing, however Mr Tang's words indicate that the production of Valentine flowers follows a changeable and highly segmented demand. The flower production and the first processing stages often happen outside the local and national borders and are followed by further, labour-intensive processing, 'just in time' before sale and delivery. The needs of such a fluctuating demand can only be met in the presence of a large pool of readily available cheap labour.

This is what my friend and myself witnessed before and during Valentine's Day: a large amount of young and not so young unemployed or under-employed people had made themselves available to work day and night in order to process and sell flowers on what was going to be an exceptionally good day for business. Most of these people were recruited among family and friends, without contracts, in a context in which absence of legal protection and social security provisions is a taken-for-granted side of hired manual labour. Once again, it needs to be noted that the necessary premise for the spreading of this kind of on-off, informal working arrangements is the scarcity of opportunities leading to more secure employment.

Paradoxically, the strenuous working hours, the low wages and the ad-hoc employment arrangements that these labourers have to accept, not to mention the scarce employability they face in a highly competitive job market, tend to be concealed by the glamorous aura surrounding the fancy bouquets they produce. On the one hand, the production of Valentine bouquets happens through a systematic exploitation of low-cost, irregular, unprotected labour, in a setting in which this form of employment is the only scenario available to large parts of the urban and rural population; on the other, the consumption of the same objects is articulated as a form of gift giving that is all about a particular, priceless relationship of love and care.

By casting the production and exchange of bouquets as part and parcel of mainland China's capitalist economy, I am building on David Graeber's argument on fetishism (2001): on the one hand, we have a sphere of production where people are treated like things in order to produce and deliver highly personalised goods to customers. Most of these workers stand no chance to be the recipients of equally fancy presents on Valentine's Day. On the other, this exploitative process of production is completely removed from the eyes of the gift recipient, who ultimately consumes the goods in the context of a very personal relation. From this perspective, Valentine bouquets can be considered to be 'tokens of value': objects and performances that give materiality to and ultimately embody value in themselves (2001: 76). The fact that these objects had to be given and received in public, often through complex ritual performances, once again points at the social character of value production: although the bouquet should symbolise the personal relationship of conjugal love between husband and wife, its real value can only be realised socially, i.e. through a performance aimed at making this personal relationship public, prompting reactions of praise and/or envy from other people.

As I have mentioned, however, the ritual of flower giving on Valentine's Day in present-day Nanjing grows more complex as it becomes popular among different social groups. Less affluent men, as we have seen, are also increasingly expected to give gifts on Valentine's Day, yet by no means can they afford the elaborate bouquets and the fancy delivery procedures that so well fit Graeber's argument on fetishism. These people participate in this particular ritual of flower giving since, in present-day China, this is one of the officially sponsored ways to show affection to family members; conjugal love and family cohesion, as it has been mentioned above, have been sponsored by the Reform state as founding values of the leaderships' vision of 'Harmonious Society'. In other

words, the production and consumption of value articulated through the celebration of Valentine's Day underwrite the production of particular social 'values', which are declared by state and market institutions as good and desirable.

By buying, giving, and receiving few roses on Valentine's Day, manual labourers make this Reform-era ritual their own, and by so doing they implicitly destabilise the standards of gift giving set by the dominant groups; however, they also tacitly consent to the desirability of a particular way of life: one that has to do with conspicuous consumption as much as it has to do with love and care for one's family. The consumption of Valentine's Day bouquets contributes to the production of the 'middle class' way of life as the ideal that everyone can and should pursue for themselves: a hegemonic vision of life.

Being 'middle class' does not only mean 'having and spending money', but spending in a certain way and for certain people. In this view, people can spend money on Valentine's Day to prove their attachment to their spouse, in accordance to the values of family cohesiveness that the Chinese state has been keen to promote since the early 1980s. Practices like the exchange of Valentine bouquets participate in the production of a specific model of success that brings together economic prosperity, 'civilised manners', and family harmony. This model of a successful lifestyle implicitly suggests that social inequality of class and sex/gender may be justified and even fair when the wealthy can show to have taste, to be high 'quality' persons, and to have good morals. At the same time, it also suggests that one's conjugal love is best expressed and quantifiable by consuming luxury goods.

## Conclusion

By exchanging bouquets and flowers on Valentine's Day, my informants engaged in a process of value production, which involved different semantic, economic, and socio-political dimensions, according to the different social positions of social actors. The professional middle classes reinstated their own dominant social position as legitimate and morally justified; the less privileged ones re-appropriated this gift giving practice, and yet by doing so they implicitly endorsed the desirability of the lifestyle embodied by affluent professionals: high income and high consumer expenditure. High consumer expenditure brings GDP growth, and for this reason the growth of the internal market has long been a concern for the Reform state. Ritual occasions such as Valentine's Day are not only good opportunities to boost internal consumer expenditure; most importantly, they are moments in which a particular social order, as well as social consent, is enacted, reproduced, and justified. In other words, this form of expenditure and consumption is, as Sangren (2000) rightly points out, very 'productive'.

Practices like the exchange of flowers on Valentine's Day point at the renewed centrality of the family as the fundamental unit of China's 'harmonious' and 'well-off' (*xiaokang*) society.<sup>18</sup> By giving and receiving expensive, fancy Valentine presents, privileged men and women not only behave as ideal middle-class members, but also as good 'Chinese' men and women: people who have become 'romantic' thanks to the Open Door Reform, but at the same time stay attached to 'Chinese' values of family support. Notably, my informants articulate these ideas in terms of

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<sup>18</sup> It has been noted that the Chinese state has always been particularly careful in dealing with the family while attempting to consolidate a specific social order. Maoist policies, for example, attempted to reconcile the state with the patriarchal family in the name of socialist production (Barlow 1994a, 1994b; Croll 2010; Wolf 1985).

'giving face', which in turn is a concept largely held to be 'quintessentially Chinese'. At the same time, however, informants readily recognise the celebration of Valentine's Day as a 'foreign' festivity: it is precisely because of its foreign origin that this particular occasion is considered to be the most appropriate to perform romance.

In order to understand how a festivity that is largely considered to be 'foreign' can be articulated as a means to be a better 'Chinese', it is necessary to look at the negotiations of meaning that stand behind the everyday uses of these terms. By relating romanticism with an imaginary 'West', for example, informants implicitly take distance from what they perceive as the authoritarian past of 'Chinese tradition'. In other words, they evoke their own relationships to their local realities; these include the Chinese state, its changing economic and social policies and its complex relation to foreign powers. In this view, practicing romance through conspicuous consumption constitutes for many informants a way of 'wordling' Chinese courtship and marriage; by performing courtship in ways that are imagined to be 'foreign' and 'romantic', my urban, affluent informants give materiality to a trope that involves the redefinition of their (and of China's) position within the global order.

The ethnographic material reported in this paper underlines the visible popularisation of Valentine's Day gift giving practices. This popularisation, however, is driven by a hegemonic idea of life that is all about the production of distinction and of social difference. In order to achieve distinction, the post-Mao middle-class citizen needs to be at once affluent and civilised: he needs to be endowed with a high quality as a person and embrace his role as reliable provider and family man. The expensive bouquets sold in the most expensive shops of the city ultimately embody an idea of distinction that speaks of economic success as much as of 'family values'. If the assemblage and sale of Valentine's Day bouquets constitutes a moment of value production in a highly exploitative labour market, the moment of gift exchange corresponds to the conversion of this very material value into those 'values' that the Chinese leadership posits as the moral foundations of Reform society.

As mentioned above, increasing numbers of people embrace consumer habits that respond to the hegemonic ideal of 'middle-class Chineseness' as a matter of behaving according to 'common sense', that is to say, according to positions that are held to be shared by everyone. Having said this, among the people introduced by this paper some stand out for dismissing the exchange of Valentine flowers as something 'too fancy' for them. These are people who, having been born and grown up in farming families before the Open Door Reform, were accustomed to ways of life predicated on Maoist egalitarianism; while in the aftermath of the Open Door Reform these informants have been ready to seize the opportunity to move into the city, as manual labourers they remain socially and economically vulnerable in the post-Mao urban landscape. These people prefer to spend their limited resources in other ways and make irony on the idea that buying an expensive bouquet might be a sign of real affection. At the same time they are also ready to admit that during the past thirty years, life in urban China became increasingly competitive, expensive, and stressful. It is perhaps by discretely suggesting a different way of living and caring that these informants disturb the emerging social order.

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**Annex: Pictures**

*Picture 1: Flower shop on February 13th, 2012*



*Picture 2: Packing flowers*



*Picture 3: Fresh flowers waiting to be packed and decorated*



Picture 4: Artificially coloured flowers



Picture 5: Chocolates casted into paper flowers



Picture 6: Bunch of bear-shaped puppets



Picture 7: The bears say “marry me”



Pictures 8 and 9: The entrance of one of Nanjing’s main clubs on February 14th, 2012.