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**Gifting dynamics of calibrating and aligning:  
An exploratory study of expat Chinese wine gifting**

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**Abstract**

The chapter discusses findings from an exploratory, interpretive study of Chinese wine gifting. Wine is increasingly popular in China, but familiarity with and knowledge of wine remain relatively low. Gifting plays an integral role in the expression of Chinese cultural values, as a process through which respect is demonstrated and social ties and mutual obligations are fostered. However, how does that process unfold when knowledge of the intended honorific meaning of a gift—especially a gift such as wine, which can vary considerably in terms of price, quality, country of origin and so on—cannot be taken for granted? Semi-standardized interviews, complemented by photo elicitation activities, were conducted with a small sample of expatriate Chinese consumers of varying ages and levels of wine involvement. The analysis highlights the contingent and laborious accomplishment of gifting: a well-chosen gift involves a series of adjustments made by the gift-giver, to ensure the gift is calibrated to reflect the giver-recipient relationship, and is aligned to the recipient's capacity to appreciate the gift. In adopting a sociological perspective on gifting as consumption, the chapter contributes novel qualitative insights to existing knowledge of wine-related Chinese consumer behaviour.

**Keywords**

China, consumer behaviour, consumption, gifting, qualitative, wine

**Introduction**

Gifting is integral to culture and social solidarity: a total system of reciprocity through which social ties and the distribution of social honour are made manifest (Mauss 1990). Gifting is thus shaped by, makes manifest, and reproduces cultural values. In the context of China, those cultural values include an emphasis on giving and maintaining 'face' (*mianzi*, *lian*), and fostering social networks through reciprocal obligations, or *guanxi* (Barbalet 2018; Chan et al. 2003; Yau et al. 1999). Gifts must be commensurate with the type of social relation that is being honoured, and the intensity of honour that is due to the recipient. As such, choosing and presenting gifts can be fraught undertakings, with honour, respect, relationships, and the risk of moral censure hanging in the balance.

Wine makes a potentially problematic choice in Chinese gifting. In its favour, wine conveys positive status associations (Liu & Murphy 2007; Somogyi et al. 2011), while a highly stratified universe of choices—varying in price, prestige, quality, and other intrinsic product

properties—offers useful gradations through which to reflect a diversity of social ties, obligations and levels of honour. However, a recipient's capacity and likelihood to fully appreciate the worthiness of the gift may be precarious, both because wine knowledge remains quite low for the average Chinese consumer (Liu & Murphy 2007; Smith Maguire 2017), and because China's 'crisis of trust' casts doubts on the quality and authenticity of wine, and consumer goods generally (Hanser 2010, Smith Maguire & Lim 2015). Herein lies the puzzle that underpins this chapter: how is wine gifting accomplished amidst these challenges, when the meaning of the gift may be poorly understood or seriously misunderstood by the gift-giver, the recipient, or both?

The chapter proceeds by reviewing previous research on Chinese gifting and Chinese wine consumer behaviour, highlighting the diverse cultural values that shape these practices, and the range of key drivers and product attributes that influence Chinese wine buyers. Noting the preponderance of positivist approaches in the research field, which narrowly focus on modelling and predicting purchase outcomes, we instead adopt a 'sociology of consumption' perspective (Evans 2019; Warde 2014) on gifting, and focus attention on the contingent accomplishment of consumption as a social process, with particular attention to the dynamics of acquisition (e.g., choosing the gift) and appreciation (e.g., bestowing honour through the gift). Having provided our rationale for taking an interpretivist approach, we outline the exploratory research that forms the basis of the chapter, consisting of nine semi-standardized interviews with expatriate Chinese consumers (primarily based in the UK) of varying ages and levels of wine involvement. Interviews explored experiences, attitudes and practices regarding wine as a gift. Our discussion then moves on to consider research findings in relation to the contingent and laborious process through which a gift-giver seeks to accomplish a successful gifting, through calibrating the gift to the specific giver-recipient relationship, and aligning the gift to the recipient's anticipated capacities to appreciate it.

### **Gifting, wine and Chinese consumer behaviour**

The process of gifting in China<sup>1</sup> is closely bound up with core cultural values associated with protocols of appropriate behaviour (*li*), face-work (*mianzi*, *lian*), and mutual investments in social networks in which individuals are bound together by reciprocal obligations, or *guanxi* (Chan et al. 2003; Barbalet 2018; Leung et al. 2011; Qian et al. 2007; Shi et al. 2011; Yau et al. 1999). The obligation to reciprocate, coupled with an emphasis on face, sets parameters within which the appropriateness of a gift is evaluated and calibrated. For example, a gift must be suitably expensive—but not too expensive—to do due justice to the status of the giver/recipient's relationship and their past gift exchanges (Qian et al. 2007; Qing et al. 2015). A well-chosen gift is not sufficient in itself; it must be presented at a proper time and occasion in accordance with the protocols of social courtesy, in order for the gift-giver to bestow honour and respect on the recipient (*mianzi*) and evidence their own good character (*lian*). Gift giving is a means of giving legitimate public expression to the quality of feeling (*renqing*) that characterises relationships. Those feelings may range from intimate to more instrumental ties, resulting in a 'continuum' of price points and selection criteria for gifts for 'close friends,' 'just friends' or 'hi/bye friends' (Joy 2001, p. 243), and variations in criteria over time as 'new friends' become 'old friends' (Leung et al. 2011). Thus, Chinese cultural values shape and are expressed through gifting practices, resulting in highly calibrated rituals of exchange that reproduce social ties and positions.

This brings us to the specific use of wine as a gift. Research on Chinese consumer behaviour in relation to wine has greatly expanded alongside China's rise to global prominence as a wine producing and consuming country (Capitello et al. 2017; Muhammad et al. 2014). Studies have found that Chinese consumers associate wine—particularly foreign wine—with status and prestige (Dal Vecchio et al. 2018; Liu & Murphy 2007; Somogyi et al. 2011), and that extrinsic cues tend to dominate as drivers of consumer behaviour, particularly price, brand, labelling and country of origin (Balestrini & Gamble 2006; Camillo 2012; Dal Vecchio et al. 2018; Hu & Baldin 2018; Tang et al. 2015). Meanwhile, a limited number of studies of Chinese wine consumer behaviour have explicitly examined wine gifting. Such research finds that consumers typically spend more when buying wine as a gift rather than for their own consumption, while confirming the same extrinsic purchase drivers including brand, colour (i.e. red wine), packaging and country of origin—although the evidence is mixed in terms of attitudinal preferences for foreign and especially French wine versus actual purchases of domestic wine (Qing et al. 2015; Xu et al. 2014; Yang & Paladino 2015; Yu et al. 2009).

Despite impressive consumption statistics for the country as a whole, and the emergence of cadres of high involvement, knowledgeable consumers (Bo Liu et al. 2014; Masset et al. 2016; Smith Maguire & Zhang 2016), wine nevertheless remains peripheral in the average Chinese consumer's everyday life, in terms of both personal consumption and product knowledge (Liu & Murphy 2007; Smith Maguire 2017). At the same time, academic knowledge of Chinese wine gifting and wine consumer behaviour remains relatively narrow as a result of the methodological proclivities of the research field. With few exceptions (e.g. Aung et al. 2017; Liu & Murphy 2007; Somogyi et al. 2011), the extant research on Chinese wine consumer behaviour is overwhelmingly positivist in orientation, focused on modelling and predicting preferences, purchases and willingness to pay through insights gleaned from online and in-store questionnaires (e.g. Balestrini & Gamble 2006; Camillo 2012; Qing et al. 2015; Tang et al. 2015; Xu et al. 2014; Yang & Paladino 2015; Yu et al. 2009) and sales databases (e.g. Agnoli et al. 2014; Dal Vecchio et al. 2018; Hu & Baldin 2018; Masset et al. 2016).

Such research has yielded insights into *what* factors are linked to preferences and purchases; however, consumer choices and tastes are matters of *how*, not simply *what* (Daenekindt & Roose 2017). We know relatively little about *how* those factors are subjectively evaluated by gift-givers and recipients in terms of the obligation of reciprocity that ensues. In response, we take a sociological perspective on gifting as consumption, characterised by 'moments' of acquisition, appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment and disposal (Warde 2014; Evans 2019). In particular, gifting foregrounds the dynamics and material accomplishments of moments of acquisition (the choosing of the gift) and appreciation (the transfer of honour through receipt of the gift). Gifting is a system fundamentally bound up with honour, respect and mutual obligations; however, how does that system work when knowledge of the intended meaning of the gift cannot be assumed? How does the obligation of choosing an appropriate gift and the risks associated with getting it wrong inflect the process of acquisition? How does a gift-giver's judgement of the recipient's capacity for appreciation shape the choice of wine, so that the gift exchange unfolds as intended?

Chinese gifting is thus a highly calibrated social process bound up with social protocols and honour, and with the risk of shame and disrespect. Such risks and challenges are especially pertinent in the case of gifting wine. While wine carries associations of status and prestige,

the capacity of gift-givers and recipients to evaluate the appropriateness of the gift cannot necessarily be taken for granted. Hence, we arrive at the rationale for the interpretivist orientation we adopt in designing research on the material accomplishment of Chinese wine gifting.

### Research design

This chapter reports on an exploratory, interpretivist study<sup>ii</sup> of expat Chinese wine gifting practices. Reflecting our interest in subjective understandings of wine and material accomplishments of gifting, we utilized semi-structured interviews, complemented by two photo elicitation activities (Saunders et al. 2019). The interview guide included questions on the general role and significance of wine as a gift, and what giving wine as a gift entailed, as well as asking respondents for detailed reflections on specific instances in which they had given and received wine as a gift. Supporting these questions were two elicitation activities. For Activity One (nine images of wine bottles including a range of red, white and sparkling accompanied by the name of the producer/brand, country of origin, and retail price, with a range from £15 to £2500—see Appendix 1), respondents were asked to choose examples that they were especially drawn to as potential gifts. For Activity Two (eight images of different business and social settings, from formal offices to restaurants to domestic spaces), respondents were asked to choose examples of situations in which a gift of wine would be especially relevant. Interviews also collected information on respondents’ background and familiarity with wine, to provide context for the anonymised responses (summarized in Table 1).

Our sampling strategy supported our exploratory aims: a non-probability purposive sample was assembled through convenience and snowball sampling, starting from contacts within our university’s Chinese student population and local Chinese business community (in the North of the United Kingdom). This recruitment approach reflected pragmatic issues of language and accessibility (all interviews were carried out in English), but sampling was also guided by our interest in variation. The sample (n=9) includes a range of ages (from 20s to 60s) and expatriate contexts (e.g., a Chinese wine entrepreneur based in France who has visited the UK for work; a postgraduate student who has lived in the UK for three years; a Chinese-born entrepreneur and British citizen, who has lived in the UK for 45 years). As expatriate Chinese living in the UK or France, our respondents are embedded (to differing degrees) in cultures in which wine is much more a part of everyday life than would likely be the case in China. Nevertheless, respondents varied in their levels of wine involvement, which we informally categorized as low, medium and high based on their personal consumption patterns, self-assessed wine knowledge, and knowledge demonstrated through the interview.

**Table 1: Summary of respondents**

|    | <i>Generic description</i>  | <i>Level of wine involvement (and indicative evidence)</i>        |
|----|---|---|
| 01 | Female, late 20s, postgraduate student, has lived in the UK for less than 5 years | Low: drinks ‘a little bit’; ‘really basic’ knowledge              |
| 02 | Male, 40s, academic, has lived in the UK for more than 20 years                   | Low: almost doesn’t drink, and drinks wine only very occasionally |

|    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 03 | Male, late 40s, hospitality business owner, has lived in the UK nearly 15 years               | Medium: drinks wine daily after work if at home; works in food/hospitality; buys French and Australian                  |
| 04 | Female, late 40s, wine business manager, has lived in the UK for over 10 years                | High: high level of knowledge; works in wine trade and travels for wine   |
| 05 | Female, late 20s, postgraduate student, has lived in the UK for more than 5 years             | Medium: drinks wine regularly; self-taught and interested to know more; regards wine as 'part of being myself'          |
| 06 | Female, late 20s, business owner, has lived in the UK for over 10 years                       | Medium: drinks wine 1-2 times per week and regularly with friends; regards wine as part of her lifestyle                |
| 07 | Male, 60s, entrepreneur/business owners, has lived in the UK for over 40 years                | Medium: broad knowledge from working in hospitality sector for many years but 'not an expert;' is 'guided by the price' |
| 08 | Female, 30s, wine business manager, has lived in France for five years and visits UK for work | High: high level of expert knowledge, WSET level 3 accredited; works in wine trade                                      |
| 09 | Female, 50s, teacher, has lived in the UK for over 15 years                                   | Low: doesn't often drink; 'very little' knowledge   |

Data collection began in February 2020. The authors co-interviewed Respondent 01; the remaining respondents (apart from 05) were interviewed by the second author. The first four interviews were conducted in-person, prior to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic; thereafter, interviews were carried out and recorded over Zoom, with the elicitation activities emailed to respondents in advance along with participant information and consent forms. Interviews ranged from 45 to 64 minutes; recordings were transcribed, amounting to a total of 131 single spaced pages of transcripts (approximate average of 14 pages per interview).

Our interpretivist orientation also informed our data analysis. We utilized a thematic approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006), moving iteratively between deductive and inductive coding of transcripts. The onset of the pandemic prompted an initial coding of four transcripts, for which we independently read and familiarised ourselves with the data and deductively coded for sources of status or honour and for aspects of gifting rituals (as suggested by our conceptual interest in gifting). Comparisons of the resulting coding fostered inter-coder agreement, and inductively generated emergent themes in relation to variations in the conditions in which wine made an appropriate (or inappropriate) gift, and the various calculations (assessments, forms of knowledge) involved in choosing a gift. These two themes (conditions and calculations) formed the basis of deductively coding the final set of nine transcripts. A final phase of inductive analysis resulted in the themes reported below, with findings clustering around how gift-givers sought to choose an appropriate gift in relation to, on the one hand, the giver/recipient relationship, and on the other, the recipient's perceived capacity for appreciating the gift. These themes are discussed below, after a general introduction to the findings.

### **Accomplishing the gifting of wine: interview findings**

The respondents clearly understood gifting as a social process bound up with honour: a way of showing respect and the 'priority' of the recipient (06), giving the recipient 'face' (02), or giving a 'good impression' (07). The moral dimension of gifting as honour ritual also emerged in terms of strict protocols around the presentation of the gift. Concerns with what is inappropriate, embarrassing or impolite underline the moral dimension of gifting: honour is at stake, and moral censure may follow if protocols are not followed. For example, giving the gift immediately upon meeting would not be 'appropriate' (09), and gifts should not be presented to a single recipient if in a group of others, as that would cause 'embarrassment' (07). Furthermore, a gift presented without attractive packaging would not be 'polite' (08). In general, our findings thus confirmed those of the extant literature on Chinese gifting with regard to protocols of obligated reciprocity and social honour (e.g. Chan et al. 2003; Yau et al. 1999).

Our findings also aligned with past research on Chinese wine consumers. Respondents mentioned the same product attributes in selecting a gift wine as identified as key drivers of wine purchase decisions (e.g. Camillo 2012; Hu & Baldin 2018). These attributes include price, brand, country of origin, colour, and packaging. However, our findings also underlined the contextually-specific and contingent dimensions of gift giving, picking up on insights from past research on variations in gifting for different types of relationships (Joy 2001), and the heightened risks and risk mitigation strategies associated with choosing wines when product knowledge is low (Somogyi et al. 2011). Below, we discuss these dynamics of the accomplishment of gifting in terms of:

- *Calibrating the gift to the giver-recipient relationship*: efforts by the giver to choose a gift that is commensurate with the status of the recipient and their relationship to them;
- *Aligning the gift to the recipient's appreciation*: efforts by the giver to anticipate and accommodate the recipient's capacity to realise the worthiness of the gift.

#### ***Calibrating the gift to the giver-recipient relationship***

Gifting requires that a gift-giver calibrates the gift to the specific status of the recipient, and the history of their relationship. For example, Respondents 01 and 05 clearly differentiated between tiers of recipients when weighing options presented in Activity One (see Appendix 1):

Because a really close friend, we think that we can give them a better gift, and in China a better gift... it's from your heart, but also the price is important. (01)

Well, if I am giving the gift to my loved ones, my friends or family, I will give the most expensive ones, but if I am giving a gift to 'friends' [casual friends] I would give the cheaper ones. (05)

Efforts to reflect the status of the recipient in the quality of the gift are, in themselves, entirely unsurprising (as anyone who has ever struggled to pick out the 'right' gift for a meaningful other will attest).

Calibration had an explicit monetary orientation for many of our respondents. For example, as part of her work, Respondent 04 is called upon to recommend wines to customers in search of gifts: 'It's important [to ask] the price first. What price? Then we choose, just from the price, the wines [to] give the customer choice.' Explaining during Activity One that it is

important to match the price to the 'level' of recipient, she chose Château Talbot (£110) as an example that would go well with 'the high level, like the company leader or something important to people.' Similarly, several of the respondents referred to explicit monetary parameters in differentiating between gifts for different tiers of friends (Joy 2001). For Respondent 05: 'In my mind a £30 gift is not a gift. At least £50, 60 or higher.' For Respondent 06, a gift for a friend might be £20-£60, whereas a business associate's gift might be £40-£100, and £50-£200 for a senior business client.

This quantitative calibration of an appropriate gift also extended retrospectively. A gift must be commensurate with the history of the giver/recipient relationship, as made manifest through the monetary value of past gifts. As Respondent 01 explained:

Because in China, if I give to my friend, maybe like some special gift, they will give me back some kind of gift, ...but the price maybe it's a little bit same. Like I give you the wine, it is £100, next time if you give me the gift, maybe same £100 or higher. It cannot be lower. If it is lower it means you didn't treat me like a good friend. Also, you didn't respect me. Maybe you don't want to make friends with me, like a long term relationship... But if I give the gift, really expensive to maybe just a friend, he will think 'Oh my god, what happened? You are so serious; it is really expensive.' So maybe they will think too much. (01)

Thus, a giver needs to calibrate the value of a gift to the status of the recipient (good friends vs. just friends) and past gift exchanges. In addition, as the above suggests, givers may also need to navigate the risk of a gift—intended as an appropriate performance of *guanxi*—being interpreted as an *inappropriate* form of undue influence, or bribery. As Respondent 09 remarked when considering some of the more expensive options in Activity One:

If it is not that special kind of ridiculous price, the wine, then people wouldn't think it is too much a bribe... 'Why do you give me something that is worth that much money? Did I do something really unusual, or are you expecting something really unusual from me?' (09)

These findings confirm gifting as a system of obligatory mutual exchange, and suggest both the short-term work (e.g. negotiating boundaries of what is an acceptable gift) and long-term work of maintaining an appropriate level of reciprocity as part of on-going social relations, here framed and articulated in economic terms. In effect, exchange partners must maintain an informal ledger so that successive gifts do not contravene the principles of respect and reciprocity.

Furthermore, gifting—as a perpetual cycle of commensurate reciprocity, made tangible through quantifiable indices—requires that both exchange partners *know* the (approximate) monetary value of the gift. Without such knowledge, a gift cannot reliably uphold the expectation of commensurate value, nor will the recipient be able to appropriately calibrate a future gift. Gifts rarely come with prices attached, thus creating the need for investigative work on the part of the recipient. This was explicitly acknowledged by Respondents 01 and 05, who use Google or Taobao (a Chinese online shopping platform) to learn the price of gifts they receive, and expect that recipients of their gifts will do the same.

### ***Aligning the gift to the recipient's appreciation***

As per the preceding discussion of calibration, a recipient needs to know the (approximate) economic value of a gift in order to uphold the principles of respect and reciprocity, which may prompt recipients to investigate the cost of a gift and keep track for future reference. Additionally, our findings revealed a related dynamic in the accomplishment of wine gifting, which went beyond mere price research, relating to aligning a gift with a recipient's perceived capacity to comprehend the gift's intended meaning.

For example, in describing how she would present option 4 (Tignanello; £130; see Appendix 1) as a wine gift, Respondent 05 simultaneously conveys the economic value of the gift, overcomes the risk of it being misinterpreted as bribery, and supplies cultural information ('the story') to make the worthiness of the gift apparent:

First of all, I will show them the packaging, the dark [glass bottle]...red and whiteish label. That is the first thing I will tell the person. And secondly, I will just Google about that Italian ...I will say something about this kind of wine and what is the character of this wine, what year, how it tastes like and what is best serving with, like fish, or chicken or salad. And after that I will mention a little about, I won't say the exact price, I will say 'Well it's not that cheap, but don't worry, it's not that expensive.' And after this I guess this person would Google it. Yeah, that's my trick. (05)

As this account suggests, appreciating a wine gift's worthiness—its social and cultural value, not simply its economic value—is bound up with forms of cultural capital (knowledge of flavour profile, producing region, food/wine pairing) that may have to be supplied to the recipient.

The work of alignment requires an assessment of a recipient's capacity to recognize the intended honour embodied in the gift, and this will vary with the giver's wine knowledge. A gift-giver with greater cultural knowledge (i.e. whose capacity to appreciate a wine's worthiness outstrips that of the recipient) may be prepared to offer wine as a 'hit and miss' gift to less knowledgeable recipients: a scenario described by Respondent 07. Or, as Respondent 05 suggests above, a giver may attempt to transfer some wine cultural capital (through a story, certificate or other framing device) as part of the gift, to reduce the risk that the gift 'misses' its mark. Alternatively, a giver may judge the risk too great, and the realization of the intended honour too precarious. In that case, wine may be judged an inappropriate gift, as below:

People I know, they wouldn't know that much about wine. Even if I spend a fortune, a few hundred pounds, or the top one, two thousand or something, they wouldn't know the value, will they? So why do I spend that much money to give somebody something that they won't appreciate. (09) I think that this [giving wine as a gift] is a risky bit. If you give somebody like a bottle of wine or a box of wine, but you need to probably do a lot of explanation, give a certificate or whatever and...make sure it's authentic, otherwise people don't know the value or they don't find out. ...Otherwise, this wine is £5 or £500, who knows? ...It is really depending on the individual knowledge, experience, or understanding...otherwise you may prepare a really, really precious wine and send it to a business partner, and they think it is just £5, so this is the risk. ...[It is] much more safe to send Maotai, the

basic price of Maotai [searches on phone]...is 2,499 RMB, £300. It is as simple; it is just like a currency. (02)

These two examples demonstrate a keen awareness of the precariousness of wine's capacity to transfer honour through gift exchange. Other gifts may serve as safer vehicles for conveying respect and reciprocity; for Respondent 02, it is the more widely recognized 'currency' of Maotai, a famous brand of Chinese liquor. These comments suggest the constitutive role of the recipient in completing the gift. Gifting emerges as a collaborative social process, in which the value of the gift is co-produced by giver and recipient: a co-production that involves convergent knowledge and calculations of cultural, social and economic capital on part of both giver and recipient, and as such is significantly prone to risks and the potential for failure.

As noted previously, respondents highlighted a number of expected product attributes through which the potential honour value of a gift was assessed, such as price, brand, country of origin, label and colour, confirming findings from previous research on Chinese wine consumption. However, if examined not as independent variables for predicting consumer purchases but as dimensions of aligning a gift with the recipient's capacity for appreciation (and thus of choosing a gift that affirms 'face' for both giver and recipient), we can see a stratification of wine product properties in relation to cultural capital.

With regard to key attributes that informed the choice of wine as a gift, a few respondents (with medium or high levels of wine involvement) cited attributes that hinge on some wine-specific cultural capital, such as an emphasis on the culture or story of a wine (04, 05, 08), and specific appellations as guarantors for high quality wine (08). More commonly, however, respondents across all levels of wine knowledge and involvement cited wine product properties that require no or very low levels of wine knowledge to comprehend. Of these indicators of value, price was perhaps the most obvious. In addition, colours (red wine, and labels with the auspicious colours of red and gold) and packaging were commonly cited in Activity One as reasons for some wines being better suited as gifts than others. For example:

[on reasons for choosing Château Pétrus] In China we like the red colour...the meaning is good fortune. [And] the background is golden...it is perfect because also in China the golden things are...bringing you good fortune, and the red will bring you good fortune, and the lucky things. (01)

[on reasons for choosing Château Talbot and Tignanello] That is a very important thing, I have to say, the packaging. The image. The first impression. Especially most of the Chinese don't know the wine very much, so the first impression is very, very, very important. ...And also the price. The price is in my budget. (06)

[on reasons for choosing Château Talbot] I think maybe [if the person] didn't know Grand Cru [which appears on the label] then he sees this one [the word 'château'] and he knows the Château, [even if] not anything else. (04)

Country of origin and brands were also mentioned, although this was largely in reference to choosing wines that would be readily recognized. For example:

[on reasons for choosing Penfolds over Château Pétrus as the better option as a gift] Yes, this label [of Penfolds] is very popular in China. If you bring that one to China everyone will know this. Yeah, but if you bring this [Pétrus]

from France, they only know it's from France, they don't know this company. But that one [Penfolds], in China everyone knows it. (O3)

Similarly, Respondent 07 noted that French wines are well respected in China, and 08 said she would commonly choose wines from 'famous regions' for gifts. Both Respondents 01 and 02 made direct reference to '82 Lafite', but such a gift—even with the extreme price tag—would require low levels of wine cultural capital to decode, thanks to the wine having been made famous in Chinese popular culture.<sup>iii</sup>

In explaining the practice of choosing wines as gifts, respondents thus tended to focus on cues that require no or low wine-field-specific cultural capital to 'decode.' Furthermore, the work of aligning a gift to the recipient involved both assessments of the recipient's anticipated appreciation, and attempts to mitigate risks of an un- or under-appreciated gift. Even if recipients know little of wine, they may still be able to fully realize the intended honour value of the gift if its worthiness is clearly communicated, such as through price or colour.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In this chapter, we have explored the dynamics of Chinese wine gifting as a form of consumption, through interviews with a small sample of expat Chinese. Focusing on the lived social practice of choosing and giving wine as a gift has shifted attention to the contingent accomplishment of gifting, which involves both gift-giver and recipient to fully realise the honour value (worthiness) of the gift. In turn, this approach has highlighted a range of risks, pitfalls and mitigation strategies associated with gifting wine. We have been especially attentive to various calculative dynamics—calibrations and alignments—involved in a gift-giver's moment of acquisition (choosing a gift), including the importance of quantification (price registers for tiers of relationships; informal ledgers of expected monetary levels of reciprocity), and of hypothetical anticipations of moments of appreciation on the part of the other (the recipient). Gift-givers face risks—e.g., a loss of face, damage to social networks—if the worth of their gift is not recognized by the recipient, or causes offence in the giving. The present study has thus underlined a gift-giver's work—largely hidden, sometimes explicit, always crucial—to minimize these risks and successfully co-produce the intended honour value of the gift in collaboration with the recipient.

The expat Chinese respondents are not representative of Chinese consumers; they operate on a daily basis in cultural contexts (in the UK and France) in which wine is a normal part of everyday life, and the gifting of wine potentially less fraught with precariousness. Without claiming generalizability for our findings (which would be inappropriate for exploratory, interpretivist research), we nevertheless suggest that our analysis casts light on under-explored aspects of gifting as a form of consumption. The present case highlights how local cultural values and stocks of cultural capital shape and find expression through the universal social phenomena of cycles of obligatory gifting, and how the product properties of wine serve as opportunities for (and potential obstacles to) the successful transfer of honour between givers and recipients. We would thus resist an interpretation of the dynamics of calibration and alignment as peculiarly Chinese; rather, the expat Chinese respondents have helped foreground dynamics that will find expression in other ways in other cultural contexts: a fertile focus for further research.

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## Appendix 1: Elicitation Activity One

On the following pages, there are a range of red, white and sparkling wines, numbered 1-9, with some additional information: the producer; the region where it is made; an approximate price per bottle. Please choose 2 to 3 that you are especially drawn to, if you were selecting wine to give as a gift.

(The context of the gift giving may be different for the different wines.)

Please take your time and note the numbers.

**Table 2 Photo Elicitation Images**

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>1.</p>  <p>Château Pétrus. Bordeaux, France. £2,500 per bottle</p> | <p>2.</p>  <p>Château Talbot. Bordeaux, France. £110 per bottle.</p> | <p>3.</p>  <p>Penfolds Grange. South Australia. £350 per bottle.</p> |
| <p>4.</p>  <p>Tignanello. Tuscany, Italy. £130 per bottle.</p>       | <p>5.</p>  <p>Pouilly-Fuissé. Burgundy, France. £30 per bottle.</p> | <p>6.</p>  <p>Meursault. Burgundy, France. £45 per bottle.</p>      |
| <p>7.</p>   | <p>8.</p>  | <p>9.</p>  |



Louis Roederer Cristal.  
Champagne, France. £225 per  
bottle.



Champagne Delamotte.  
Champagne, France. £40 per  
bottle.



Giol Prosecco. Veneto,  
Italy. £15 per bottle.

Photographs: John Dunning

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> References to ‘Chinese culture’ require a word of caution. Variations in local expressions of cultural values, and generational shifts in fidelity to those values can be found between regions, city tiers, and urban/rural divides within China. Previous research discussed here includes work that has examined first tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (e.g. Xu et al. 2014; Balestrini & Gamble 2006), Hong Kong (e.g. Joy 2001; Masset et al. 2016; Tang et al. 2016), and Chinese overseas (e.g. Aung et al. 2017; Shanka & Handley 2011). We are thus mindful that notions of Chinese cultural homogeneity have little empirical basis. However, a nuanced differentiation of variation *within* Chinese cultures is neither within the scope of the present chapter, nor necessary for its purpose, which is to explore variation within lived practices of gifting (and not to generalize to Chinese culture, writ at whatever scale).

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<sup>iii</sup> In the highly successful 1989 Hong Kong movie *God of Gamblers*, Chow Yun Fat’s eponymous character commands: ‘Uncork me a bottle of 1982 Lafite!’