

‘Cowboy cloth’ and kinship

The closeness of denim consumption in a South-west Chinese city

Tom McDonald

tom.mcdonald@ucl.ac.uk

Department of Anthropology

University College London, 14 Taviton Street, London, WC1H 0BW, U.K.

Final version published as: McDonald, T. (2011). ‘Cowboy cloth’ and kinship: the closeness of denim consumption in a South-west Chinese city. *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 9(1), 76-89.

Full text PDF available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175183511X12949158771518> or via
<http://bloomsbury.com>.

Tom McDonald is a research student in the Department of Anthropology at University College London. He also occupies a Visiting Research Scholar position at the Nationalities Research Institute in Yunnan University, China. Tom is currently undertaking fieldwork on denim consumption in small-town South West China.

Abstract

This paper examines the effect of the fabric denim in objectifying kinship in the city of Kunming, China. It is argued that denim has been particularly efficacious due to its ability to insert itself into traditional Chinese kinship notions of nurturance. Parents were seen to gift denim to their children with the object of instigating a change in the lives of the younger generation, coupled with the knowledge that a change in material circumstances would be necessary to achieve such transformation. At the same time, the younger generation's denim also provoked a 'kinship gulf' between children and their parents, which parents appeared keen to close, by purchasing and wearing denim of their own (though not without a degree of ambivalence, reflected by the presence of inactive jeans in parents' wardrobes). In this remarkable situation, denim was seen firstly as the tool for creating generational disjunction through traditional means, and subsequently the prospective solution to overcome this disjunction. It is herein argued that denim moves us to consider the study of kinship as the study of 'closeness', a term which affords the consideration of objects in the milieu of intimate relationships.

‘Cowboy cloth’ and kinship

The closeness of denim consumption in a South-west Chinese cityⁱ

For office administrator Zhang Guangli, talk of jeans invokes vivid recollections of an event from his childhood. When he was in the third year of primary school in Kunming, towards the autumn of 1983, political factions in the Chinese Communist party launched the ‘anti-Spiritual Pollution’ campaign. The campaign targeted what was perceived as an increase in damaging Western ideals, which were seen as having entered the country following the declaration of the ‘open door’ policy five years earlier. Propaganda initially attacked pornography, trends in art, literary and theoretical thinking; however, its scope was soon extended to bring a far wider range of social phenomenon under criticism (Gold, 1984:947). At the height of the campaign, Guangli recalled, his school decreed that jeans, by that time popular attire for himself and his classmates, were ‘spiritually polluting’. Suddenly, not a student was to be seen wearing denim, either at school, or in the public sphere. Guangli recalled his mother taking pains to ensure that he did not wear jeans during this period, because of the risk of bringing himself or the family into disrepute. The campaign itself was quietly wound-down in early 1984, but for a brief moment at least, jeans became the centre of attention. Even though only young people were wearing denim at the time, their regulation in this period was a concern for the entire family.

This article demonstrates that though denim (*niúzǎibù*; literally ‘cowboy cloth’)ⁱⁱ may now no longer be seen ‘spiritually polluting’, its appropriation continues to provide a means by which family relations are materialised. It concerns itself with the ramifications of denim consumption in the formation of kinship in contemporary Kunming, a South-Western

Chinese city in the throes of rapid development.ⁱⁱⁱ Social changes have created an explosion in opportunities for consumption of mass-produced products, an increase in transactions, and the production of consumptive desires, termed the ‘consumer revolution’ in China (Davis, 2000:7).

It is in this context that denim has appeared and proliferated. The researcher’s own (very rough) head-count on a commercial street in the centre of the city revealed 44 out of 100 passers-by were wearing denim. In Kunming’s residential suburbs this figure decreased to 23 out of 100. Denim was selected because, as Miller and Woodward (2007:337) argue, it is the worldwide ubiquity of jeans, combined with the lack of attention research affords them, which means that they can actually have *greater* possibility of revealing insights into fashion, clothing and the act of dressing than perhaps any other item.^{iv}

Anthropological approaches to Chinese society have long been steeped in the social anthropological tradition, emphasising the study of kinship as ‘the recognition of a relationship between persons based on descent or marriage’ (Stone, 1997:5). Anthropologists such as Morgan (1871:415), Lévi-Strauss (1969:328) and Freedman (1965) were largely responsible for forming the classic model of the Chinese kinship system: consanguineal in nature, agnatic, emphasising patrilineality, reinforced through a complex array of vocatives, and the corporate institution of the family.^v

Following the founding of the PRC, family relations underwent significant upheaval. Such changes are attributed to a number of factors, including allocation of childcare through communes and later compulsory education (Kipnis, 2008), the right to divorce (Diamant, 2000:128), and perhaps most significantly, the one-child-one-family policy (Fong, 2004). China’s youth have benefited from increasing economic and political power in the family,

which has, it is claimed, effectively disrupted the traditional agnatic system and the emphasis on filial piety (For accounts see Yan, 2003:89, 2005:637, 2004:148). Various narratives have noted that this has accompanied what Simmel (1978:448) terms the increase in material culture.

This paper takes the radical item of denim, and grounds it in the traditional anthropological analytic framework of Chinese kinship studies. It is herein argued that denim has been particularly efficacious due to its ability to insert itself into the traditional Chinese notion of nurturance (*yǎng*), which Stafford (1995:80, 2000) describes as the wide array of symbolic and substantive transfers between parent and child that places an obligation on offspring to reciprocate the care received in youth when they reach adulthood. The obligation to return *yǎng* continues even after parents die, with the burning of paper clothing (and paper-money) to comfort deceased ancestors (Doolittle, 1866:61; Gates, 1987). Zhao & Belk (2003) also found that modern consumer goods are being incorporated into these practices. They observed the inclusion of paper cell phones, computers, PDAs, televisions, refrigerators, stereos, and automobiles being burnt in ancestral offerings.

These studies highlight a discourse that priveledges clothing as an essential form of nurturance, on par with food, and fundamental for the creation of kinship relations. Stafford (1995:100) illustrates this through a mother's concern over judgements of her appearance that might be made by others on visiting her son. The son's ability to *yǎng* his mother, Stafford claimed, was expressed in the clothes she wore, 'while their ability to care for (*yǎng*) each other was reflected in the food they, as a family, could serve to someone from the outside'.

In this context, it therefore seems reasonable to postulate that denim allowed parents to maintain traditional parent-child nurturing roles by clothing their children while

simultaneously fulfilling the motive of instigating a transformation in the lives of their descendants, coupled with the knowledge that a change in material circumstances would be necessary to achieve such transformation.

However, the denim given to the younger generation also provoked a ‘kinship gulf’ between children and their parents, which parents have more recently appeared keen to close, by purchasing and wearing denim of their own (though not without a degree of ambivalence, reflected by, for example, inactive jeans present in parents’ wardrobes). Denim in Kunming was thus seen firstly as the tool creating generational disjunction through traditional means, and subsequently the prospective solution to remove this disjunction.

Finally, this paper will demonstrate that the study of denim engenders contemplation of the textile not only in terms of objectifying kinship, but also prompts a reconsideration of what the study of kinship should be. It is herein argued that denim points us to consider the study of kinship as the study of ‘closeness’, a term which affords the consideration of objects in the milieu of intimate relationships.

Denim and the Dong’s

The case of the Dong family will now be examined, as it well exemplifies the distribution of denim that seems commonplace among families. The researcher’s main contact with the Dong family came through 22 year old Dong Baiyi. Dong Baiyi lives at home, with her older brother and parents, and as such they live in a nuclear kinship unit. The Dong family is atypical of modern Chinese kinship structure in that they have two children, due to an exemption in the family planning laws allowing couples in which one of the parents is of a state-recognised ethnic minority (Dong Baiyi’s mother, Li Jingmei, is of Dai ethnicity) to have multiple births (Sautman, 1998:89-90).

The family are economically comfortable. Dong Baiyi works as a receptionist in a two-star hotel, earning around 2000 RMB per month. Her brother, Dong Yishan, sells insurance, which can earn several thousand RMB per month dependent on commission. Baiyi's father, Dong Guoping, is a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) doctor, and her mother is a nurse.

Dong Baiyi claims only she and her brother wear denim regularly, while her parents wear it very rarely. Baiyi herself had six pairs of jeans, and her brother had 4 pairs. The presence of denim in the family, however, is not a new phenomenon, dating back to 1990, when Baiyi was only four years old. At that time she received a denim dress from her mother's sister, who, Baiyi informed the researcher, was then making a living importing large amounts of foreign clothing for sale.

The purchase of Baiyi's first pair of jeans occurred six years later, at her request, when ten year old Baiyi was in the final year of primary school. Baiyi was able to vividly recall the event:

Yes, because I thought in school, very many people were wearing [jeans]. I thought they were very beautiful. So I made my Dad take me. It [jeans] had just become popular...

At that time I felt... at that time I bought them... that cloth was very, very soft. I felt, the colour was very light. Light blue. Light blue. At that time. Afterwards, below it had Mickey mouse design. I felt, at that time i felt it was very fashionable, the important thing was I felt it was very popular, ah, to have flared-trousers, it didn't feel bad at all. Also, I recall at that time I unexpectedly had a little bit of an interest in denim. Because I felt when you wear them it was very comfortable, not the same as other trousers, where you wear them for a few days, they're dirty... with denim, you don't have to wash it so clean.

Baiyi's third denim item, another pair of jeans, was gifted from her father's elder brother, who gave her a set of tight jeans, which she claims to have disliked. Her fourth denim item, given to her shortly afterwards, was a pair of dungaree jeans:

Baiyi: And that time, ah... too cute! I felt wearing dungaree jeans, I felt relatively cute. After, I just really liked to wear [them], because braced jeans are very convenient, just a T-shirt and some braced trousers. I felt very good.

Interviewer: Your friends, at that time, also wore them?

Baiyi: Yes. I think from the sixth year of primary school, starting that time, it started to become fashionable. Just, a lot of little girls who love to make themselves up and wear beautiful clothes started to wear them, just started to wear jeans.

Baiyi's testimony reveals important trends for her induction into denim. All four of the first denim items she received were gifted to her, with at least three coming from close relations on both the maternal and paternal sides of her family. Baiyi herself took an active role in instigating the purchase of one pair.

Today Baiyi's situation has changed. She now has a university degree, a job, and considerable autonomy over her clothes, food and lifestyle. She continues to live at home, but the flow of resources has started to reverse itself, perhaps most significantly by the surrender of a third of her monthly income (around 600 RMB) to her parents. This reverse reveals, in some sense, Baiyi's filial obligation to her parents to return the nurturance she has been given. However, in this period denim has continued to remain an important feature in Baiyi's wardrobe, even if the way she has thought about them has changed.

Now I like jeans because they are convenient (*fāngbiàn*), you can match them with anything. Match them with T-shirts, match them with shirts. And... the main point is you can match them with anything. Also, they won't be vulgar (*yōngsú*).

Baiyi's denim collection has expanded to six pairs of jeans (only three of which she regularly wears), a pair of denim dungarees, and three denim dresses. Baiyi's jeans are not particularly tight, and many have floral designs.

The importance of floral forms in Baiyi's life quickly became apparent. Virtually every time Baiyi met the researcher she was wearing at least one item of clothes featuring some kind of floral pattern. This ranged from a pink hooded-top with large flowers on it, to

small flowers on the inner-lining of her *Converse*-style shoes, the tongue of which was folded over to reveal the floral-patterned fabric. But flowers were not merely worn by Baiyi, they seemed to permeate her entire life. This was made apparent when Baiyi invited the researcher on a park trip to “look at the flowers” (kàn huā). Baiyi was able to identify a large array of flora, their blossoming times, and sometimes their medicinal use. On at least three separate days, she pointed out, or drew the researcher’s attention to flowers.

Baiyi is aware that her clothing differs markedly from that of her parents. Her father owns only a single pair of jeans (which he rarely wears); her mother owns three; in comparison to four owned by her brother and six by herself. Baiyi reported that none of her grandparents (both paternal and maternal) ever owned or wore jeans. She describes their style as ‘plain’ (*pǔsù*), although she said that she did not mind the clothes that they wore. Baiyi’s mother also wore a long, very flowery skirt on the occasion she met the researcher. In fact, the amount of casual skirts in her mother’s wardrobe exceeded Baiyi’s own. Baiyi related her mother’s preference for skirts to her Dai ethnicity. Regardless of garment, though, the wearing of flowers, either embroidered or print, seemed to be something that both her and her mother could indulge in, both linking the maternal side and emphasising femininity.

Baiyi has been wearing denim for over four-fifths of her life, and jeans for over half. Baiyi likes jeans because they are “comfortable” and “convenient”, two words she used on countless occasions to describe jeans. Not only has Baiyi grown up, denim has grown with her, and her preferences in what constitutes suitable denim have changed. Most of her jeans remain straight-legged or flared, which she maintains is appropriate if your body is “just ok”. Flowers emphasise her femininity, but also draw attention to her body. The cut of Baiyi’s denim enables her to be a grown woman, while still being a filial daughter. The history of her receiving the denim from her family represents a tacit approval of her choice by her parents,

that has enabled her to expand the forms of denim she wears. The multiple forms of denim Baiyi owns suggest the fabric was instrumental in allowing this transformation of identity to occur.

The selfless jean? Denim and nurturance

The young age at which Dong Baiyi received her first pair of denim jeans reflects the often-encountered role that parents had in encouraging their offspring to adopt denim. In all four of the families included in this fieldwork, the youngest generation owned, on average, double the amount of denim items than their parents.

The role parents played in encouraging their children to wear denim was reflected in a number of ways. First, in shopping trips, the near-universal accompaniment of under-18 year olds by parents or grandparents was observed. Parents not only sanctioned the purchase, but frequently handed over the money themselves.

Many young adults described starting university as a breakpoint, in terms of shopping unaccompanied, citing the freedom to shop on their own or with friends. However, most still received some sort of allowance from their parents to spend on clothing. 21 year old female student Luo Huidai summarised the situation:

Before I had started university, I lived with my mother, she would take me to stroll the streets (*guàngjiē*), and provide ideas, but after starting university Mum was not by my side. Every month we receive living expenses, right? ... [Now] when we stroll the streets... I go with classmates, there are a few people whose perspective (*yānguāng*) will be about the same as [me]. I will get these people to accompany me to buy... I will get at least another person to come with me. Because a friends' eyes are like a mirror.

The most extreme example of familial shopping strategies observed was that of with Yang Changying. Changying was accompanied on the shopping trip by her mother's sibling's daughter (younger than ego) (*biǎomèi*). Changying found a top and a pair of high heels she

particularly liked, and resolved to purchase them. However, the seller only gave a 5 RMB discount on her original asking price of 180 RMB. Changying became particularly irate at the fact that the seller would not give her a larger discount. She marched out of the stall, boarded a taxi, and went across town to a large 7-floor market, where her mother's other sibling's daughter (older than ego) (*biǎojiě*), who she simply addressed as 'older sister' (*jiě*), had a small stall. 'Older sister' then took the lead in sourcing the rest of Changying's costume, with items from her own stall, at cost price, and using her hard-nosed bargaining skills, some pieces from nearby stalls at heavily discounted prices. Under her 'older sister's' supervision, she managed to get a new t-shirt, tights, some black shorts and a pair of high-heeled shoes for 100 RMB.

Changying's case, though not directly about denim (even though she was wearing jeans at the time), illustrates the enduring importance of Chinese kinship relations in the procurement of clothing, even in urban environments. When formal methods of obtaining clothing with strangers through economic methods failed, Changying reverted to an extended family network to obtain clothing at an affordable price.

The first finding of this paper is that parents in Kunming have, since the start of China's opening and reform period in the early 1980, elected to clothe their offspring in denim while, in most instances, not adopting to follow the trend themselves. They have achieved this through the buying and gifting of clothes to young children; and the tacit approval gained through the act of accompanying older children on shopping trips, where they are also often frequently called upon to fund the purchase. Denim, however, seems to have a separate story to tell in this context, that is of parents' own unease about the disjuncture which has been created, and their subsequent attempts to close it.

Parental attempts to close the kinship gulf

In the case of the Dong family previously mentioned, both of the parents owned denim items, but the researcher never observed either of the parents wearing them. This observation was further substantiated by the daughter, Dong Baiyi, who testified that her parents rarely wore the denim they owned. This phenomena was by no means confined to the Dong family. In all the families surveyed, parents reported that they owned denim, but through regular encounters in the course of their day-to-day lives it became plainly obvious that they very rarely wore their jeans. None of the families reported grandparents as ever having owned or worn jeans.

Gao Suyin, 45, who worked at a vegetable stall was a notable exception to this. Gao Suyin was noted to alternate two pairs of trousers on the days she worked at the stall. Some days she wore a pair of smart cotton patterned grey/black trousers, on other days she wore a rather ill-fitting pair of jeans. Unusually for a woman of her age, the jeans were relatively tight on her body, the waist of which was pulled up to her navel. They had two off-centre seams on the outside, and the bottom three inches were folded up around her shin. She had bought the jeans for her daughter, who had refused to wear them. Chinese markets generally do not issue refunds for unwanted goods, so she ended up wearing them herself.

Several parents remarked on what they perceived to be the inconvenience of jeans in comparison to ‘casual trousers’ (*xiūxiánkù*). For example, Chen Juan and her husband are both in their forties, and run a small boiled dumpling restaurant in the North-west of the city. She explained that though she does own some jeans, she does not wear them. She says that older people should wear looser, more relaxed clothes, rather than “tight, tight, stretched, stretched” (*jǐnjǐnbēngbēng*) ones. Juan put her statement into practice the following day, when she was observed wearing a huge, grey sleeveless, loose one-piece smock-like outfit

with strips of dark-grey acrylic fur along the edges.

That is not to say that denim is completely absent from the Chen family. On one occasion, Chen Juan's brother-in-law who also worked at the restaurant, perched at the end of the restaurant and lit up a cigarette. His trousers appeared to be denim-like, except they were not 'standard' denim: they consisted of pale blue, very thin cotton. On the back pocket there was ornate embroidered flowers in dark blue thread. His keys and a pair of nail clippers hung from his belt. Jutting out from underneath his jeans were a pair of shiny white, alligator-skin style loafers, with a small golden-coloured flash on them. As he made to leave, he donned a pair of tinted glasses, mounted his blue electric scooter, cigarette hanging from mouth, and rode away. The two sisters looked at each other, and were overheard disparagingly saying: "His clothes, they're so bad looking" (*tā de yīfú tài nánkàn*). Hong Jianhua's sartorial digression provoked disapproval precisely because his choice of items were not suitable for a man of his age and position.

In fact, the ownership of such trousers, typically made of soft blue cotton fabric was not at all uncommon amongst middle-aged parents. They were made to look slightly distressed, like jeans, although they felt more like the cotton 'casual trousers' preferred by parents. When Dong Baiyi told the researcher her father had just such a pair of 'jeans', she also disparagingly remarked "They're not proper jeans, though."

Colour was another important differentiating factor between parents and their children's adoption of the fabric. Denim was available in a range of colours in Kunming, however, the most popular remained blue. It was more common for the lowest generation to experiment with wearing different colours, parents preferred blue jeans, which one informant described as being more 'traditional' (*chuántōng*).

Children and young people wore a far wider range of denim styles than did adults.

Parents seemed to be restricted in style mostly to jeans, whereas young people were also seen wearing dungarees and skirts. Children were perhaps the only group to also wear full denim suits (i.e. jackets and jeans) in addition to other styles. In the research period, a pair of heavily distressed, torn jeans, which are known in China by the nickname ‘beggars trousers’ (*qīgàikù*) were spotted only once, worn by a twenty-something female.

In conclusion, having effectively ‘weaned’ their children onto a variety of denim forms, most parents opted not to actively follow the path they had sent their own offspring down. Wang Baiyi recounted the pairs of jeans that hung, unused, in her parents’ wardrobes. Chen Juan had a pair of unused jeans that she disliked for their lack of comfort and overall tightness. The jeans Guo Suyin purchased for her daughter had been rejected, and by default fell to her to wear, which she did so in the workplace, despite being somewhat ill-fitting. Parents would happily say that denim looked good on their own offspring, but that it was not suitable for themselves. One possible explanation for this phenomena may be that these parents are likely to have witnessed, or been aware of, the criticism levelled at denim as being ‘spiritually polluting’ by the state apparatus in the 1980s (see Wang, 1986; Webb, 1986; He, 1996 for accounts) and more broadly, the severe repercussions of sartorial indiscretions during the cultural revolution when wrongdoers were forced to remove offending garments in front of crowds during Red Army struggle sessions (Nien, 1987:85; in Steele & Major, 1999:59). It is possible that such memories generate the ambivalence felt by parents towards wearing denim themselves.

If parents really experience such feelings of anxiety because of their experience of the previously hazardous nature of denim, what could account for their decision to purchase the jeans in the first place, and then subsequently not wear them? Parents did not provide any

testimony as to the logicality of their purchase, and it is at this point unclear. However, it would seem reasonable to suggest that parents may have been driven by a desire to experience some of the material wealth that their children were receiving (Davis and Sensenbrenner (2000:62) report similar trends for ‘parental indulgence’ amongst Shanghai adults).

One other feasible explanation would be the narrative that existed among informants which stated that wearing similar or identical fabrics engendered particular sensations of closeness. This was most manifestly demonstrated by the existence of ‘family outfits’ (*jiātíngzhuāng*), identical outfits available across men’s, women’s and children’s sizes. Where there were no child cuts available the clothing was also called ‘lovers’ outfits’ (*qīnrénzhuāng*). The garments were intended to be worn concurrently by family members (or unmarried couples). The shopkeeper described that the clothing was popular as it provided a “close feeling” (*qīnmì de gǎnjué*) between wearers, revealing a capacity for clothing to be conceptualised as not only expressing intimate family connections, but through the act of purchase and consumption, actually sustaining and strengthening such personal bonds. Family outfits were by no means widely worn. Some expressed distaste for the overtness of the clothing. In many ways, the ‘family outfit’ was seen to be using a proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut. But it does raise the possibility of denim having the potential to achieve a similar feeling of intimacy, or closeness, in a much subtler fashion. Were this supposition to be true, it would appear to corroborate Miller and Woodward’s (in press) argument that denim has the capacity to express intimacy as well as globality.

Cowboy trousers and the closeness of kinship

This paper opened by postulating that if denim had to be considered in relationship to any

single phenomena, it should be kinship, a theme which has been central to anthropological accounts of China for decades.

How did taking denim as a point of enquiry contribute to an understanding of the concept of kinship? The traditional Chinese model of kinship was portrayed as being consanguineal in nature, agnatic, stressing patrilineality, emphasised through complex kinship nomenclature categories and the corporate institution of the family. Some phenomena observed confirm elements of this system: gifting of denim from upper to lower generations constitutes the receiving of nurturance from ancestors; the widespread adoption of denim being mainly confined to the bottom generation substantiates continued importance of distinguishing the generations. Concurrently, denim also challenges the traditional system: denim was gifted from the matrilineal side rather than solely within a corporate patrilineal institution; parents owned jeans, but felt uncomfortable wearing them; denim was worn by both genders with variations in styles. This evidence indicates kinship was also objectified through buying, gifting and consumption of denim, rather than being wholly dependent on biological categories dictated by “the basic facts of life … birth, conception, and death” (Fox, 1967:27). A material culture approach, accommodating individuals’ relationships to denim, hereby challenges social anthropology’s conventional rendering of kinship.

Kinship is also more than, as Godelier (1998:387) claims, mental and societal realities encompassing marriage, nomenclature, and the marking of individuals and their bodies. Looking at kinship through the lens of denim shows that such relations do not exist ‘as is’. Rather, *kinship is created*, through the minutiae of social action: the gifting of jeans from parent to child invoking traditional notions of nurturance; familial clothes shopping trips; decisions on what to wear for any given day. Multitudes of tiny gestures combine to produce the reality of being a mother, father, son, daughter, sister or brother. Denim, just as much as

biological fact or kinship terminology, has been shown to contribute to constructing such a reality.

Is the study of kinship, it must be then asked, useful at all? Schneider (1984:193) dismisses kinship, arguing it is only relevant because it has been defined by European social scientists who use the system as the method of understanding the world around them, dryly pointing out the Nuer never told Fortes or Leach “We have patrilineal lineages...” (1984:4). Schneider demonstrates not all societies have ‘kinship’, at least in terms of social relationships connected to underlying sexual or biological fact. Godelier (1998) argues that kinship and family are not, in fact, the foundation of society, and that ties based on kinship have never been enough to create corporate relations. Dousset (2007:65) points out that Godelier’s work suggests kinship ties do not produce a society, rather, politico-religious relationships achieve this by producing and legitimatising the sovereignty of a human groups over territories and their social and materially constructed resources.

However, dismissing kinship studies altogether on the grounds of these faults runs the risk of throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bath water. This study has demonstrated that in Kunming, the arrangement and maintenance of family relations remained a major concern for participants, and denim was used to objectify these relationships.

Carsten (2000:4) attempts to recast kinship as a study of ‘relatedness’. She claims that thinking in terms of relatedness is beneficial as it allows the use of local idioms rather than pre-given definitions of what kinship is, while facilitating a move away from the inherent analytical opposition between the social and biological, on which kinship study has thus far focused. Carsten (1995:224) illustrates this via the argument that it is only through indigenous notions of relatedness: for the Malay, she claims, living and consuming together

in houses is the way in which they become kin. Carsten's description makes kinship processual, mutable and fluid, and is closer to what has been observed with denim consumption in this study.

The problem with Carsten's use of relatedness, as she herself notes, is that it can be used to describe either genealogical connection (and in so doing it confronts the same problem as kinship); or, it can be used more generally to encompasses all relations (and is thus prone to be too unspecific). Thus, it is here argued that the study of 'closeness' offers a more workable term to understand kinship. As opposed to 'relatedness', 'closeness' affords more primacy to an individual's immediacy (which could be understood physically, biologically, emotionally or cognitively), over that which is far away, while not rejecting the distant altogether. Importantly, such a definition also (albeit innocuously) allows the opportunity to acknowledge that very often the things *closest* to people, are exactly that: *things*. For while informants spent an important part of their lives in contact (both physically and socially) with their families and other individuals, by contrast their *entire* lives were spent in contact with objects (especially denim which was, of course, worn). These objects, as demonstrated by jeans, in addition to objectifying social relations, also acted to transform informant's understanding of kinship. Kinship as the study of 'closeness' is thus advanced, as it entails a requirement to consider the role objects play in everyday life and social relations.

The findings also raise the importance of the inclusion of non-denim wearers in any account of denim. If, as Miller and Woodward (2007:336) argue, at any moment half the population of the world is clad in denim, this also entails that at any moment half the world is *not* wearing the fabric. The Chinese case shows that non-wearers played a significant role in making denim consumption the norm for those who did wear it. There are parallels here with Miller's (in press) study of denim in a small Indian town, where he argues that the adoption

of jeans is dictated by caste conservatism. The difference is that in Kunming, by contrast, the adoption appears much more marked by a generational conservatism.

Denim has been particularly efficacious due to its ability to insert itself into traditional notions of *yǎng* and the maintenance of kinship, enabling Kunming parents to gift it to their children in the hope their lives would be fundamentally different from their own, coupled with an awareness that an alteration in material circumstances would be necessary to achieve such a change. But denim also provoked a ‘kinship gulf’ between children and their parents, one that parents now appeared keen to close, by purchasing and wearing denim of their own, though not without a degree of ambivalence. It is as if, having dispatched their offspring into the *Brave New World*, parents desired to follow in their progenies’ footsteps, to experience some of the materiality their offspring had. Ambivalence was best reflected by the amount of parents’ jeans lying inactive, in wardrobes. Thus, perhaps the most remarkable discovery about denim in Kunming at the turn of the century is that it was seen as a tool that could create generational disjunction through the most traditional of means, and then later was hoped would provide the solution to remove this disjunction.

Denim has demonstrated, with great subtlety, an important change that has taken place within South-western Chinese society. Denim showed hope for the future of the youngest generation, a desire that through their use they could be ‘comfortable’, in every sense of the word, not only with their family and peers but with a world ‘out there’. Denim not only provided this opportunity, but continues to do so, day in and day out.

Bibliography

- Carsten, J. (1995). The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood, and Relatedness among Malays in Pulau Langkawi. *American Ethnologist*, 22(2), 223-241.
- Carsten, J. (2000). Introduction: cultures of relatedness. In J. Carsten (Ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (pp. 1-36). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, D. S. (2000). Introduction: A Revolution in Consumption. In D. S. Davis (Ed.), *The consumer revolution in urban China*. Berkeley; London: University of California Press.
- Davis, D. S. & Sensenbrenner, J. (2000). Commercializing Childhood: Parental Purchases for Shanghai's Only Child. In D. S. Davis (Ed.), *The consumer revolution in urban China* (pp. 54-79). Berkeley; London: University of California Press.
- Diamant, N. J. (2000). *Revolutionizing the family: politics, love, and divorce in urban and rural China, 1949-1968*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dousset, L. (2007). 'There Never Has Been Such a Thing as a Kin-Based Society': A Review Article. *Anthropological Forum: A journal of social anthropology and comparative sociology*, 17(1), 61-69.
- Fong, V. L. (2004). *Only hope: coming of age under China's one-child policy*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Fox, R. (1967). *Kinship and Marriage: an anthropological perspective*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freedman, M. (1965). *Lineage organization in southeastern China*. London: University of London, Athlone Press.
- Gates, H. (1987). Money for the Gods. *Modern China*, 13(3), 259-277.
- Godelier, M. (1998). Afterword: Transformation and Lines of Evolution. In M. Godelier, T. R. Trautmann, & F. E. Tjon Sie Fat (Eds.), *Transformations of kinship* (pp. 386-413). Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution.
- Gold, T. B. (1984). "Just in Time!": China Battles Spiritual Pollution on the Eve of 1984. *Asian Survey*, 24(9), 947-974.
- He, B. (1996). Dilemmas of pluralist development and democratization in China. *Democratization*, 3(3), 287-305.
- Doolittle, J. (1866). *Social Life of the Chinese*. Ludgate Hill: Sampson Low, Son & Marston.
- Kipnis, A. (2008). Education and the governing of child-centered relatedness. In S. Brandtstädt & G. D. Santos (Eds.), *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives* (pp. 204-222). Routledge: Routledge.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The elementary structures of kinship* (J. H. Bell, J. von Sturmer, & R. Needham, Trans.). London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Miller, D. (in press). The limits of jeans in Kannur, Kerala. In D. Miller & S. Woodward (Eds.), *The Global Denim Project*. London: Routledge.
- Miller, D. & Woodward, S. (2007). Manifesto for a study of denim. *Social Anthropology*, 15(3), 335-351.
- Miller, D. & Woodward, S. (in press). Introduction. In D. Miller & S. Woodward (Eds.), *The Global Denim Project*. London: Routledge.

- Morgan, L. H. (1871). *Systems of consanguinity and affinity of the human family*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- Nien, C. (1987). *Life and Death in Shanghai*. London: Grafton.
- Sautman, B. (1998). Preferential policies for ethnic minorities in China: The case of Xinjiang. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 4(1), 86-118.
- Schneider, D. M. (1984). *A critique of the study of kinship*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Simmel, G. (1978). *The philosophy of money* (T. Bottomore & D. Frisby, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Stafford, C. (1995). *The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stafford, C. (2000). Chinese patriliney and the cycles of yang and laiwang. In J. Carsten (Ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (pp. 37-54). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Steele, V. & Major, J. S. (1999). *China chic: east meets west*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Stone, L. (1997). *Kinship and gender: an introduction*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Wang, S.-S. (1986). The Rise and Fall of the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution in the People's Republic of China. *Asian Affairs*, 13(1), 47-62.
- Webb, C. (1986). China: An outsider's inside view. *Asian Affairs*, 17(1), 57-63.
- Yan, Y. (2005). The Individual and Transformation of Bridewealth in Rural North China. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 11(4), 637-658.
- Yan, Y. (2003). *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Zhao, X. & Belk, R. (2003). Money to Burn: Consumption by the Dead in China. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 30, 222-225.

i I am incredibly grateful to Professor Daniel Miller and Dr Sophie Woodward for commenting on drafts of this paper. I am much obliged to Professor Yang Hui of Yunnan University who gave valuable assistance in China. This project was made possible by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council.

ii Where it has been felt to aid clarity, English translations of Mandarin Chinese are accompanied with italicised Hanyu Pinyin in parentheses.

iii The accounts were obtained during a two-month period of fieldwork in Kunming between June and July 2009. Informants' names have been replaced to protect their anonymity. All interviews with informants were conducted in standard Mandarin Chinese. I remain greatly indebted to the participants of this research, who demonstrated much hospitality in allowing me into their lives.

iv For more information on the Global Denim Project visit <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-denim-project>

v Freedman's work concentrated on lineage in China's South-east, and it should be noted that the south-west probably never quite had the same corporate dimension to kinship as Freedman's descriptions. Nevertheless, his model is included here because of its enduring influence in sinological anthropology, and in this respect it provides a useful 'ideal type' with which to balance the conclusions of this thesis against. By the same token, it should be noted that this inquiry into denim in a South-Western Chinese city should not be assumed as representing China in its entirety. A wealth of anthropological studies have emphasised the heterogeneity of many aspects of Chinese life when considered on a national scale. Clothing

is no different. Both my own observations, and that of my informants emphasise the uniqueness of sartorial life of Kunming, both in respect of other Chinese cities, and the countryside.