


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sipping tea, plastics performing: representational and materialist politics of boba tea consumption in contemporary China

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Abstract

In a single serving of boba tea, the non-human actors of the tall plastic cups, plastic dome lids, and the giant plastic straws dominate, but receive little attention. This article uses recent theories and discussions of new materialism to bring together cultural analysis of the boba tea consumption phenomenon that could be relevant for reflecting on a sustainable future. The article contributes to social research of waste by focusing on the mediating functions of plastic before it becomes waste. My central argument is that plastic is not merely a physical and impartial container in the contemporary food and beverage industry. It plays an indispensable role in the visualization, mass mediation, and consumption of the boba tea beverage. While current waste research often focuses on the “afterlife” of plastic waste as it relates to underclass waste workers, recycling economy and global waste trade, this article highlights the performative function of plastic as it changes the way we imagine time, gender, and waste. I show it is the plastic cup that enables boba tea to be so visually and gastronomically satisfying in an age when the photogenicity and “Instagrammability” of food and beverage have become more relevant to taste and distinctions.

Key words: Boba tea consumption; contemporary China; new materialism; performance capacity of plastic; single-use plastic

Lining up for an hour to get a boba tea was no fun. Obviously, I was not alone in Shenzhen, South China in the hot summer of 2019. The small teashop was packed with eager customers on a weekend morning. When using the term “boba tea,” I refer to a beverage that involves mixing tea with milk, cheese or fresh fruits, tapioca balls, and other ingredients. In the Shenzhen boba teashop, many young people came with their parents, even their grandparents – it was very much a family event. It was fascinating to see that everyone took a picture with the plastic cup before taking the first sip as a way to compensate for the long queues. In fact, when I chatted with these tea customers, everyone said, “Camera first, of course. It is so pretty.”

Queuing up for a cup of boba tea is now part of everyday urban life in contemporary China. Long lines of people gazing at their phones for an hour or two are signs of the popularity of a certain teashop or a new tea flavor. Several teashop brands, such as Heytea, Gong Cha, Yidiandian, Coco, and Nayuki’s Tea, stand out with nationwide chains of stores.¹ Not only do they constantly invent new flavors to bring in business, but they also attract customers through designer tearoom spaces. In fact, when a branch of Heytea was opened in Shanghai in 2017, news headlines reported that as many as 10,000 people joined a queue that lasted for up to 5 hours. Some joked that it would have

¹Junjie 2020.

been easier to get a boba tea from the same teashop located in the neighboring city of Suzhou, which was 30 minutes away by highspeed train. Although everyone complained that their phone battery died and their legs ached after the excessive wait, people were satisfied after taking a picture of the tea and sharing it on social media.

The tradition of serving tea in traditional clay teapots and ceramic cups sounds like something from antiquity for many holding the chilled plastic cups these days. But boba tea only emerged in the 1990s, starting in Taiwan where tea powders, tapioca, and various artificial flavors were mixed together in a shaker. The upgraded version, highly popular in mainland China and around the world today, has most ingredients served fresh. The tea base, for instance, is freshly brewed loose tea leaves. Milk powder is ditched and instead fresh milk and cheese are used. The choices of toppings have expanded extensively, ranging from various tropical fruits to red beans, aloe, grass jelly, and sago.

But boba tea involves more than the fresh ingredients. It is an expression of urban and youth identity. It is about pre-ordering food and drink using digital infrastructure of smartphones, phone applications, and electronic payments. Taking a selfie with a cup of boba tea in a designer tearoom at a high-end shopping mall says much about one's identity, age, urban location, and mode of consumption. It is a new kind of "distinction"² that can be visualized and shown off through the ubiquitous smartphone and social media. If consuming a Starbucks coffee in urban China in early 2000 functioned as a means to flag one's membership of the group of "xiaozi (petty bourgeoisie),"³ holding a boba tea in the 2020s represents a recent trend of younger Chinese pursuing experiences of techno-individuality. Many youngsters even jokingly describe boba tea as a form of "IV drip" (the intravenous therapy that delivers fluid, medication, and nutrition directly into a person's vein), implying the need to consume the tea frequently to prove one's identity or state of existence (Fig. 1). But this is not only the case in China: the fever for boba tea has become global, with boba tea shops springing up like mushrooms in various parts of southeast Asia, the United States, Europe, South Africa, and Australia.

While socio-cultural theories certainly remind us of how such things as boba tea consumption construct urban identities and distinctions, they seldom point to the elephant in the room: the enormous wastage of single-use plastic in the consumption of this product. In a single serving of boba tea, the non-human actors of the tall plastic cups, the domed lids, and the giant plastic straws dominate – but they receive little attention. All plastic cups serving boba tea are made of polypropylene (PP) or polyethylene terephthalate (PET), known for their stability in withstanding high temperatures. In the past, PP had a milky finish and was more often used in takeout containers. In recent years, however, the translucence of PP has been improved by injecting a sorbitol-type nucleating agent. With more processing, the latest PP is proudly comparable to the appearance and functionality of glass. Today, PP is even lighter and more durable than PET, making it one of the most widely used materials for food and beverages. Yet the ubiquity of PET is also associated with its high and excessive disposability.

According to Chinese NGO Eco Canton in 2019, the popularity and the daily habits of boba tea among Chinese people led to the production of 5,000 million single-use cups in 2018, counting both plastic cups and paper cups with a plastic lining. These could line up to go around the Earth multiple times.⁴ In another report published by the *New York Times* in 2019, the online takeout business in China was responsible for 1.6 million tons of packaging waste in 2017.⁵ In short, the consumption of boba tea, together with the huge takeout business, is really a single-use plastic disaster in China. The numbers of single-use plastic cup going into landfill or the ocean will only increase as boba tea now travels to and gains popularity in other parts of the world.

The major question asked in this article is: Why do people keep using so many plastic containers despite being well aware that single-use plastic has been filling up landfills and the ocean, and destroying

²Bourdieu 1984.

³Henningsen 2012.

⁴Eco Canton 2019.

⁵Zhong and Zhang 2019.



Figure 1. Boba tea meme in China (https://www.qqtn.com/article/article_276563_1.html).

the air and nature? Why are decades of environmental campaigns for the reduction of single-use plastics not changing people's behaviors? At the same time, while environmentalists have campaigned hard to call for a reduction in single-use plastics, they seldom examine why people keep using them apart from the convenience. The assumption is that consumers or businesses could easily switch to other types of containers made from degradable ingredients while holding the same amount of food.

This article suggests that the answer is complicated. It argues that the translucent plastic container both changes and mediates the meaning of food. Single-use plastic not only enhances food, but shapes its visual attractiveness in the age of social media, playing a critical role in defining the meaning of food and manner of consumption. Plastic containers are therefore not easily replaceable and their use is difficult to reduce. This article engages recent theories and discussions of new materialism to bring together cultural and media analysis of the boba tea consumption phenomenon that could be relevant to reflect on a sustainable future. Thinking through the mediative and performative capacity of the plastic cups, the article contributes to social research of waste in two ways.⁶ First, it examines the image of plastic in various tea advertising and analyzes how such representations configure the ways in which we imagine the historical and future presence of plastic. Second, the article examines how plastic is represented through the construction of gender ideologies and subjectivities in advertising media. While current waste research often focuses on the “afterlives” of plastic waste as it relates to waste workers, the recycling economy, and the global waste trade, little has been done in relation to the media and gendering capacity of single-use plastic before its disposal. The article shows that it is the plastic cup that changes the way food is understood and consumed in an age when the photogenicity and “instagrammability” of food sometimes becomes more relevant than taste. Coming to terms with the materiality of plastic in enabling consumption and formation of identity will hopefully facilitate a more nuanced discussion on plastic waste reduction in the future.

The article also contributes to the latest non-human and new materialist turn in social and cultural theories.⁷ Existing sociocultural studies often attend to socially disadvantaged groups, the politics of

⁶Gidwani 2015; Gidwani and Maringanti 2016; Gille 2010; Hawkins 2006; Hawkins and Muecke 2003.

⁷Braidotti 2015; Cole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2013; Latour 1993; Miller 2005.

their representations and associated inequalities in the dominant culture, with the focus remaining largely human. The materialist turn has motivated a new direction of research to attend to phenomena that conventionally have been examined in the field of science, including pollution, technology, non-human species, and their intersections with existing inequalities of gender, race, and class.⁸ Jane Bennet, in the influential *Vibrant Matters: A Political Ecology of Things*, suggests the importance of understanding non-human actors, their “thing power,” and the ways in which they help construct human culture and society.⁹ She uses the notion of “distributed agency” to reconceptualize conventional ways of understanding politics and to highlight the role of non-human actors in shaping human actions and environmental consequences. Plastic is one such material or “thing” that dominates and permeates our lives. Yet the material influence – the ubiquity and societal transformations of plastics – has been under-research.¹⁰ This article attempts to respond to calls for more articulation of the ways in which the proliferation of plastic challenges the human existence,¹¹ and impacts the definition of pollution, toxicity, and harms.¹²

By examining how the materiality of single-use plastic changes the ways we see and consume food and beverage through boba tea advertising, I conceptualize the performative power of plastic to think about what single-use plastics do to food, and to human consumers. This article also highlights boba tea as a popular cultural platform where single-use plastic, gender, popular media, and digital technology meet.

Figure of plastic in boba tea advertisements

Advertisements for boba tea are everywhere, attractive, and powerful in today’s China. A boba tea brand in Zhejiang province called Xiangpiaopiao, for instance, ran so many commercials during television reality shows that the company’s advertising cost was 360 million RMB in 2016, far exceeding its annual profit of 270 million RMB.¹³ No doubt, the new beverage capital and advertising greatly influence our perceptions and consumption behaviors, but also our understanding of plastic. The brand Heytea, in particular, has been known to run so much high-quality online advertising that it has redefined both the tea industry and the advertising industry. In what follows, I show a few examples from the national Heytea chain of teashops to give readers a sense of how boba tea is promoted in contemporary China.

Since it began in 2012, Heytea has mushroomed into 695 tea-rooms, with its net worth estimated at about 60 billion RMB in 2020. The tea company now occupies a flagship position and one of the biggest shares in the country’s tea beverage market. With a Japanese-style brand logo, and some of its tea-rooms decorated in *zen* and laboratory styles, Heytea often promotes itself as a brand of “coolness, *zen*, inspire and design.”¹⁴ The truth, however, is that majority of Heytea commercials continue to deploy conventional themes of sexualized femininity to sell the company’s product. Heytea also likes to invoke themes of nostalgia and traditional Chinese cultural elements in promoting boba tea.

An iconic series of Heytea advertising revokes the retro style of calendar poster modern girl (*yuefanpai nvlang*). Calendar poster modern girl was an advertising style popular during the republican period of Shanghai, China. During the 1930s, after the imperial dynasty ended and modern China became part of global trade, many calendar posters in Shanghai featured Chinese women in sexy clothing, makeup, and permed hair holding products such as cigarettes, soap, and perfumes. The advertisement style has been seen as promoting new commodities with sexualized female bodies, a combination unprecedented in the history of the imperial nation.¹⁵ Heytea mocked the calendar

⁸Alaimo 2016; Haraway 2016; Probyn 2016.

⁹Bennet 2011.

¹⁰Abrahms-Kavunenko 2021.

¹¹Pathak and Nichter 2019.

¹²Liboiron 2016.

¹³Pengpengjun 2017.

¹⁴Zhang 2021, p. 3.

¹⁵Dal Lago 2012, pp. 45–62.

poster modern girl style by replacing the older commercial products with its own boba tea and retaining the sexualized femininity. In other words, even though the Heytea brand claims to be cool and *zen*, it continues to deploy “the female body as the displaying site of the pleasure of consumption.”¹⁶

But Heytea’s advertising goes beyond putting the plastic cup back into the context of 1930s China. It also features boba tea with dancing models in colorful outfits set in the 1980s. The boldness, the cheapness, and images of dancing glamor successfully made the brand’s “cantaloupe tea flavor” a new topic of conversation during 2020. To surprise consumers further, the brand even put boba tea back in pre-modern China, featuring lovers in ancient clothing walking by river and mountain landscapes with traditional Chinese poems on the side.¹⁷ In all these representations, the tea brand successfully gained attention and boosted sales by juxtaposing the elements of tea, nostalgia, femininity, and themes of Chinese tradition. Added together, these elements signify postmodern design of pastiche and innovative parody (Figs 2–4).

While these commercials have raised numerous online discussions about how the company repackages Chinese culture and traditions, no one has ever talked about how plastic figures in and in relation to them. If one looks closely at these posters, the plastic cups, sometimes together with the plastic straws, appear to sit rather awkwardly in the represented spaces and time periods. One poster features a purple-colored boba tea in the hand of a Chinese woman in a purple *qipao* surrounded by antique furniture. Another poster, in the form of a newspaper, juxtaposes the sexualized woman in the *qipao*, boba tea, and a gramophone. In the image shown in Figure 5, the plastic cup was put in the hand of the 1,000-year-old snake deity spirit in the form of a woman walking with her human lover by the lake – a classic Chinese folk legend. The message of the brand is clear: whether in the 1930s, the 1980s, or premodern China, the plastic cup of boba tea blends in.

The problem with these advertisements is less about reinforcing a certain image of Chinese femininities than in radically changing how we imagine both the historical and future presence of plastic in the country. By putting the single-use plastic boba tea cups next to the images of scenic river and mountain landscapes, and in the hands of sexualized Chinese women ostensibly from the 1930s, such advertising engineers an image of plastic as natural and beautiful. Then, by naturalizing a connection between the image of plastic and Chinese tradition, an image is created of plastic as time-honored – even eternal. The truth, of course, is that there was no plastic in pre-modern China. Even though plastic had started to appear by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not widely available in the form of consumer products in Europe or America until after World War II. Plastic might have existed in China during the 1930s or 1940s in certain products such as spectacle frames, but it was not something to which ordinary people had easy access. In the 1970s, the most conspicuous plastic product in rural China was the thin agricultural plastic cover farmers used to protect crops from cold weather, a technology imported from Japan. But these examples were durable and used for a long time, not single-use plastics. Single-use plastics in the form of thin plastic bags only started to appear in China in the 1980s, and such plastics were never used and disposed of as extensively and massively as they are today.¹⁸

Invoking nostalgic sentiments and playing with anachronism, the Heytea advertisements can be seen as funny and eye-catching. No one seriously believes that plastic existed in premodern China. But such advertising does make people easily forget that all kinds of sustainable materials and containers were used in the very recent Chinese past. Serving tea in single-use plastic cups is a historically unprecedented phenomenon that has nothing to do with Chinese history and culture. Yet, as much this article wants to critique these advertisements as constructing a false presence of plastic in the history of China, they also reveal a brutal truth: the potential eternal life of the plastic cups. The non-biodegradable nature of these plastic cups means that plastic waste will pollute our land and oceans for many hundreds of years, if not more. In making visible the plastic cup as an object of omnipotence

¹⁶Pang 2007, p. 124.

¹⁷Huahua 2018.

¹⁸Liu 2020.



Figure 2. Heytea poster: a modern girl with boba tea in qipao and permed hair.

in both premodern and modern Chinese life, these commercials reveal an uncanny truth: single-use plastic waste is not going anywhere.

The tea company would probably counter-argue that it is promoting the tea and not the plastic cups, and it is pure coincidence that plastic is juxtaposed as both disposable and eternal in its posters. Yet such conceptual juxtaposition resonates with the philosophical relationship between “plastic and presentism” explored by Gay Hawkins. Hawkins argues that plastic enacts a particular temporality – presentism or ontology of the present. By that she means plastic not only produces the social-material effect of immediacy, but also the technical effect that commodities, just like boba tea, are endlessly replaceable and reproducible, and therefore have no history or origin. Worse, the presentism enacted by plastic means that it produces “unconcerned consumers” who do not care about the material after-lives of the discarded waste or even about the future.¹⁹ The advertising representation of plastic in China is in fact a rather uncanny accidental reminder of such plastic’s temporalities: although the

¹⁹Hawkins 2018, pp. 99–100.

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Figure 3. Heytea poster: modern girls with boba tea in qipao and permed hair.

figure of disposable cups is characterized by being immediately present and ephemeral in different historical time periods, its discarded afterlife will continue to persist as a part of the country's polluted future.



Figure 4. Screen cap of Heytea video: young couples in the 1980s styles liking tea in cantaloupe flavour. See the entire video at <https://www.bilibili.com/s/video/BV14N411X7tX>.

Performativity and gendering effects of plastics

In this section, my analysis shifts to another type of boba tea advertising, which focuses on taking photographs with boba tea. This is a new form of advertising in which companies do not run their own commercials but instead directly sponsor powerful influencers who share their liking of new products with thousands of followers. At the same time, companies engage customers by allowing them to provide “user-generated content” for products.²⁰ The online advertising content I have selected here has the title “How to serve your tea elegantly and share a perfect picture on the social media?” It is a mixture of the above two strategies. The content belongs to a commercial model company, which uses young, attractive female models to generate a series of photos using Heytea products. The content is basically one picture after another featuring three pretty and slim female models posing with their nail colors next to boba tea, together with chic electronic devices in a nice office/café space. The captions of the pictures instruct readers on methods of conducting photography or selfies with the boba tea – for example, “Let your friends blur in the background while foregrounding yourself in order to highlight the silhouette”; “Lower your chin and elevate your phone to make your face smaller”; “Shoulder to shoulder, turn around and smile.”

Subtlety is what makes such advertising successful. Instead of promoting the tea directly, the content focuses on nail colors and posing postures: “Pink nails go best with the ‘grapefruit flavour’”; “Hey Cheese Gold Black Tea is naturally elegant and goes well with metallic nail colours”; “Getting a 700 ml big cup is a big advantage – it makes your face smaller.” By putting together boba tea, nail beauty, and

²⁰Kicked off by Starbucks about a decade ago, it is now another major marketing strategy that companies around the world use to multiply their advertising effect on social media (Cooper 2019). In China, market research has found that the “beauty values (*gao yanzhi*)” of influencers and live streamers have a direct and additional effect on the sales of a company’s products (Zhou *et al.* 2018).



Figure 5. Heytea poster: lovers in pre-modern Chinese legend walking by the West Lake of Hangzhou with boba tea.

photography, the advertisement goes beyond selling a product to constructing a subjectivity of middle-class office ladies ready to spend money and time on manicures, leisurely drinks, selfie imaging, and social media sharing (Fig. 6).

What is the role of the plastic cup in these narratives and images of photography skills, the pretty ladies, and the boba tea? Is the plastic merely a tea container? I argue that it is a major mediator of the entire process of advertising and consumption. It is precisely the translucent and stretching materiality of the plastic that makes everything else happen. It is the translucent and tall plastic cup that is capable of holding the liquid and stacking up the various colors and textures of ingredients in an appealing way. One might argue that a glass container could do the same, but a glass or a glass bottle does not work well with consumers wanting to hold it in various postures without the problems of spilling. The plastic cup, with its domed lid, not only keep the drink in a stable shape, but its flat opening – rather than a bottle neck – highlights the white creamy or cheesy toppings that contrast with the colors of the tea. In other words, it is the plastic cup with the domed lid – also translucent – that functionally seals and visually mediates the multiple layers of liquid and solid ingredients. It is the plastic that

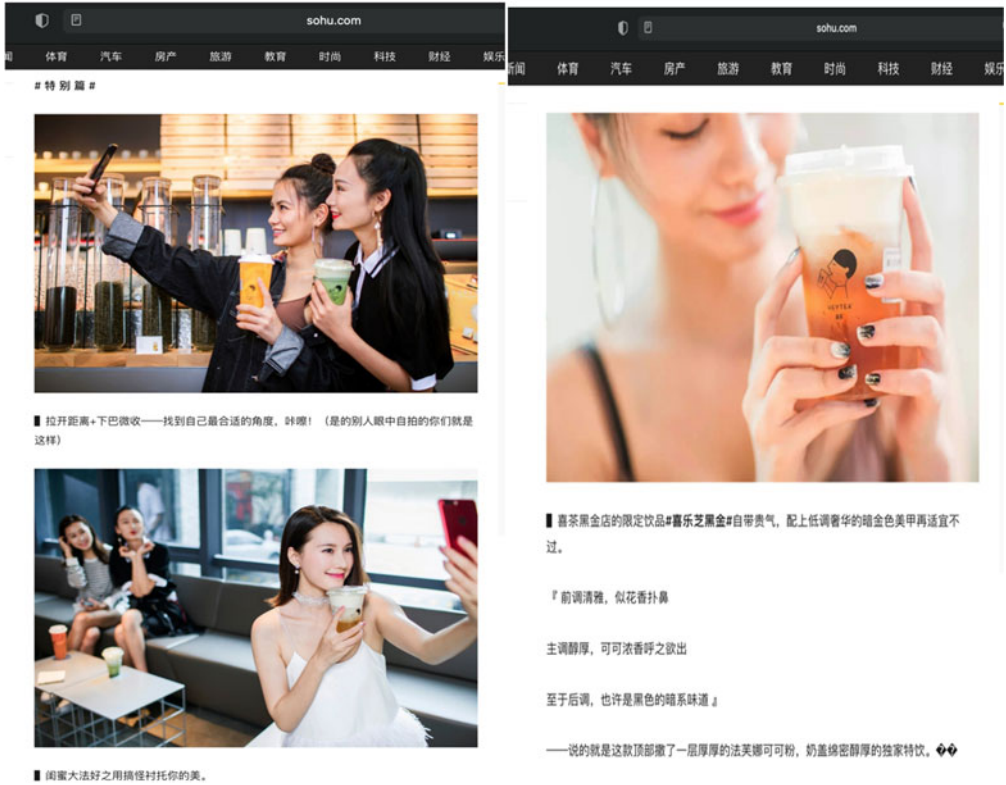


Figure 6. Pictures extracted from the web advertising “How to serve your tea elegantly and share a perfect picture on the social media?” https://www.sohu.com/a/154253597_503407.

makes possible the visualization of the beverage, and accordingly its “instagrammability” or sharing of photographs on social media. Here, the plastic cup assembles the multiple processes of containing, sealing, mediating, photographing, and consuming the beverage. Without the plastic performing these tasks, the boba tea falls apart.

Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastics (2013) by Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, and Mike Michael is insightful. Looking at the case of PET bottles extensively used as mineral water containers in the United States, they argue that the PET bottle does not just hold water, but functions as a “qualifying process” to change public perceptions of the mineral water as cleaner, better, and tastier.²¹ Similarly, the PET plastic cup changes the way we consume boba tea and how we perceive it. In fact, when Heytea first started its business, it used ceramic mugs with PET plastic cups utilized only for takeout orders. But because the tea was enhanced by the swirl of cheese on top and various kinds of colorful fruits, consumers were eager to take pictures of the drink’s “appearance.” With the shaking and mixing processes, the tall translucent plastic cup accentuates the dynamic layering of various ingredients and colors, making it both appealing and photogenic. Increasingly, customers demanded plastic cups when ordering. It motivated the company to ditch the mugs completely and switch to plastic cups.²²

The single-use plastic fundamentally transforms the content and meaning of the drink. It enables the liquid contents to be physically stacked up for visual consumption. The plastic cup and lid can lock

²¹Gabrys *et al.* 2013, pp. 12–14. Environmental NGOs have exposed the truth multiple times that bottled mineral water company often gets their water directly from tap, and carries the same amount of impurities (BBC News 2017).

²²Eco Canton 2019.

up the liquid in a way that enables the cup to be held in various positions for photography. Effectively, the plastic cup alters the physical appearance of the tea in ways that no other material containers could do. It is not an exaggeration to say that the plastic cup is what makes boba tea one of the most popular and most in-demand drinks in the world of the selfie, Instagrammable, and liking economy. Neither a passive nor dead material, plastic plays a role in mediating and assembling the visual and social media consumption of the boba tea. Finally, in China's advertising media, the use of plastics is also associated with urban class distinctions, white-collar femininity, fashion, and beauty.

Discussion: plastics as performative media

This article has shown that the performance power of plastic cup has played a big role in enabling the processes of visualization, photographability, and consumption of food and beverages. A plastic cup does not just hold the tea; it changes our perceptions of the tea – and even its physical appearance. Without the plastic cup, all the color and textures of the boba tea cannot be properly represented. Philosopher Manuel Delanda reminded us of the importance of “expressivity of material.”²³ Indeed, without the plastic material stacking up and mediating all the colors, urban taste, class, and femininity, one wonders if whether the boba tea queue will last.

When we think about the performative agency – or the “thing power”²⁴ – of single-use plastic it is important never to do away with the role of human actor. Indeed, we need to deepen our reflection on the human relationship with plastics. When we start to seriously examine the way plastic “acts” and performs in our media, food consumption, and subsequently in our identity-making, it might come as a surprise to know how much plastic controls our everyday lives. In the case of boba tea consumption, this article has demonstrated that the plastic cup blurs the boundaries among biological, cultural, and media consumption. In advertising media, the representation of plastic also changes the way we imagine the past and the future. The plastic cup takes control of the entire process of us desiring, appreciating, and sharing the food and drink with friends on social media before one actually takes a sip of it. This explains why a simple call for single-use plastic reduction is sometimes ineffective because, beyond serving as a container, the plastic is crucial in performance of the meanings of food today. In the end, one might question how the performative power of plastic is changing both what food is and what the human body/subject is. Stacey Alaimo's “trans-corporeal subject” might be useful here, as it reminds us of how the human body or subject has constantly been situated and invaded by numerous non-human substances and forces – GMO, CO₂, and everyday chemicals.²⁵ Similarly, the urban feminine consuming subject is also highly mediated and situated by the performative forces of plastic.

Finally, this article might give the impression that people play with plastic cups and enjoy leisurely drinks a lot in China. But this does not do justice to how much China is suffering from the consequence of plastic pollution.²⁶ Six rivers in China, including the Yangtze, have been heavily polluted by micro-plastics and surface plastic concentration.²⁷ China is not only one of the biggest consumers of plastics, but also one of the biggest plastic producers for the world. By 2010, China already topped the world's list of plastic manufacturing. Major PET manufacturing plants in contemporary China have large manufacturing plants in various provinces,²⁸ with production supporting all kinds of plastic products used in cars, electronics, toys, and household products consumed by people around the world.

Moreover, China used to be one of the biggest plastic recycling hubs in the world. So much plastic used in Europe, America, Australia, and Japan was shipped to various corners of rural China for

²³Interview with Delanda in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2013, p. 39.

²⁴Bennett 2011.

²⁵Alaimo 2016.

²⁶Liu 2020.

²⁷Labreton *et al.* 2017.

²⁸Zhang *et al.* 2020.

sorting, melting, pelleting, and remanufacturing. Recycling plastics also created huge pollution issues for the country,²⁹ and caused complex inequalities and toxicities for its people.³⁰ The Chinese government eventually banned the import of many plastic products into the country in 2018. Yet the surging domestic demand and production for plastic, including for boba tea consumption means that single-use plastic usage and plastic waste production will only continue to intensify. Over the last decade, quite a few environmental protests have also broken out in China targeting petrochemical plants.³¹ More future research is needed to chart a site of contested encounters where plastic consumption, related representations, the plastic recycling business, and the production of plastic waste will all meet.

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²⁹Alexander and Reno 2012, p. 4; Minter 2013; Ye et al. 2016.

³⁰Wang 2016; Wu and Zhang 2016, 2019.

³¹The most famous is the mass protest against the DuPont PX factory in Xiamen in 2007 (Wikipedia 2007). PX is an acronym of paraxylene, a chemical essential to the process of manufacturing plastic bottles and polyester clothing, which is dangerous if inhaled or if absorbed through the skin. Citizens in Xiamen were furious at the proximity of the factory to residential areas and rumors spread that the exposure of PX material would lead to slow poisoning. The protests were iconic in the history of environmental activism in China, with over 10,000 people taking to the streets. The protests alarmed the government, which had prioritized economic development over environmental regulation and degradation. The Xiamen government eventually gave in and stopped the plant construction. The DuPont company later moved the factory to a site that was further away. In 2015, explosions from the factories and a dozen injuries were recorded (Liu 2015).

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