

Consumption, Sustainability and Variegated Consumer Societies: Development and Distinction in Late-Socialist China and Vietnam

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Abstract

Contemporary accounts of consumption and sustainability are often criticized both for ignoring the non-Western world and for not paying sufficient attention to the structuring effects of capitalist political economy. This paper suggests a way to do both through a variegated consumer societies framework. Such a framework involves a multi-scalar approach to production-consumption complexes, including attention to both everyday life and consumption environments, as well as governance, production networks, and broader consumer-cultural frames. A central point is that capitalist consumer societies always take similar but varied shapes, depending on local institutions and cultures as well as the multi-scalar connections behind goods, trends and fashion. In this article, I use this framework to study changing consumption in China and Vietnam, two countries that have been among the fastest-growing economies and home to some of the fastest-expanding consumer-class populations globally over the past decades. I study the emergence of capitalist consumer cultures in these nominally socialist countries, zooming in on sustainable consumption and new forms of distinction through two core consumption domains: mobility and food.

Keywords: Consumer society; Consumption; Social practices; Capitalism; Sustainability; Food; Asia.

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1 Introduction

Social-scientific studies of consumption and sustainability have seen strong growth in recent decades, unpacking how consumption patterns change and are reproduced through an often-complex combination of material, cultural, and social processes (Sahakian et al., 2022). A central contribution, and particularly so through the “practice turn” since the 2000s, has been showing how consumption takes place as moments in mundane, socially shared activities (Warde, 2005) and how normalization processes have gradually made increasingly material-intensive lifestyles taken for granted (Shove, 2003; Wethal et al., 2024). These insights are of vital importance in the search for more sustainable societies. However, the field has two important blind spots so far. First of all, almost all attention has been directed towards affluent Western societies. While such a focus is understandable due to the high material and environmental footprints of consumption patterns in these societies, it is a major shortcoming and a dramatic omission. It not only misses out on most of the world’s population and hence most of the world’s consumers, but it also fails to acknowledge the dramatic changes that have taken place in the world economy in recent decades, especially the rise of new middle classes (Anantharaman, 2018; Hansen & Wethal, 2023). Second, while one of the strongest contributions of recent studies of consumption and sustainability lies in their thorough grounding in everyday life, the prioritization of the mundane has come at the expense of studies of the systemic underpinnings of consumption patterns.

An ongoing discussion in the field is what comes after the practice turn (e.g., Evans, 2020). In this article, I argue that the field should build on, rather than leave, its focus on practices, but that it is time for what I term a systemic turn in consumption research. Making consumption studies more global and more attentive to the systemic underpinnings of consumption patterns requires a multidisciplinary and collective effort. I suggest a variegated consumer society framing as one possible way forward that can help build a globally oriented field of consumption studies that is structurally oriented without losing sight of the complexity of everyday life. Such an approach aims to study complexes of production and consumption in ways that allow for acknowledging both the patterned predictability of consumption patterns and the creative unpredictability that exists in all human activity. In the following, I explain the approach before employing it to outline consumption shifts in the socialist market economies of China and Vietnam, representing probably the two most dramatic large-scale, societal shifts in consumption patterns in recent times. For the purpose of this article, I also use the approach to investigate new forms of distinction within attempts to make the socialist market economy more sustainable.

2 A Systemic Turn and Variegated Consumer Societies

In order to understand sustainable consumption, an approach is needed that allows us to make sense of how consumption patterns take shape and change. By now, the field of consumption studies has developed a very rich arsenal of methods and conceptual approaches to do this (e.g., Sahakian et al., 2022). The practice turn has convincingly demonstrated that consumption cannot be fully understood as choices or as individuals expressing identity, rather consumption must be understood as fundamentally shaped by the social, material, and cultural contexts in which it takes place, which in turn co-shape processes of embodiment that contribute to the formation of tastes and habits. Simply put, consumption is more often a question of

habit than active deliberation, and always shaped by culture, social expectations, and material surroundings (Warde, 2005 & 2014; Shove, 2003).

An attempt to make sense of how consumption patterns take shape necessitates a consideration of capitalism as an economic and social system (Wilhite, 2016). The question is whether the practice turn is able to do this. In many ways, this is an ontological question. Although many scholars are somewhere in between, it is possible to distinguish two main approaches to this question at the moment: those who argue for using practice theory to make sense of 'large-scale phenomena' such as capitalism (see Shove, 2023) and those that argue for combining practice theory with other approaches to be able to do so (e.g. Hansen, 2022; Warde, 2022). While there is clear merit in both, I argue for the latter. This is not because I do not think a practice approach to the political economy or economic geography of capitalism can tell us something interesting, but because such an approach will not necessarily tell us what we need for the purpose of making sense of consumption. What we most urgently need in consumption research, I argue, is not mainly to understand how complex practice arrangements take place across and within, for example, global production networks, but specifically how these networks take part in shaping practices that are directly relevant for consumption.

More systemic-oriented consumption studies would necessarily involve a multi- and interdisciplinary endeavor. There is a rich history of sociological studies of consumer culture and consumer society to draw on (e.g., Sassatelli, 2015 & 2020) that the fairly recent expansion of the sociology of consumption has, to a large extent, set aside (see Evans, 2019 & 2020; Welch et al., 2020). A central point in this scholarship is that a multitude of consumer cultures take shape within the broader frames of a society organized around the consumption of commodities, i.e., a consumer society (Sassatelli, 2020). I suggest it makes sense to also approach consumer societies in the plural, since also the ways in which societies organize and are organized around consumption take variegated forms. The starting point would be to maintain a prime focus on consumption as closely related to but distinct from production (Warde, 2022), but to study entire production-consumption complexes to understand how consumption and consumer societies take shape in related yet unique ways. I suggest directly studying how the political economy of capitalism shapes the formation of complexes of production and consumption in related but different ways in different societies and for different forms of consumption. To do so, we can draw on economic-geographical approaches to how capitalism takes variegated forms through the meeting between local cultures and practices and the cross-scalar connections of trade and investment (Peck & Theodore, 2007; Peck & Zhang, 2013; Peck, 2023). These "context-engaged modes" (Peck, 2024, p. 2) of studying how capitalism unfolds through the concrete practices of firms, states and other actors across scales (Peck, 2023; Knutsen et al., 2025) help explain how capitalist processes lead to "persistently patterned but never mechanistically predetermined configurations" (Peck, 2023, p. 4). While these studies have focused on capitalism as a system with its regimes of accumulation, it has not been used to study consumer society. My proposition is on the surface quite simple: Just like capitalism as a system, consumer society takes variegated forms. It is always the same, yet always distinct.

The ways in which a consumer society develops in turn depend on multi-scalar connections, in other words, links shaped from the global to the household. To understand these multi-scalar connections of consumption, we need to understand material flows. This can be achieved by studying the formation of consumption patterns across entire complexes of production and consumption by focusing attention on the links between broader production networks and the social practices — including their practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structures, and general understandings (Schatzki, 2002) — in which consumption patterns are shaped and

enacted. There is much inspiration to be found in the systems of provision approach, a framework designed to study the backward linkages of different forms of goods and services (Fine, 2002). A variegated consumer society approach can build on the insights generated from such research (see Dei et al., 2025), but also needs to focus on how consumption is embedded in and made sense of in widely different political, cultural, and social contexts. Such an approach could extend on existing work on how systems of provision and everyday practices co-shape consumption patterns (Hansen, 2018 & 2022) by paying more direct attention to governance and broader cultural frames across production-consumption complexes to analyze how consumer cultures and consumer societies take shape.

In terms of governance, further inspiration can be found in studies of how consumption patterns are politically championed and regulated (Sassatelli, 2015) and how both public and private actors are part of governing societies towards specific forms of normalized mass consumption (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2022). As put by Dubuisson-Quellier (2022, p. 45), (affluent) consumption has been “forged as a norm” and is “extensively organized and governed”, something that has received less attention in contemporary consumption research. The same can be argued in the case of culture (Welch et al., 2020). The practice turn in consumption research emerged partly as a response to the focus on the expressive individual of the cultural turn (Warde, 2014). Although consumption from a practice lens is necessarily deeply embedded in culture, cultural processes have received little direct attention. A reappraisal of the cultural in a systemic approach could respond to Welch, Halkier and Keller’s suggestion that “the challenge of a sociology of consumption in the Anthropocene” could be “to shed light on the cultural processes through which consumption as a principle of social order is harnessed by capital accumulation” (2020, p. 329). Importantly, a variegated consumer society approach should not mistake the institutional homogenization of capitalism for cultural homogenization but manage to analyze how capitalist development produces consumer cultures that are similar yet always take distinct forms in different institutional and cultural contexts (Wilhite, 2016; Sassatelli, 2020).

In sum, by now, consumption research has reached a level of maturity that would allow for a more integrated and systemic approach. Such an approach needs to be able to operate at the micro and macro scale and to acknowledge how the most mundane act of consumption can have complex linkages to production processes and complexes of meaning that link distant localities together. While this point certainly has been made before (with Mintz, 1985, as a classic study), no systematic approach has been developed that allows us to take both everyday practices and the multi-scalar work of broader complexes of production and consumption seriously. This, in turn, requires specific methodological orientations. Similar to how Shove (2017) has argued that there are no specific practice-theoretical methods, I do not think there are specific systemic methods. But it does require doing more than observing and interviewing consumers in order to be able to analyze what happens outside of moments of consumption. This could involve interviewing policymakers, producers, and marketing actors, for example. It could also zoom in on consumption environments or the broader geographies of consumption and could draw much inspiration from different approaches to “following” goods across production-consumption complexes (e.g., Cook et al., 2006).

In the following, I employ a systemic approach to study two related large-scale transformations of consumption in China and Vietnam. These two countries and their socialist market economies (Bekkevold et al., 2020) are illustrative cases because of the transformative changes they have undergone relatively recently, including a radical shift from socialism to a hybrid form of consumer society. In doing so, my insights are clearly skewed towards Vietnam. I draw

on more than a decade of research on development, consumption, and the rise of new middle classes in the country, including a particular focus on mobility and food and combining ethnographic engagement with everyday practices with secondary data and interviews along production networks (see Hansen, 2022). I combine this with drawing on secondary data from China in order to compare and contrast developments in the only country that has seen a similar development to that experienced in Vietnam. In the following, I focus on governance, culture, and production-consumption complexes to analyze China and Vietnam's variegated consumer societies. I first focus on the political creation of new consumer societies in China and Vietnam, before moving on to analyze the governance of consumer cultures and the new socialist consumer. I then study the production-consumption complexes and the multi-scalar connections that have enabled consumption transformations in the realms of mobility and food. Throughout, I pay particular attention to sustainable consumption and the new forms of distinction emerging through an overall societal focus on sustainability.

3 Creating a Consumer Society

China and Vietnam, until relatively recently, aimed to develop something markedly different from a capitalist consumer society. Since the market reforms in both countries, however, this has in practical terms changed radically (see Hansen, 2020). While according to official rhetoric, none of these countries is capitalist, they have both embraced the market economy, both in terms of how domestic economies are organized and in their deep embeddedness in regional and global production networks. Still, the two countries remain nominally socialist with a range of socialist institutions still in place to govern the market economy, and their transformations have taken very different paths and shapes from what has been seen in former socialist societies elsewhere, such as the former Soviet Union (see Saxonberg, 2013, for a broad comparison of "transitions and non-transitions" from communism; for studies of post-Soviet consumer societies, see for example Patico, 2008; Humphrey, 2002). Here I follow Nguyen et al. (2024) in separating Vietnam and China from post-socialist countries and rather treating them as forms of "late socialism".

In many ways, economic development in Vietnam and China has depended on consumption elsewhere. China has played a key role in the global economy as a factory of the world, and today alone accounts for around a third of all manufacturing output in the world and remains the world's largest exporter (e.g., *Statista*, 2025). Vietnam's economy is much smaller, but its exports, of both primary and manufactured products, have played a key role in the country's development (see Masina, 2006; Do & Masina, 2026). As part of the overall development strategies of both countries, the domestic market has later gained increasing attention. Today, increasing domestic consumption is a stated goal in both countries (see Croll, 2006; Otis, 2012; Hansen, 2023), something that has been further strengthened by the Trump regime's protectionist trade policies, which threaten a main export market.

How is a domestic market created? While focusing on a very different time, Eric Hobsbawm's summary of the case of the industrial revolution in Britain provides some useful pointers:

The domestic market, large and expanding as it was, could grow in only four important ways. [...] There could be *growth of population*, which creates more consumers (and, of course, producers); *a transfer of people* from non-monetary to monetary incomes, which creates more customers; *an increase of income* per head, which cre-

ates better customers; and a *substitution of industrially produced goods* for older forms of manufacture or imports (1968, p. 27, emphasis added).

China and Vietnam have, until recently, had restrictive birth policies, so population growth as a strategy was not an option (although the populations of both countries have grown significantly over the past decades). The second point, the transfer of people from non-monetary to monetary incomes, is crucial. In *The Origin of Capitalism*, Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002) has argued that if we want to understand the creation of consumer society, we should not mainly look at the growth in people *able* to purchase goods, but rather the growth in people *compelled* to buy goods from the market due to dispossession. In China and Vietnam, this change took place less as direct enclosure, since agriculture and land reforms played crucial roles in the early stages of reform, and more in terms of the dwindling income from agricultural production and the need for additional income in the new market economy. The peasants of China and Vietnam, around whom the entire socialist revolution in both countries had been built, started losing out in the new economy and were often forced to work in both the industrial and agricultural sectors to make ends meet. In many ways, this took form as a slightly more indirect version of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003). As Behzad Yaghmaian argues in *The Accidental Capitalist*, “China’s peasants became the sacrificial goat for the country’s industrialization in the first 30 years of the revolution. They remained the sacrifice for China’s new model of industrialization after the 1980s — this time, however, as migrant workers” (Yaghmaian, 2012, p. 170). Rural-urban migrants have been vital to economic growth in both China and Vietnam, and their often-precarious jobs remain essential to sustain the late-socialist consumer society (Nguyen et al., 2024).

So, China and Vietnam created more consumers, and also better consumers through both higher incomes and more access to consumer credit (Hansen, 2020). Work and income situations have changed drastically, and although most people are not rich, most people now do have some money to spend. The final point, on industrial products replacing older forms of manufacture, is ongoing, and much more so in China than in Vietnam. Just like in the UK during the industrial revolution, many of the more privileged classes had access to a wide range of consumer goods before the reforms (see Truitt, 2013; Gerth, 2020). There was also a wide range of domestically mass-produced consumer products on the market in the more socialist days, a period that Gerth (2020, p. 7) refers to as “state consumerism”. But it was a far cry from the availability of consumer goods in these countries today. Gradually, a wide range of industrial products have become woven into every part of everyday life in both countries through both expanded domestic production and integration into global production networks and an opening up of the market to foreign imports (Hansen, 2020). In other words, China and Vietnam are today mass consumption societies in related but different ways from other parts of the world. China and Vietnam are home to parallel societies defined by wealth and access. While consumer goods have penetrated all parts of society, the new consumer society comes with dramatic inequality. It also to some extent consists of parallel consumer societies, where large parts of the population depend on cheap products and copies (see Naafs, 2018, for a related point in the case of Indonesia), a variety of what Arnold and DeWald (2011) have called the “accessibly modern”. Simultaneously, a growing minority has access to a wide range of high-quality consumer products from around the world. In this situation, new forms of distinction take shape. While standing out through wealth could be dangerous during the socialist days in China and Vietnam, the situation is different today. In contemporary consumer society, a wide range of products are used to fit in and stand out, some of them also directly showcasing extreme wealth (see Yu, 2014).

The new consumer societies are central parts of the development success stories of China and Vietnam. But they are also both wasteful and polluting, and both countries have seen a reorientation, at least discursively, towards “greener” development and more sustainable lifestyles. Both the new (relative and unequal) affluence and the destructive aspects of consumer society have, combined with the continued socialist orientation of these regimes, led to specific conceptions of what the socialist consumer should look like.

4 Governing Consumer Society and Sustainable Consumption

The late-socialist versions of China and Vietnam are full of contradictions (e.g., Nguyen & Mao, 2026), also in the realm of consumption. As summarized by Nguyen et al., “the aspiring late-socialist subject’s imagination is captured by an encounter between the ‘utopian dreams of socialism and the fictional expectations of capitalism’ [...] whose goals are inherently contradictory” (2024, p. 20). Interestingly, in contemporary China and Vietnam, the push for the development of a domestic market exists side by side with normative statements on personal restraint and “civilized” consumption. In China, realizing Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” clearly involves higher material living standards, in other words, more consumption. But it also comes with the idea that culture can balance out the perils of affluence with a stated goal of avoiding what is seen as Western forms of consumption, including conspicuous consumption (see Hansen, 2023). This is also central to Xi Jinping’s grand scheme of “ecological civilization”. Jiahua Pan, at the influential public research institution the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has published English-language texts on what can be broadly described as China’s approach to sustainable development. In *China’s Environmental Governing and Ecological Civilization* (Pan, 2016), one chapter is dedicated to consumption. Here, it is explained how the grand idea of ecological civilization is opposed to what is portrayed as Western-style consumerism and rather promotes “high quality, healthy and eco-friendly” forms of consumption (Pan, 2016). What exactly this looks like is unclear, but it seems to involve developing what is called ecological consciousness (see Bruckermann, 2024) and, in this way, making conscious and sustainable choices. There is also significant responsibility placed on affluent consumers within the country to set an example for the rest of society through “eco-friendly rational consumption”, as they are seen to influence consumption patterns for the whole of society. As put by Pan, “if rich members of the Chinese society do not spend money on purchasing luxury cars with high emissions, but buy solar photovoltaic power generation equipment to generate renewable energy and replace coal-fired electricity and gasoline, their consumption will be sustainable and in line with ecological justice. Such consumption choices can lead the whole society’s transition” (2016, p. 172). Pan’s argument is that there is an ongoing change in “consumption paradigm” in China, away from a focus on high consumption and the associated expansion of wealth and economic growth under industrial civilization towards a consumption orientation under ecological civilization that is “equal, rational, and eco-friendly” (Pan 2016, p. 172). There are a few clear regulations in place, apart from in distinct realms like mobility, where many Chinese cities have implemented a wide range of policies, for example, banning motorbikes and restricting car ownership (although not mainly due to concerns for the environment). But the discourse is clear, and places high levels of responsibility on consumers for the greening of China while simultaneously laying the grounds for institutionalizing what Manisha Anantharaman (2022 & 2024) calls “performative environmentalism”, i.e., opportunities for the middle (and upper) classes to find both distinction and a cleaner conscience in ostensibly greener forms of consumption.

Vietnam does not have a program similar to that of the ecological civilization, but nevertheless promotes many similar goals. The country has been part of a wide range of sustainable development initiatives, and at the moment, the most attention seems to fall within the rubric of “Net Zero”. As part of this umbrella, the government in 2025 also launched a national green environment program to advance “Net zero goals”, where lifestyle and sustainable living are a core dimension. Similar to in China, there are few clear policies on sustainable consumption, but with a rather elusive idea of “culture” as the antidote against consumerism (see Gillen, 2016, p. 41), as well as a range of expectations towards consumer-citizens as “modern and civilized”.

In many ways, the ideal modern consumer in both countries could be summarized as a highly educated middle-class consumer with the money and know-how to buy more sustainable products while being able to show restraint (Hansen, 2023). While this, in many ways, breaks with the collective-oriented socialist hero, it still has in common the positioning of responsibility on everyone for the development of socialism. This time, however, the hero is a cultivated and civilized, but private and individualistic, consumer who consumes appropriately for the progress of the entire nation (see Bruckermann, 2024).

The shaping of the new, late-socialist consumer can be understood as a broad new cultural scheme for appropriate living in the socialist market economy. Should this scheme succeed in developing more than a billion consumers who show constraint and moderation, this would have global implications. However, despite these ideological takes on consumer society, there is no doubt that many high-income consumers in China and Vietnam today engage in excessive and luxurious forms of consumption. Also, increasing shares of the population in both countries have adopted consumption standards that are associated with affluent societies, although in varied forms.

5 Variegated Consumer Society and New Production-Consumption Complexes: Mobility and Food

Compared to other countries, consumption booms in China and Vietnam have taken both expected and novel turns alongside economic development. Many cases could have been used to illustrate this point, such as the many examples of foreign consumer goods that have not lived up to expectations in the Chinese “dream market” (see Croll, 2006). Here I will zoom in on what, from a sustainability perspective, can be seen as two core categories of consumption: mobility and food. My focus is both on how new consumption patterns have taken shape through multi-scalar processes and on the socio-cultural meanings emerging in mobility and food in attempts to develop more sustainable forms of development and consumption.

5.1 The Motorization and Electrification of Mobility

The first obvious point for both China and Vietnam from a sustainable mobility perspective is that they have moved away from largely sustainable mobility cultures at a very high speed and largely missed the opportunity to build on their histories during the period of transformation. More precisely, the socialist periods of both countries were characterized by bicycles. Indeed, the bicycle played a central role in both the revolution and the socialist projects. That said, it was not Mao or the communists who popularized the bicycle in China. By the time of the communist takeover, bicycles were common in all Chinese cities, and Frank Dikötter (2007) has found that there were 250,000 bicycles in Shanghai in 1948. But Mao embraced bicycles as the vehicle of the proletariat and revived the domestic bicycle industry. Thus, the bicycle

became part of the “three rounds and sound”, the four must-have things of every household during Mao’s China: a bicycle, a sewing machine, a watch and a radio (Dikötter, 2007). In Vietnam, bicycles both represented a central tool in the fight for independence and an important means of transportation, and the communist regime in the “reunified” Vietnam expanded bicycle manufacturing significantly (see Carr-Ellison, 2025). While acquiring a bicycle in socialist Asia was for many almost as hard as it was acquiring a car in socialist Europe (see Siegelbaum, 2011), urban bicycle ownership steadily increased. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was rather normal for an urban household to have a bicycle in both countries (see Dikötter, 2007; Koh, 2006), a development that had depended first on foreign imports of both ideas and materials and later on industrial policy and socialist visions.

Bicycles are certainly still visible in the streetscapes of Vietnamese and Chinese cities. They even represent a new form of green distinction, with expensive racing bikes very popular among the upper-middle classes and elites for exercise. But as a means of transportation, they have almost disappeared completely. Instead, both countries saw rapid motorization of transport, but the shapes this has taken are very different in the two countries, and none of them look exactly like consumer societies elsewhere. Vietnam’s motorbike society is unparalleled by developments anywhere else. At the latest count, according to the National Traffic Safety Committee, Vietnam was home to 77 million motorbikes in 2024 (*Vietnamnet*, 2024). While car ownership has increased there as well and while cars have taken over the throne as the ultimate status symbol, the motorbike remains the dominant form of mobility and the main means of transport (Hansen, 2022). Vietnam’s “system of moto-mobility” and emerging car-driven society have been analyzed as an outcome of a combination of changing systems of provision and everyday practices, driven by changes in industry, urban geographies, and everyday life (Hansen, 2022 & 2017). From a variegated consumer society perspective, the overall motorization of transportation can be understood as a predictable consumption change, with consumer culture, governance, and scalar connections as distinct explanatory factors. The motorbike here serves as a useful example. While a certain moto-mobility culture was introduced in colonial times and while moto-mobility has been popular across Asia, the motorbike society in Vietnam today has emerged through connections to the East Asian motorcycle industry and has been helped by the Vietnamese authorities’ aims to develop industrial capacity in the country. While the government was directly involved in providing fertile ground for the motorbike industry in the country through import substitution policies (Fujita, 2013), the explosion in motorbike ownership was largely unplanned and has rather been indirectly aided through high taxes on cars and lack of public transport (Hansen, 2022 & 2017). As part of the system of motomobility, a motorbike-driven consumer culture has emerged, not only concerning the vehicles as such, but in terms of unique geographies of consumption built around two-wheeled mobilities. This, in turn, reinforces the strong position of the motorbike in contemporary Vietnamese consumer society.

While Vietnam’s motorbike society is a clear variation from global mobility patterns, China stands out in a different way. Since Beijing first introduced a motorbike ban in 1985, 185 cities across the country have joined (Chen et al., 2021). This has, in many ways, paved the way for the system of automobility, although many Chinese cities have also imposed strict regulations on car ownership. This is an obvious example of the importance of governance in shaping consumption patterns. Interestingly, possibly with China as a model, Vietnamese cities are now proposing to do the same. In what would represent a dramatic disruption of mobility, major Vietnamese cities are looking to ban motorbikes in major parts of urban areas. No restrictions on cars have been proposed, but the ban will seemingly not apply to electric motorbikes. The

likely outcome is both a continued increase in automobility and a possibly rapid electrification of urban mobility. The Chinese experience certainly supports this assumption, as the use of electric two-wheelers of different kinds has grown tremendously, in turn partly re-embedding two-wheelers in Chinese mobility cultures (Zuev, 2018).

But it is the electric car that has recently emerged as the favored form of private mobility by policymakers in both China and Vietnam. Although omitted as a strategic industry in the most recent five-year plan, China has become a global industry leader in electric cars and the government has long both supported the domestic electric vehicle industry and subsidized purchases, and has developed clear goals for the electrification of the car fleet (e.g., Li et al., 2025). Both the development and adoption in Vietnam have been slower, although they have also set ambitious goals for the electrification of the car fleet. The most powerful commercial actor in the country, the VinGroup, has started developing both electric cars and electric motorbikes. While foreign car manufacturers are also positioning themselves in the market as Vietnam's ambitions for electrification increase, VinFast currently dominates the electric car market. With a recent campaign named "Fierce Vietnamese spirit — for a green future", the company is clearly positioning itself as a leading force in the electrification of mobility in Vietnam and as part of the state's vision for sustainable development. While charging infrastructure is still under development, electric car sales reached 17 percent of all car sales in 2024, with VinFast cars as bestsellers in the market (Tran, 2025).

The motorization and later electrification of mobility in Chinese and Vietnamese cities are processes that have developed through connections with global and regional industries. They have also developed through state visions of what a modern society looks like. While different forms of two-wheeled mobilities compete with the increasing dominance of cars, the car, first in the fossil-fuelled version and later the electric, seems to hold a unique position both in dominant policymakers' and citizens' aspirations towards modern society. These can be read as a global expansion of the "system of automobility" (Urry, 2004). While the system of automobility poses major environmental problems globally and significant environmental and mobility challenges locally, also in its electric form, the fact that electric cars are considered green allows for the display of ecological consciousness without letting go of consumer aspirations. There is considerable potential for distinction through mobility, as is evident in the popularity of flashy, luxurious cars among wealthy people around the world. China and Vietnam are certainly not exceptions. The diversity and popularity of luxurious electric cars in China is a good example. Hongqi is popularly labelled "China's Rolls-Royce" but there are a wide range of brands and models on the market now. Electric cars are just taking off in Vietnam, a country where cars have long represented a central tool for distinction. While the most popular models are not expensive relative to other cars, luxury electric cars have also emerged on the Vietnamese car market. In both countries, then, the electrification of cars allows owners to display both wealth and ecological consciousness and thus achieve distinction through the ultimate consumer goods while staying in line with the communist regimes' visions for a modern and green society.

5.2 Towards a Capitalist Diet?

Similar to the history of mobility, China and Vietnam have moved from largely environmentally sustainable diets to, in many ways, more problematic diets and food systems at a very high speed. That said, not long ago, the average Vietnamese and Chinese citizen was undernourished. Since reforms, the caloric intake has increased dramatically, and for the first time

in history, these countries are facing societal challenges in terms of overnutrition. Following FAOSTAT (2026) statistics and taking the years of official adoption of market reforms as starting point, China's average daily calorie intake (measured as food supply) has increased by an astounding 69 percent, from 2080 in 1978 (around 84 percent of the global average and 62 percent of the European average) to 3514 in 2023 (16 percent above the world average and slightly above the European average). Similarly, in Vietnam, the daily average calorie intake increased from 2065 in 1986 to 3086 in 2023, a 49 percent increase. While such numbers may not be entirely accurate, they capture some of the radical change in the availability of food that these countries have experienced.

China and Vietnam have seen some of the most dramatic dietary changes in the world over the past decades. Importantly, this does not necessarily mean a complete transformation of eating practices and diets, but rather new combinations of change and continuity. Some of the main changes take shape as what nutrition research would label a "nutrition transition", changes seen across the world towards less healthy diets that tend to include more animal-sourced food, more processed food, more sugar, and more fats (see Popkin et al., 2012). Critical research has pointed out that these changes should be understood less as demand-driven and natural, and rather as created through supply-side processes (e.g., Weis, 2013; Otero et al., 2018). Since it is to a significant extent driven by logics of capital accumulation, the planetary obesity pandemic can, from this perspective, usefully be understood as an outcome of a late capitalist diet. Again, these dietary shifts take variegated forms. The case of meat consumption illustrates this point. Although the correlations between urbanization, income, and meat consumption are often presented as explanatory factors, the fact is that there are very large variations in meat intake between countries and across income levels (see Hansen, 2018). These are shaped by both food cultures and broader food geographies and production networks.

To stay with meat as a key food segment from a sustainability perspective, China and Vietnam have seen some of the fastest increases in meat consumption in the world over the past decades (Korsnes & Liu, 2021; Fallon, 2024; Hansen, 2018). Around the time of reforms, meat was a rare luxury in both countries. In 2023, the latest available numbers show that the meat supply had reached 74 kg per capita in China, almost at the level of Europe (at 78.7). Vietnam had reached 60.5 kg per capita, much higher than the global average (45.3 kg), and almost three times that of countries like Thailand (24.5 kg), a country that is both significantly wealthier and more urbanized than Vietnam. China and Vietnam share many similarities, both in terms of a strong orientation towards growth in agricultural output and overall food cultures. They also share a general tendency towards much more meat-intensive food practices. These changes have been made possible through multi-scalar processes, including global, regional, and domestic flows of agricultural produce and investments and a transformation of urban foodscapes (see Hansen & Jakobsen, 2020).

Foodscapes have changed dramatically alongside and through broader socio-economic transformations. The most conspicuous examples are the many Western and Asian fast-food outlets. But probably more important for dietary changes are the supermarkets and the many more subtle changes to how and where food is eaten, for example, the millions of small eateries that can be seen as a hybrid form of traditional street kitchens, fast food chains and restaurants by often offering street food or dishes resembling street food but with menus and in indoor and air-conditioned environments (Hansen, 2024). Changes also happen through the very large number of people who have lived, studied, or worked in foreign countries, bringing ideas and food-cultural inspirations back. Yet these overall similarities hide many differences. On the production side, the two countries have adopted different approaches. First and foremost,

China's meat sector is much more large-scale and industrial than the case in Vietnam, although parts of Vietnam's meat sector are moving in that direction (Hansen & Jakobsen, 2020). On the consumption side, China consumes much more meat per capita than Vietnam. While this could possibly partly be explained by the fact that the process of meatification started earlier in China, it could also relate to differences in the impact of public health discourses on food practices, as well as in food cultures, and for example, the uneven impact of religion on these. Fully understanding these differences would require further investigation.

Importantly and interestingly, China and Vietnam share signs of a partial reorientation towards less meat-intensive diets. Health authorities in both countries have expressed worries about the overconsumption of meat. And although meat consumption continues to increase rapidly in both countries, many consumers share the concern. Among many middle-class consumers, trends towards "clean food" and reduced meat consumption are evident. The first is a trend that has grown out of a series of food scandals and a deepening distrust of agricultural practices within both countries (see contributions in Ehlert & Faltnann, 2019). The result has been a wide range of strategies, from increasing home growing and informal food networks on the supply side, to a surge in different 'clean food' shops and a wide range of strategies to determine safe food (Hansen, 2022). Meat reduction is both old and new. Both China and Vietnam have histories of meat avoidance embedded in their food cultures (Vu, 2016; Korsnes & Liu, 2021). Related to processes seen in many other countries, reducing meat consumption is increasingly becoming an expected part of belonging to certain parts of the middle class. Not mainly because of the environment, but because it is considered the healthy choice. Distinct from processes documented recently in the sociology of consumption (e.g., Wendler et al., 2026), meat reduction in China and Vietnam is often related to religious discourses and practices. Interestingly, there does not seem to be any official discourse linking high levels of meat consumption to environmental issues in either of the two countries.

It is well known that there is possible distinction in meat, something that is obvious, for example, in the popularity of upmarket steakhouses in Chinese and Vietnamese cities or the growing popularity of expensive, imported meat (see, e.g., DuBois, 2025, and Bui, 2026). Simultaneously, openly eating less meat is a way of displaying care for health and, for a small minority, also care for the environment. Again, such practices have long histories in both countries, but take a range of different shapes in contemporary consumer society. For parts of the Vietnamese and Chinese middle and upper classes, either showing restraint with meat or avoiding it entirely has become expected. The emergence of high-end vegan dining spaces frequented by the upper-middle classes and elites illustrates this trend. In many ways, new trends around meat avoidance reflect deeper changes in the morality and meanings of consumption in late socialist society (see Goossaert & Palmer, 2011). Klein (2017) finds that parts of the resurgence of vegetarian eating in China are closely related to new forms of distinction and "the ability to display self-development and cultivation" (p. 255) as part of belonging to a new middle class. This aligns well with my own observations among parts of the Vietnamese middle classes, although, especially in central and southern parts of the country, religion and the deep embeddedness of religious and spiritual orientations in everyday practices are crucial. The point remains that in many different ways and alongside consumer societies where distinction through material consumption has become more widespread and accepted, what Hoskins (2022) has called "conspicuous non-consumption" is also a central part of class belonging in contemporary China and Vietnam.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for a systemic turn in research on consumption and sustainability. This responds to repeated calls for both an increased engagement with the non-Western world in consumption research as well as for developing approaches that take a larger account factor in broader political, economic and cultural processes in shaping consumption than what has typically been the cases in recent scholarship (e.g., Anantharaman, 2018; Evans, 2020; Warde, 2022; Anantharaman et al., 2024; see also Fuchs et al., 2025a; Wahn, 2026). I have argued for a variegated consumer society framework for accomplishing both goals at the same time by developing an approach that is able to study consumption as an outcome of entire production-consumption complexes, including production networks, governance, cultural frames, consumption environments, and everyday practices.

Here, I have used the framework to study the emergence of new consumer societies in China and Vietnam. A central point is that these late socialist consumer societies share fundamental traits with capitalist consumer societies elsewhere, but take distinct forms through socialist legacies, state strategies, and their position in global and regional production networks that co-shape new consumer cultures. These have their own histories and futures and understanding how they are shaped and change is of vital importance to global sustainability. Both countries have, in different ways, seen an increased focus on “greener” consumption patterns as part of an overall orientation towards sustainable development. Through the new realities of the market economy combined with an overall socialist orientation and a focus on sustainable consumption, new standards for the ideal (late-)socialist consumer are emerging. This figure seems to take the shape of an educated middle-class citizen who is an active contributor to the economy through consumption, but who also shows constraint and opts for environmentally friendly solutions. While both regimes make it clear that Western-style consumerism should be alien to the socialist market economy, conspicuous consumption is widespread, and the new orientation towards greener forms of consumption has created new avenues for distinction. In this paper, I have zoomed in on the realms of mobility and food, where electric cars and meat avoidance have emerged as competitors to fossil-fueled cars and imported meat in the status hierarchies of consumption.

Mobility and food are also illustrative cases for how consumer societies take variegated forms. The privatization and motorization, and increasingly also electrification, of mobility is an expected outcome of capitalist development, but takes different shapes through production networks, industrial strategies, urban policies, and cultures and practices of mobility. China and Vietnam share a velo-mobile past, but since then have developed quite different combinations of two-wheeled and four-wheeled, motorized and electric mobility systems. Similarly, they share a fairly recent past of plant-dominant diets as well as very rapid processes of meatification. Currently, both countries are in different ways in a situation where meat consumption continues increasing alongside a reorientation among parts of the population towards meat-reduced eating. Government policies and production networks, including those for meat and alternative protein sources, will likely play a decisive role in the future developments of this shift.

In conclusion, this article has proposed a variegated consumer society framework as a way forward towards a new direction for research on consumption and sustainability. Rather than necessarily developing a new theory, I suggest there are many approaches to draw on in such a framework. While I have here mainly drawn inspiration from work on variegated capitalism, systems of provision, practice theory and scholarship on consumer culture and consumer

society, there are many other possible sources of inspiration, for example, in work on social reproduction, colonial and racial capitalism (see Anantharaman, 2024), or on how different forms of markets take shape (e.g., Bååth & Fuentes, 2025). Surely these would unveil parts of consumer society that I have not covered here. The point remains that a variegated consumer society framework should keep the focus on everyday life from the practice turn, but combine it with more structurally oriented approaches to how consumption takes shape not only as moments in practices (Warde, 2005), but as the outcome of material, social, and cultural processes at different points of broader production-consumption complexes. While I have argued that such an approach is suitable for making sense of consumption transformations outside affluent, Western societies, these more mature consumer societies would also benefit from analyses that combine a structural and an everyday orientation. If we take the challenges of unsustainable consumption seriously, such approaches are imperative for understanding the potential for, and barriers to, radical change beyond the performative environmentalism of the well-off (Anantharaman, 2022 & 2024; Fuchs et al., 2025b). With decades of rich insights on the complexities of everyday consumption to build on, consumption research should take on this challenge. But this, I argue, could require a systemic turn with new theoretical and methodological developments that allow for more multi-scalar engagement. Such a turn could (and should) also lay the ground for developing more holistic takes on sustainability policies from a consumption perspective.

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