

「苦與樂」研討會

「苦與樂」專題討論第四節

The Construction of Culture and Pleasure: The Café in China

Prof. Pang Lai Kwan

(Department of Modern Languages and Intercultural Studies, CUHK)

彭麗君教授（香港中文大學現代語言及文化系）

The history of coffee has been one of colonialism and imperialism, largely written by the harsh labor and exploitation of the colonized Africans and the Caribbean people in the last three centuries. In Europe, contradictorily, coffee and the café signify sobriety and civilization; the café as a public sphere was allegedly one of the most crucial contributing factors to the great French Revolution. The café is considered a place where exalted ideas are exchanged in a relaxed atmosphere, in parallel or sometimes opposed to the rigid and stubborn classroom environment. The café symbolizes a proud feature of Western culture, where civilization is cultivated in a form of pleasure and enjoyment, although not without intellectual dynamics and confrontations. As a latecomer to be included in the Western colonial map, China embraced the café as a quintessential Western life style. It is the vast market, instead of its labor, that China attracts the Imperialist powers; coffee was introduced to China not as a plant to be harvested and processed but as a commodity to be consumed. Commodities are never just materials but signs, and coffee was also attached to the symbolic value of Western culture and pleasure. The young, sober, but relaxed café is opposed to the chaotic, noisy, and feudal traditional teahouse. This paper traces the development of the café culture in modern China. It documents how the early twentieth-century young intellectuals went to coffee shops less for the coffee than for the new urban identity. I look at writings and films in the early twentieth century to explore how coffee shop and its life-style were depicted and fantasized, how it served as gathering place for young people to develop their identities, and how progressive and creative ideas were brewed in a pleasurable and relaxed environment. I also ask in what ways the introduction of the café culture sheds lights to our understanding of China's modernity, which is composed not only of military invasions or philosophical reflections but also new concepts of culture and pleasure.