

Yībēi Kāfēi: Starbucks in China as Glocal Practice

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In this presentation I propose a framework for exploring how Starbucks in China sustains both global and local cultural practices. It builds on the concept of the “glocal” or “glocalization” developed by sociologists in the late 1980s and later taken up by business as a way to organize, strategize, and maximize globalizing brands. While trying to avoid a capitalist apologetics (which is pretty hard to do when talking about Starbucks), I argue that by re-envisioning the “glocal” through a cultural rhetorics lens, calling in de Certeau’s conceptualization of strategies and tactics we can delineate the ways in which Starbucks in China is both engineered by multinational business and marketing logics (strategies) and a space of local meaning-making practices (tactics) that speak back to, engage with, and revise corporate attempts at cooptation and commodification (**EXPLAIN SLIDE 3**).

This revived and revised framing of the glocal using a cultural rhetorics lens aims to help us better understand the workings of culturally-augmented spaces, particularly those that present local interpretations of globalized experiences. While the example for this presentation is specifically Starbucks in China, the larger argument encourages us to (re)consider spaces we might not initially see as relevant to the field and its questions, such as the mass-produced, carbon-copy reading chairs and barstools of a multinational coffee conglomerate. As such, I conclude with a list of qualities we might consider when seeking out glocal spaces productive to a cultural rhetorics analytical lens.

As we do, I begin again with a story (**CLICK TO SLIDE 4**).

By October of 2008, I had been to over 20 Starbucks in China. Shanghai -- a place I ended up calling home for six years -- is this massive, sprawling, ever changing metropolis (**CLICK -- SLIDE 5**). You leave for a even just a couple of weeks and something has finished construction, started construction, opened, closed. When I moved there in 2008 there were just barely 9 metro lines, and by the time I moved back to the states in 2015, it had doubled to 17. The more the city grew, expanded, connected itself to itself, the more globalized it became. Huge, glistening shopping malls adorn all of the central neighborhoods. Burger King, Pizza Hut, KFC, and most recently Taco Bell can be found in most parts of the city. The online food delivery service called "Sherpa's," similar to GrubHub here in the US, includes an impressive representation of the world's cuisines -- almost like a UN general assembly. Shanghai is Paris is Tokyo is New York is Dubai is Sydney. You get the idea.

I used Starbucks as a way to explore the city, to make sense of the chaos. Weeknights after work or on the weekends, I'd choose a new Starbucks, figure out how to get there (metro, bus, walking, taxi, bike) and set out for the adventure. You have to remember that 2008 was just before the time of the smartphone. I had no updating map or GPS to guide me. There was an accessibility to locating Starbucks for someone still learning Mandarin and the maze the city. The point of these journeys was not a venti latte or fappachino, but rather a way of marking progress of exploration. (**CLICK SLIDE 6**). In fact, for my first year in Shanghai, I'd often refer to spaces in terms of their relationship to a particular Starbucks. The Shanghai Museum is on the other side of the People's Park Starbucks. Xintiandi, a popular shopping street, starts at the Starbucks on Taicang Road. At the end of the journey to whatever new part of Shanghai I was exploring, I took deep pleasure and comfort in settling at a table or chair, pulling out my journal or a book, and recharging before continuing on or heading back to my apartment.

The first Starbucks in China opened in 1999 in Beijing in what was the tallest office building in the city at that time -- The China World Trade Building. By the time I moved to Shanghai just 9 years later, there were about 200-300 stores nationwide. They now have more than 3,400 stores in 140 cities in China ((**CLICK SLIDE 7**) some perspective here: China has over 100 cities with more than a million people; the US has 10). (**CLICK SLIDE 8**). Starbucks recently announced a plan to reach 6,000 stores by 2021 by opening one store every 15 hours. And having seen the type of growth that a city like Shanghai can sustain, I have no doubt this goal will be easily met.

(**CLICK SLIDE 9**) There's been one major clash between Starbucks as a corporation and Chinese citizens. In 2000, Starbucks opened a location in the Forbidden City. According to news reports, from 2000-2007 the arrangement was mutually beneficial as the revenue and taxes from the store helped to cover the maintenance costs for the 178-acre Forbidden City complex. However, in 2007, netizens raised concern about the placement of this global brand in a cultural heritage site.

(**CLICK SLIDE 10**) This campaign was lead by Chinese news anchor and journalist, Rui Chenggang, who wrote op-eds, posted to his personal blog, and collected a following of people voicing online protest of the Forbidden City location. It is significant that Rui's concern was not with Starbucks itself as an entity, but rather the encroachment of a global brand on spaces of tradition, history, and culture. He said that Starbucks had "undermined the Forbidden City's solemnity and trampled over Chinese culture;" and that all he wanted was "Starbucks move out of the Forbidden City peacefully and quietly. And we'll continue enjoying Starbucks coffee elsewhere in the city."

Business has used this as an example of a failure in "glocalization" -- or the attempts for a global company to translate its goods and services for local markets. Explanations of this

conflict in scholarly publications in business and popular publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes*, focus on the limits that companies might encounter in trying to translate their products for local market. **(CLICK SLIDE 11)** The concept of the glocal was first introduced by Japanese business scholars, as a way to describe how to localize farming practices for particular conditions. It was picked up by “Western” business scholarship as well as the field of sociology in their studies of the processes of globalization. It has more recently been used by education and digital media and communication to describe learning experiences and communicative practices largely mediated by the internet.

I’m interested in the ways in which cultural rhetorics might use the concept of the glocal to both better understand existing cultural traditions and practices as they shift and change through processes of globalization, and also how we might use the glocal to (re)consider spaces and practices of culturally driven meaning making in and among the seeming cultural deserts of globalization.

One of the first places to begin theorizing this lens is de Certeau’s conceptualization of strategies and tactics as presented in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. One way to think about strategies and tactics is that strategies are implemented from the top down, and tactics are responses to these strategies from the bottom up. **(CLICK SLIDE 12)** De Certeau defines strategies as “The calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power can be isolated from an “environment” (xix). They produce, tabulate, and impose spaces **(explain the imagine on slide 12)**. This sounds a lot like the work of a multinational conglomerate. However, once those spaces are tabulated and imposed, bodies find ways to adapt those spaces for their own needs. **(CLICK SLIDE 13)** These are the tactics for de Certeau, or “A calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” (xix). Tactics use,

manipulate, and divert these spaces created through strategies (**explain the image on slide 13**).

(CLICK SLIDE 14) One way to think about Starbucks glocally is the business way...the green tea lattes and the red bean scones and the moon cakes they sell each year for the mid-autumn festival. However, if we think about Starbucks as a glocal space from a cultural rhetorics lens, and we consider de Certeau's understanding of the potential for diversion and meaning-making in the employment of tactics, we see a new view entirely. Rui Changgang, although opposed to the imposition of Starbucks on "traditional" Chinese culture and history, also saw the value it posed for everyday use:

"Even in the United States, Starbucks' success is mainly because it provides a place for people to rest in a place that they did not have before, and has little to do with coffee itself. In China's success, I think this is also the biggest factor."

其实，即使是在美国，星巴克的成功最主要的还是因为，它为人们在最应该的地点提供了一个以前没有的休息聚会的场所，与咖啡本身并无太大的关系。在中国的成功，我以为这也是最大的因素。

Qíshí, jìshǐ shì zài měiguó, xīngbākè de chénggōng zuì zhǔyào de háishì yīnwèi, tā wéi rénmen zài zuì yīnggāi dì dìdiǎn tíngōnglè yīgè yǐqián méiyǒu de xiūxi jùhuì de chǎngsuǒ, yǔ kāfēi běnshēn bìng wú tài dà de guānxì. Zài zhōngguó de chénggōng, wǒ yǐwéi zhè yěshì zuìdà de yīnsù.

What Rui is getting at here has been pointed to before -- the idea that Starbucks functions as a "third place." A third place is a space that people can gather outside of work or home without a particular goal or purpose beyond the space itself. Pub culture in the UK is a great example of a third space. Sometimes, on hot summer days in Shanghai, people take out tables and chairs to play mahjong or bet cards. Parks also function as third spaces in big cities like Shanghai, where families camp out for the day with food and games. However, Starbucks -- especially when it first opened -- functioned in a way that was distinct from those spaces. It was an indoor space

where people were welcome to come and sit and linger. It had food and drink. Maybe most importantly, it had free wifi. It also maintained an atmosphere that was suitable for a multitude of occasions -- I myself had first dates, Mandarin lessons, business meetings -- all at Starbucks. At my local Starbucks in the Former French Concession area, I made friends with people in my neighborhood or those who had similar morning routines to my own. **(CLICK SLIDE 16)** While I also sometimes chatted with the people who owned the baozi stands in the morning or street noodle carts in the evening, there wasn't the same inclination to linger or to invest in more than routine interactions.

Having lived in Shanghai from 2008 to 2015, I saw the ways in which the introduction of cafe style coffee culture -- or third places -- through Starbucks influenced the development of new locally and independently owned cafes. **(CLICK SLIDE 17)** An entire street of cafes opened on Yongkong Rd, which operated by day while bars opened at night. These cafes offered single origin coffees brewed in a variety of styles, catering to the developed tastes of a new market of coffee drinkers.

Certainly these spaces are interesting to consider from a cultural rhetorics lens as well, but Starbucks in its glocality offers a few things that a local coffee shop can't in terms of uses of space, meaning-making, and tactical cultural practices: **(CLICK SLIDE 18)**

1. Expansiveness
 - a. With over 3,400 starbucks in over 140 cities in China, this is an experience that almost people all over China can share -- despite geographical regions, city size, and local traditions and cultures.
2. Anonymity/community
 - a. A third place like Starbucks balances between anonymity and a space for building or sustaining a local community. Smaller cafes that are concerned with

the product -- the quality and the roast of the coffee -- cannot usually sustain the costs of rent for spaces large enough to encourage lingering. For a company with the resources like Starbucks, there is more flexibility in the ways that people decide to use spaces. For example, my Mandarin tutor held her classes at Starbucks for two entire weeks while the city repaired her internet connection in her apartment. This type of tactical usage of space might not be sustainable in a smaller, locally owned cafe.

3. Capital

- a. Starbucks as a corporation has the capital to buy space in expensive parts of the city, pay for air conditioning and heat, maintain high speed free internet, and staff enough to maintain spaces and keep them clean. There simply are not other spaces like this in the middle of big cities like Shanghai, where families can take a break from errands, set up a business meeting, or study group without prior planning or notice. In these ways, Chinese citizens and international residents enact tactics that capitalize on the success of Starbucks.

There are many ways in which Cultural Rhetorics already takes seriously processes and products of globalization, such as popular culture studies and analyses of global digital spaces. This is another way in which we might expand our understandings of culture, where it happens, how it happens, and what it looks like when it is happening in globalizing, transitioning spaces. One of the things I find funny about Starbucks is how culturally filtered it is, in all spaces. The Starbucks model was “imported” from Milan, as the result of a 1983 business trip of the first CEO of the company -- Howard Schultz. He described having an epiphany about the model Starbucks should use after cafe hopping around the city. He said of his epiphany, “It was so immediate and physical that I was shaking.” Personally, I think he was shaking from too many

double espressos...**(CLICK SLIDE 19)** but it is interesting to consider the ways in which a Chinese experience of drinking coffee at Starbucks starts first from the filtering of this idea into an American market and being filtered yet again for a Chinese one. It's also funny that Italy refused the opening of a Starbucks until this past September, where finally one location was allowed as a trial run -- in Milan.

From the beginning, Starbucks has worked from logics of glocality, but logics that considered the bottom line -- how to sell more to more people across the world. There are ways to consider glocality, as tactical cultural practice, that begins from the ways in which people use and utilize these constructed spaces. I imagine there are other glocal spaces worthy of research and analysis; here I have proposed Starbucks in China as one way to begin to think through these complex and sometimes paradoxical spaces and practices. **(CLICK SLIDE 20)**