

Thesis abstract

Formulas of Chineseness: tracing daigou between Australia and China

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Over the past ten years, the buying and selling of infant formula across national borders has attracted concern and controversy in both Australia and China. This practice is commonly called daigou, a Mandarin portmanteau of “to buy” (*gou*) and “on behalf” (*dai*).

This thesis examines the infant formula daigou trade between China and Australia, studying both the work involved in doing daigou and the imaginaries that shape and are shaped by it in both countries. The study challenges the dominant accounts of daigou by telling different stories about the trade: stories that critically articulate how gender, migration, labour, and racialisation have shaped it. To accomplish this, this thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach, bringing literature from Asian diaspora studies and China studies into conversation with sociological scholarship on racialisation, migration, labour, and gender, as well as science and technology studies. Empirically, it draws upon interviews with daigou shoppers in Australia and buyers of infant formula in China, participant observation of daigou shops in Australia, and discourse analysis of news media, infant formula advertisements, and scientific and policy literature from Australia and China.

The thesis opens with an analysis of Australian news media to show how daigou has been constructed as a foreign Chinese phenomenon happening to Australia (Chapter 3). Part 2 (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) draws upon interviews with daigou shoppers to argue that daigou should instead be understood as an Australian migrant labour practice. It demonstrates how the trade’s emergence and proliferation have been shaped by migrants’ challenging experiences of Australia’s gendered and exclusionary labour market, and how their labour has generated profits for companies based in Australia.

Part 3 (Chapters 7, 8, and 9) examines the imaginaries that underpin — and are reproduced by — the daigou trade. First, by analysing the labour of shoppers and infant formula advertisements, it shows how the trade has reproduced and exported colonial imaginaries of Australia. It then discusses imaginaries of Australian infant formula as “clean and green,” highlighting how these understandings reflect middle-class Chinese mothers’ negotiation of China’s development and pollution. Finally, it studies the new biologised imaginaries of Chineseness that are produced in anti-daigou discourses of infant nutrition in China. In particular, it focuses on the idea of “Chinese formula

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for Chinese babies” and its deployment in the cultivation of a racialised commodity.

Through its examination of the intersecting practices and imaginaries that shape the daigou trade, this thesis contributes to critical conceptual and empirical work on Chineseness, racialisation, markets, migration, and transnational practices and subjects.

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